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To cite this article: Michael S. Merry Corresponding author (2005) Should educators accommodate intolerance? Mark Halstead, homosexuality, and the Islamic case, Journal of Moral Education, 34:1, 19-36, DOI: [10.1080/03057240500049265](https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240500049265)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240500049265>



Published online: 16 Aug 2006.



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Should educators accommodate intolerance? Mark Halstead,¹ homosexuality, and the Islamic case

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The ideological interface between Muslims and liberal educators undoubtedly is strained in the realm of sex education, and perhaps on no topic more so than homosexuality. Mark Halstead argues that schools should not try to ‘undermine the faith’ of Muslims, who object to teaching homosexuality as an ‘acceptable alternative lifestyle’. In this article, I will argue against his monolithic presentation of Islam. Furthermore, I will argue that because Halstead presents a narrow view of Islam he is neglectful of gay and lesbian Muslims who are particularly vulnerable to the unrepentant hostilities of their own communities, and he limits the options available to sex educators in such a way as to discourage genuine encounters between homosexuals and Muslims.

The Muslim condemnation of homosexual behaviour is [a] small part of an overarching world view, a world view, incidentally, which represents a significant, perhaps a growing, challenge to western liberal values. (Halstead, 1999a, p. 133)

Though not a Muslim himself, Mark Halstead has eloquently articulated the moral views of Muslims for a quarter of a century. In general, Halstead has attempted to elaborate the Muslim concern for nurturing commitment to a shared way of life; more particularly, he has endeavoured to demonstrate various ways in which the democratic aims of liberals—especially as they pertain to education—must take account of the moral claims of Muslims living in Western societies. The ideological interface between Muslims and liberal educators undoubtedly is strained in the realm of sex education, and perhaps on no topic more so than homosexuality. Halstead argues that schools should not try to undermine the faith of Muslims, who object to teaching homosexuality as an ‘acceptable alternative lifestyle’. Rather, insofar as schools concern themselves with private values, they should adopt a neutral stance, purveying information *about* different values but not condoning one to the exclusion of the other (1999b, p. 276).

Halstead begins by positing two basic claims. First, the increasing acceptance of homosexuality in Western culture, he tells us, is due to certain philosophical

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assumptions. These assumptions buttress the values of liberal education and they include the unflinching support of individual freedom, equality of respect, tolerance, and a celebration of diversity. Second, Halstead insists that not all people who reject homosexuality are ‘homophobic’; they simply may disagree in principle with a) an acknowledgement of a homosexual orientation, or b) ‘acts’ that one might associate with homosexuality. While there are several groups one might use to represent these principled objections, Halstead chooses Muslims to stand opposite the ‘gay agenda’, i.e., the view that sex educators ought to present homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle. Halstead briefly acknowledges a diversity of opinion within the homosexual community, but proceeds with a portrayal of a ‘gay agenda’ based on what he believes are ‘the beliefs and values which unite at least the majority of western homosexuals’ (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998, p. 51).

Halstead’s view on Islam is coupled with a very strong parental rights position; to this is added a great deal of stock in early development value coherence with one’s family. He states, ‘[t]he value of belonging to a stable, secure family may take priority, at least in early childhood’ (1999b, pp. 277–278). The family on Halstead’s view is not left unchecked because he recognizes the need to balance the valid interests of parents against the public interests of raising children to be tolerant, cooperative citizens as well as the future interests of the child. Built into Halstead’s pedagogy is a distinction he borrows from Berger and Luckmann (1980) that essentially divides the child’s learning process and socialization into primary and secondary stages. In the first stage, it is necessary that the child

[T]akes on board the social world mediated to him by his ‘significant others’ (i.e., parents and other [care-givers]) and internalizes their roles and attitudes; it is by identifying with significant others that the child ‘becomes capable of ... acquiring a subjectively coherent and plausible identity’. (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998, p. 61)²

This of course follows the logic of the cultural coherence model. The basic concern behind cultural coherence is the emotional and social stability of the child whose parents may adhere to a set of cultural and religious values lacking endorsement by the society in which they live. While cultural coherence may apply to *all* families, including those whose values receive widespread approval, it is especially relevant to minority communities, whose specific values and beliefs are more likely to be ignored or even forbidden in certain cultural contexts. Where education is concerned, cultural coherence theory assumes that a learning environment culturally (and/or religiously) consonant with the parents is more likely to produce healthy learning outcomes for young children and is more likely to foster a firmer sense of self. Implicitly assumed in cultural coherence theory is that parents have the fundamental right to raise their children according to their customs, beliefs and values.

The second stage to Halstead’s pedagogy involves the aim of enabling ‘different communities with different values and ways of understanding the world to live together in harmony and to enable each in their different ways to contribute to the well-being of the broader society’ (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998, p. 62). Halstead recognizes that it is in Muslim children’s best interest to be knowledgeable about

certain Western attitudes toward homosexuality if they are to cultivate appropriate responses to it. He writes:

Muslim children in the West will need to develop some knowledge of the broader society in which they are to be citizens. This knowledge will be incomplete without some understanding of contemporary western attitudes to homosexuality (just as the education of gay and lesbian young people will be incomplete without some understanding of the attitudes of Muslims and other faith communities towards homosexuality). (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998, p. 62)

An adequate understanding of different values will allow Muslims to better understand and interpret ‘gestures, dress, speech or behaviour which do not conform to Islamic norms’ (1997, p. 325). Halstead warns against ‘making converts’ as an ulterior motive for having open discussions about the ways in which different persons from different belief systems think about controversial subjects. Rather, he calls upon educators to ‘enable different minority communities with different values and ways of understanding the world to live together in harmony and to enable each in their different ways to contribute to the well-being of the broader society’ (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998, p. 62). Since Muslim youth ought ‘to develop the tolerance needed for life in a multicultural society’, a truly multicultural education is necessary. In Halstead’s own words,

[E]ven if certain beliefs do not make sense from one’s own cultural perspective, one should try to see them through the eyes of others, and this involves learning about the underlying values of others so that one can understand how certain beliefs fit into *their* world view. (1999a, pp. 135–136)

Halstead recognizes that his proposals are a tall order. He knows, for instance, that there is likely to be tension if a ‘gay agenda’ can seek to promote homosexuality as an alternative expression of one’s sexual identity when conservative Muslims do not espouse beliefs capable of accommodating such views. With this in mind, he endorses the approach of Reiss (1997), who has suggested that homosexuality be taught, but only as a controversial issue ‘with children being introduced sensitively to a range of different perspectives and no attempt being made to indoctrinate them into one particular view’ (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998, p. 62; cf. Halstead & Reiss, 2003, pp. 161, 196). Halstead genuinely hopes that sensitive teaching about homosexuality will lead Muslim students to be ‘better informed and more sympathetic to other people’s positions and may help them to clarify their own values and attitudes’. Nevertheless, throughout Halstead’s argument there is the implicit assumption that Muslims *cannot* and perhaps even *should not* be encouraged to think about homosexuality empathically. This is because he does not question the widely held view that homosexuality is morally wrong from an ‘Islamic point of view’.

Halstead unequivocally asserts that Muslims ‘think in terms of acts, not inclinations’ (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998, p. 58), thereby premising his claim that Muslims cannot *conceive* of a homosexual ‘orientation’ owing to its fundamental ‘incoherence’ within an Islamic frame of reference. Not only is a sexual orientation inconceivable, we are told that Islam also cannot abide homosexual deeds. Halstead writes,

Because Muslims cannot accept the concept of a homosexual orientation as a given, two consequences follow. First, they cannot accept the distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual behaviour [that] lies at the heart of the gay and lesbian world view. All that exists on a Muslim view is homosexual behaviour, and even gays and lesbians agree that this should be judged [by] the same standards that are applied to any other form of sexual behaviour [...] Secondly, 'coming out' in the sense of openly acknowledging one's sexual orientation lacks coherence from a Muslim perspective. However, 'coming out' in the sense of public display of homosexual behaviour is morally unacceptable in Islam: it is precisely the sin for which Lot's people were destroyed. (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998, p. 60)

Therefore, the upshot of Halstead's constructed antagonism suggests that a) Muslims share a 'coherent and unified worldview', including a unanimous set of beliefs about homosexuality; and b) if Muslims are to receive sensitive education concerning homosexuality it ought to be presented as controversial, as something that 'some people believe'. However, before this education takes place, Muslim children must 'have been adequately initiated into the beliefs and values of their own community during primary socialisation' (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998, p. 62). Finally, c) Halstead's stark opposition presumes there to be some concerted and unified homosexual front attempting to squeeze out the hegemonic heterosexual norm. In what follows, I will argue against Halstead's odd defence³ of an Islamic understanding of homosexuality and I will show three things:

- Halstead endorses a questionable understanding of Islam that considers homosexuality to be forbidden;
- He neglects gay and lesbian Muslims who are particularly vulnerable to the unrepentant hostilities of their own communities;
- He delimits the range of options available to sex educators in such a way as to discourage genuine encounters between homosexuals and Muslims.

Discussion

In elaborating the 'Islamic view', Halstead glosses over certain facts. For example, he does not acknowledge that the Prophet did not preside over any legal case involving homosexuality and dismisses a wealth of Sufi literature that uses homosexual love as a metaphor for divine love, choosing instead to draw a peculiar analogy to rape:

[To argue] that the practice of submitting to being penetrated by a male can be justified as a symbol of spiritual submission to God [seems] to us to be just as fanciful as suggesting that the humiliation of rape can be 'etherialised' in the West by recognizing that in the poetry of John Donne, for example, rape is used as a symbol of the relationship between God and the believer (see Holy Sonnet XIV) (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998, pp. 56–57).

Furthermore, Halstead refuses to engage in a critical reading of the sexual 'complementarity' theology of Islam (similar to other religions); this is the view that men and women are made *for* each other by virtue of their sexual oppositeness, but also that each has been created for particular roles to fill specific to their sex. Finally, he ignores the unwarrantable conclusion that sexual orientation is supposed to

follow from one's being born a man or a woman. Halstead claims that in Islam sexual identity is ultimately not a matter of being either heterosexual or homosexual. The key distinction, he tells us, is between what is permitted (*halal*) and forbidden (*haram*). Halstead expands on this:

Islam teaches that if people have sinful desires they should keep them to themselves and control them in order to avoid doing what God has forbidden. It may, for example, be quite natural for anyone to find handsome boys attractive (and indeed the *Qur'an* promises that in paradise the faithful will be attended by young men like pearls: Sura 56:37 and Sura 76:19), but if this attraction becomes sexual desire it must be resisted. (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998, p. 59)

Because Halstead limits his discussion to a (particular) religious framework, he does not flesh out the cultural underpinnings of homophobia, nor does he acknowledge the relatively recent beginnings of widespread anti-homosexual attitudes within Islam. Rather he chooses to focus on what he calls 'the religious perspective', setting in terminal opposition Islam, *as a religion*, against homosexuality. In concluding that the Islamic 'worldview' cannot admit of any notion of 'orientation' but can only conceive of 'acts', Halstead permits conservative Muslim scholars to remain stubbornly indolent where there is room for Islam to expand its conception with ever-increasing knowledge and experience. Yedullah Kazmi speaks directly to this challenge facing Muslims:

[The] existence of several conversations in a tradition is a source and proof of a tradition's health and depth and range of meanings it encompasses. It is, therefore, wrong to classify and judge an entire tradition by the conversation that may be dominant for a period of time ... In short, it is wrong to assume that a tradition is a monolithic structure that harbours just one conversation and always speaks with one voice. Voices of dissent and rebellion and voices of alternative conversations are, if one cares to listen, audible just below the noise of the dominant conversation. (Kazmi, 2003, p. 279)

It will not do to say, as Halstead does, 'Islamic teaching about homosexuality is part of the belief system of a religion which has existed for many centuries and which they believe originated in divine revelation' (1999a, p. 133). Indeed, many Muslims are calling out for fresh re-examinations of their conceptual models and terminology (see Bilgrami, 1992).

When it comes to the germane religious sources, Judaism, Christianity and Islam share many of the same narratives. Still, it is discomfiting that Halstead covers the obligatory exegesis of the Sodom and Gomorrah story without referencing alternate interpretations,⁴ welcomed by many Muslims, Jews, and Christians, which suggest that the 'sin' of Sodom is not homosexuality but *inhospitality* (see Boswell, 1980, pp. 91–99), a grave offence in Near Eastern cultures. Halstead touches upon the Lot narrative in the Qur'ān,⁵ and briefly considers the etymologies of *ishūiha' al-mumathil* ('carnal desire to the same') and *liwat* ('the doing of Lot's people'). Yet he then confidently concludes that these will help us to appreciate the manner in which the Arabic language demonstrates the Muslim 'way of thinking and behaving' because of the way that language shapes understanding (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998, p. 58; cf. Halstead & Reiss, 2003, p. 100).

Halstead is correct to claim that language, as Heidegger once put it, is our 'house of being' inasmuch as we come to perceive the world principally in ways circumscribed by our language. Yet his logic falters concerning the fixedness of this understanding. Islam has come to inhabit many cultural spaces wherein homosexuality is commonly practised. Halstead admits to the fact (Halstead & Reiss, 2003, p. 101), though he unfailingly assumes the most orthodox Islamic view when he refers to these occurrences as 'lapses' and 'deviations'.⁶ One anticipates, then, Halstead's sympathy with parents who wish to withdraw their children from sex education classes whose content may conflict with the values of the home, but he wisely acknowledges the tremendous burden such a choice invites for parents who must take up this daunting responsibility. Halstead also knows that no matter how strictly Muslim parents attempt to regulate their children's knowledge of sexuality, the formidable influences of popular culture, purveyed through various media and the hidden curriculum⁷ (not excluding children taken out of the state school system and placed in comprehensive religious schools) will exert considerable influence on a child's thinking. He also knows that simplistic moralizing and Islamic prohibitions, to which many immigrant Muslim children are exposed in after-school and weekend Qur'anic classes, will not suffice to counter these influences, nor will they be likely to appeal to the Muslim child without more culturally-sensitive lessons that take account of non-Muslim societies. Nevertheless, concerning homosexuality as a 'morally acceptable way of life', Halstead defends the right of conservative religious groups, in particular Muslims, to object to 'the gay and lesbian perspective'. Considering the good that Halstead recognizes responsible sex education can bring Muslim parents seeking to educate their children, it is disconcerting to find him unhesitatingly *defending* the view that 'from an Islamic perspective' there is no such thing as a homosexual orientation, just homosexual acts.

The fundamental 'incoherence' Halstead speaks of is not as apparent as he would like; indeed, it may point to a failure on the part of Muslim leaders to acknowledge a dimension of human sexuality that moderate Jews and Christians were beginning to accept only a few decades ago. That Muslims lag a little behind some Jews and Christians does not betray an obscurantist tendency in Islam any more than it might suggest a progressive attitude endemic to Judaism or Christianity. After all, Jews and Christians have not exactly pioneered the broader discussion; they typically follow the conversation after it has surfaced in the public. Moreover, the churches are deeply divided on the issue, as the recent appointment of Episcopal Bishop Eugene Robinson in New Hampshire indicates. Still, having a divided group of believers is considerably different from a body of conservative clerics insisting that there will be no discussion at all.

Because of the austere prohibitions against homosexuality in Islamic *teaching*, gay and lesbian Muslims must choose to live an irreconcilable double identity, repress or deny their homosexual feelings, or turn their back on Islam in order to be true to themselves. To say, as Halstead does, that views expressing the idea that homosexuality is a normal and acceptable lifestyle 'are not shared, or even understood, by Muslims' (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998, p. 61), is to sanction an

extremely static view of Islam. This strikes one as particularly odd when Halstead is surely aware of gay and lesbian Muslim alliances in Europe, the United States and Canada.⁸ It is also odd when Halstead so plainly points out the highly differentiated manifestations of Islam throughout the world. This includes his acknowledgement of many Muslim parents who *want* their children exposed to sex education classes in Western primary and secondary schools.

Halstead's insistence that Muslims learn about homosexuality as a controversial subject is problematic for three reasons: first, by merely learning 'about' different opinions and experiences with no effort to foster empathy (i.e., the ability to 'take on' or profoundly relate to another's situation) and mutual respect, one can do little more than provide exposure to another point of view without cultivating respect for persons *qua* persons. Second, this approach does little to alleviate the stigmatization and fear that attend Muslim youth who identify as gay or lesbian but are unable to be public about it because that view is presented only as an option *for others*. Halstead encourages 'sensitive teaching about homosexuality as a controversial issue that will help students to become better informed and more sympathetic to other people's positions and may help them to clarify their own values and attitudes' (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998, p. 62). Unfortunately, he does not avoid suggesting that Muslims could not possibly identify with views in conflict with orthodox theology. Muslim children might learn to show *sympathy* toward homosexuals, but Halstead does not address the needs of gay and lesbian Muslim youth who may find themselves 'trapped' by highly intolerant attitudes towards homosexuality within their own communities.

Third, Halstead's characterization of homosexuality as an 'abomination' and deserving of condemnation according to the 'Muslim worldview' not only foists a monolithic reading of homosexuality onto Islam, but it also delimits the range of topics morally acceptable to Muslims (others might include the recognition and treatment of clinical depression and ideas about a woman's place in Islamic society). However, these are much-contested subjects.⁹ To claim that Muslim attitudes toward homosexuality are fixed and represent 'a significant, perhaps a growing, challenge to western liberal values' (Halstead, 1999, p. 133) is to imagine that all Muslims view it in the same way. It is certainly unnecessary, to borrow Halstead's locution, that one 'celebrate the existence of homosexual behaviour' (Halstead, 1999, p. 132). More essential is that we consider the experiences of gay and lesbian people and consider why it is that his or her religion would appear to condemn a sexual identity so many people possess, including many within the Muslim world.¹⁰

In an open challenge to Halstead (and Lewicka), John Beck posits that homosexuality is the 'given' basis of one's sexual being, and should be presented in schools as 'a morally acceptable way of life' (Beck, 1999, p. 126).¹¹ Beck is eager to support the public virtue of tolerance so that citizens are prepared 'to tolerate serious offence to cherished convictions which are of central importance to their individual lives and sense of identity' (Beck, 1999, p. 125). He continues,

Tolerance is much more than a passive virtue. Very considerable maturity is required to both hold to one view for considered reasons, whilst accepting that it is fully legitimate

for others in the same society to hold equally strongly and sincerely to views that are not merely different but competing. (Beck, 1999, p. 125)

But more than mere tolerance, Beck seeks to promote support of young people in schools ‘in negotiating these [identity] transitions, [while] recognizing that even identifying what *constitutes* appropriate support may often prove controversial’ (1999, p. 127). Yet Beck—like Halstead—is also content to have educators teach homosexuality as a *controversial* issue (Beck, 1999, pp. 126, 128). Halstead challenges Beck by saying that he has effectively shown intolerance toward conservative Muslims by making factual claims contrary to their core beliefs, and that he has established nothing by way of ‘logical argument’. Halstead charges that Beck ‘firmly believes that there is such a concept (i.e., orientation) and that it is ‘a recurring human experience’ which may, in spite of its recent origin, be applied retrospectively to any historical period...’ (Halstead, 1999a, p. 134).

Notwithstanding the fact that Beck has not argued as cogently as he might have, Halstead gives us no substantive reasons for disregarding the more than ample anecdotal evidence Beck provides. Simply because Beck has failed to produce *conclusive* empirical proof of a homosexual orientation—not to mention its stability over time—does not mean that his argument is shot full of holes as Halstead would have us believe. To the contrary, Beck’s challenge to Halstead is predicated on assumptions that are just as reasonable as any others concerning the heterosexual ‘orientation’ and *its* stability over time. No one doubts that heterosexuals experience heterosexual attraction. Few suppose that straights *choose* to be attracted to the opposite sex. Indeed, society attaches religious significance to heterosexuality and the nuptial contracts which bestow approval on its public expression. In Western culture ‘orientation’ may not always have been the language used—Halstead is correct to point out its recent psychological provenance—but other substitutes were well within reach, chief among them ‘natural law’.¹²

Halstead also troubles himself too much with terminology (e.g., ‘orientation’, ‘the homosexual’) and its historical and cultural etymology. So, for example, we find him disputing Beck’s claim that the *concept* of a homosexual orientation is simply not found (!) in the Middle East, only homosexual acts. But considering that Halstead does recognize that Muslim children are raised according to views uncompromisingly intolerant toward homosexuality, one would hope to find him a little more sceptical of the traditions that maintain and justify anti-homosexual attitudes. To repeat, the fact that ‘there is no such thing from an Islamic perspective as a homosexual orientation’ (Halstead, 1999, p. 135; 1998, p. 59) might simply point to the refusal of Muslim scholars to engage with unfolding understandings of human sexuality. Ataullah Siddiqui asserts that many Muslim scholars trained in *madrassahs* and seminaries are ‘out of touch with developments in the field of science, technology and even other areas of thought and society’ (Siddiqui, 1997, p. 426). This seems a more plausible explanation for ‘incoherence’ from an Islamic view than any argument suggesting there not to be an implicit understanding of what is *meant* by a particular sexual orientation. (For centuries, after all, the Catholic Church held the position that the mentally ill were demon-possessed or that ‘spilling one’s seed’

through masturbation was equivalent to murder.) At an appropriate stage in their personal and intellectual development, ‘young people *can*’ as Beck suggests, ‘[at] least be brought to clearly *understand* the position of the other’ (1999, p. 126).

Halstead also does not address the external threat of intolerance (including violence) toward homosexuals; rather, he claims that one ‘cannot justifiably develop a school policy which is offensive to certain sections of society on the basis of a concept [i.e., orientation] which is so clearly open to challenge’ (Halstead 1999a, p. 135). He unequivocally states:

[A] pluralist democratic society has a duty to respect and take account of the beliefs and values of minority groups within it except where, as in the case of racist beliefs, for example, those beliefs are in conflict with the fundamental principles on which the democratic society itself is based. (1997, p. 327)

Halstead and I agree that citizens in liberal democracies have a duty to respect and take account of the beliefs and values of others. Nevertheless, I see at least three problems here. First, though Halstead outlines some of the core principles of a democratic society, *viz.*, liberty, equality and rationality (Halstead & Reiss, 2003, pp. 59–61), without more details it seems unlikely that we will know whether certain beliefs and values may conflict with them or whether we ought even to take account of them. Secondly, democratic societies *already* tolerate a plethora of beliefs and values, including structural inequalities and limited opportunities on many levels, contrary to the spirit of a well-functioning democracy. Halstead is correct to cast aside racist beliefs as unworthy of respect, but why does he stop there? The fact that racist beliefs are abhorrent and unworthy of respect while homophobic attitudes ascribed to a religion *deserve* our respect seems astonishingly incongruent. Third, Halstead’s attempts to ‘preserve Muslim values intact within the Muslim community’ unwittingly sanction *internal* intolerance as well, because some of these ‘values’¹³ often include militant bigotry toward homosexuals, and this will inevitably include many Muslims.

Finally, tensions persist between liberalism and illiberal communities. ‘Clearly’, Halstead comments, ‘the state cannot both claim to welcome diversity and at the same time try to ensure that its non-liberal citizens adopt liberal values’ (1999a, p. 133). Halstead assumes here that diversity and the adoption of liberal values are somehow incompatible. Yet this would only be true if the state welcomed *all* kinds of diversity, including those that systematically interfere with the freedom of others to pursue life and liberty. We know this *not* to be the case; the state does not sanction *unfettered* diversity. Still, there is another way in which Halstead, mistakenly, understands liberal values to be neutral. Halstead claims that a liberal education stresses equality of respect and refuses ‘to side with any contestable conception of the good’ (1999a, p. 132). I concur with Halstead that in one sense a neutral stance is necessary in order to teach controversial subject matter. Therefore, one ought to encourage students to think from multiple perspectives about stem cell research, gun control, and euthanasia but not condone or promote any particular take on this subject matter. Similarly, one ought to be just as objective concerning religious belief as one would be about homosexuality. Not only is there widespread ignorance about

religions among non-religious people, but also it is unsurprising that gay and lesbian groups can be equally intolerant of conservative religious groups. As John Beck says, ‘moral offence is experienced on *both* sides’ (1999, p. 125).¹⁴

Even so, in another sense one cannot be neutral when entertaining *all* points of view. A liberal education worthy of its name simply cannot give equal time to views that tout superiority or monopolies on truth when they pertain to the basic virtues of tolerance and respect. Most liberals are also famously interested in pursuing justice and fairness, hardly a neutral position. Halstead is correct, therefore, to stress that an education for democratic citizenship necessarily entails ‘the rejection of racism, prejudice, and discrimination as an affront to individual dignity’ (Halstead, 2003, p. 289; cf. Halstead & Reiss, 2003, p. 160). Where Halstead’s view becomes problematic is in his insistence that persons’ primary identities, i.e., their religious and cultural ‘commitments’, are more constitutive of who they are than any identity derived from citizenship (2003, p. 280) *if and when* these primary identities become the bane of all that stands in the way of a liberal education. Making matters worse, Halstead insists that education for citizenship would ‘as far as possible exclude cultural issues from its agenda and focus solely on political matters’ (2003, p. 289). Here a comment from Stephen Macedo is useful:

Liberal democratic values and virtues should be important in the lives of liberal citizens, but those citizens should also have their own interests, convictions, and commitments beyond public concerns that make their lives distinctive. (Macedo, 2000, p. 246)

Macedo also knows that neutrality is a clever ruse to which no one, including liberals, can afford to acquiesce. He adds:

Liberal education should not stand for a neutral educational environment, one that is ‘nonjudgmental’ with respect to the choices people make or to the forms of good and valuable lives: to the contrary, we want children to learn that there are better and worse ways to using their freedom. What is crucial from a liberal standpoint is that no one educational authority should totally dominate; that children acquire a measure of distance on all claims to truth in order to be able to think critically about our inclusive political ideals and detect conflicts between those inclusive ideals and their more particular moral and religious convictions. (Macedo, 2000, p. 238)

Macedo’s point is important and Halstead would doubtless agree. Yet Halstead never actually says that Muslims ought to attain a critical distance from their beliefs or repudiate the (cultural) prejudice of homophobia;¹⁵ this is because he believes disagreement with homosexuality is a core part of the Islamic faith. Halstead also does not want to acknowledge that certain ‘core Islamic values’ are stridently anti-homosexual. Furthermore, insofar as Halstead seeks to provide an education for specific cultural attachment—one that conveys ‘the attitude of [one’s] own cultural group toward homosexuality’ (Halstead, 2003, p. 292)—there is reason to be concerned with the reinforcing of deep-seated prejudice. Hence, there remains perpetual conflict in Halstead’s logic if he imagines that Muslims ought to reject prejudices contrary to those respecting the dignity of others, while at the same time maintaining that a person’s core identity (and Halstead is rather vague about what this means) requires special safeguarding and protection. Halstead clearly wants to

balance an education for citizenship with an education for specific cultural attachment, and I am deeply sympathetic to this; he is therefore correct to say that children need ‘emotional stability, security and confidence if they are to grow into mature, responsible, reflective, authentic adults’ (1995a, p. 37). Still, without explicitly combating the prejudice against homosexuality, it seems an unlikely *rapprochement*. Finally, Halstead does not work out the tension wrought by an equality of respect for *cultures* with a concern for the equality of respect for *persons*. He seems to favour the former when he says, for instance, that the failure to pass on the ‘beliefs and customs’ of the community to the next generation has ‘every appearance of the wilful self-destruction of the community’ (1995a, p. 39). Though I recognize the cultural embeddedness of all persons, I am frankly more concerned with the latter and see no need to be uncritical about one’s inherited culture.

Objections

I can perceive at least three inherent difficulties in my challenges to Halstead. Some, for example, might say that I am asking too much of educators: put simply, it may not be possible to *teach* empathy and mutual respect. (It is hard enough to teach sympathy and tolerance.) It is true that empathy is indeed an elusive virtue that few people actually attain without undergoing profound life changes that enable them to identify with others in ways that exceed what average people are capable of. Still, this seems no substantive reason not to *encourage* it, and this includes mutual respect. Also, in criticizing Halstead’s legitimating of traditionalism, there will be those who will claim that I am applying some essentialist norm onto specific cultural communities and therefore engaging in some kind of ethical imperialism. This is a serious charge, and I have not the space to address it adequately here, but I will briefly say two things. First, reinforcing religious views by merely learning ‘about’ how others think is too shallow a goal for educators for reasons that will become clearer in the subsequent paragraphs. Secondly, by championing the ‘Islamic view’ without careful scrutiny of cultural practices and religious distortions that irremediably truncate the capabilities of some of its members, communitarians are partly complicit in the injustices that ensue. Similarly, if we assume that religious customs and beliefs are altogether innocuous and seek merely to promote the good of the community its beliefs express, we unavoidably participate in the oppression of gay and lesbian Muslims. In offering my criticisms, I am merely calling upon Halstead to be consistent with his own liberal ideals. These include autonomy as the ultimate goal of a child’s moral development (Halstead, 1999b, p. 278; Halstead & Reiss, 2003, pp. 159–162), as well those which

Enable different minority communities with different values and ways of understanding the world to live together in harmony and to enable each in their different ways to contribute to the well-being of the broader society. (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998, p. 62)

I can anticipate still a third criticism, namely that it is coercive and illegitimate to demand respect of views to which one’s beliefs stand uncompromisingly opposed. What is more, compelling respect from those whose core values stand in opposition

to counter beliefs is to strike against the practice of liberal tolerance. To this I will say the following: first, Halstead has himself placed limits on tolerance (and thus neutrality) by excluding attitudes that inform practices hostile to a democratic society. Second, the goal of mutual respect is tied up with the idea of reciprocity, which entails setting fair terms of cooperation for working out differences between interested parties within a liberal democracy. In seeking to foster mutual respect and not merely tolerance, one hopes to promote social cohesion of a degree necessary to advance the projects of democracy in a spirit of mutual concern and understanding. Reciprocity is an attempt to surmount (not ignore) the fundamental differences that may divide various individuals by calling upon each participant or group to justify its actions in acceptable ways that can be understood by others. Being acceptable does not mean there will be agreement or that individuals will share core convictions. On the contrary, reciprocity implies accepting the burdens of judgement; this means that we can acknowledge the ways that others espouse ‘reasonable truths’ very different from our own, recognizing that each of us is susceptible to a limited understanding. Robert George adds,

Reciprocity is above all a constitutive moral value of deliberative democracy, something that democratic citizens owe to one another as a matter of justice. It is what might be called a ‘common good’ of the political community, a mutual moral benefit to all concerned, even (or perhaps especially) when people find themselves in irresolvable disagreement over fundamental core issues. As such, the mutual respect citizens owe to one another provides a kind of moral bond between them, their substantive moral disagreements notwithstanding, and it requires them to search for political accommodation whenever possible. (George, 1999, p. 189)

In seeking to promote mutual respect and not settling for mere tolerance, liberals are also seeking to preclude private loathing of those with whom one does not agree. Publicly tolerant people may still perpetrate intolerant acts owing to prejudices deeply rooted in a person’s psyche devoid of a basic respect for persons. And, as Amy Gutmann notes, respect may help to curb discrimination in the job market, housing, club memberships, as well as in the private sphere (Gutmann, 1995, p. 561). Even if Halstead *were* correct about the unity of a prohibitive ‘Islamic view’ regarding homosexuality, that claim would not detract from the need to foster mutual respect among parties espousing opposing points of view.

Educational challenges

I concur with Halstead that in a pluralist society there will be many issues on which reasonable persons can and will respectfully disagree. I would also endorse Halstead’s view that it is the responsibility of the common school to avoid what he calls a ‘potentially oppressive situation where children are expected to accept values in school [that] are directly in conflict with their own values or those of their family’ (Halstead, 1999a, p. 132). Yet to claim, as Halstead does, that the most we can hope for is ‘an enlightened live-and-let-live’ is to despair of fostering more than mere tolerance. It also avoids any responsibility to confront crass prejudices and hatred. Beck writes,

Irrational prejudice against [homosexuals] should be shown to *be* irrational; intimidation of such minorities should be met with firm but rational sanctions and the reasons why their rights to self-expression *and* self-actualization ought to be upheld should be explained. (Beck, 1999, p. 127)

Furthermore, ‘an enlightened live-and-let-live’ falls far short of the encounter I am suggesting will be conducive to reciprocity and mutual respect. This would be an encounter where persons espousing different points of view and having different experiences can learn from one another in an atmosphere of trust and respect. Religious persons opposed to homosexuality need to encounter gay and lesbian students in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, just as gay and lesbian students need to encounter devout religious persons who do not approve of their sexual identification.¹⁶ Elsewhere, Halstead *has* called for an ‘education for cross-cultural understanding’ (1995b, p. 374) and has pleaded for ‘actual contact’ with other groups including ‘authentic interactions’ (2003, p. 291). This approximates my suggestion that a genuine encounter between gay and lesbian students and those whose cultural and religious values stand in sharp disagreement ought to be actively encouraged.

The participation of Muslim (and other conservative) parents in helping to make decisions about how material will be presented or not presented in sex education classes is also crucial. Today Muslims represent a mixed bag like everyone else. Some parents want their children in sex education classes; others object to certain content; still other parents withdraw their children from these classes and either place them in private religious schools or ‘supplement’ their own sex education in the home. Seeking to accommodate the concerns of Muslim parents—within reasonable limits—may be a benefit to everyone concerned. Gay and lesbian children will be exposed to the principled views of other children and, hopefully, will come to respect perspectives that do not necessarily situate (hetero-) sexual expression within marriage alone. Non-Muslim religious children also may come to appreciate the similarities they share in common with Muslim students. Moreover, Halstead correctly points out that both Muslims and homosexuals suffer from unflattering stereotypes in the popular media, both are likely to have experienced discrimination, and both groups are more apt to struggle for equal rights (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998, p. 50). Finally, Muslim students will be more likely to experience a sense of inclusion in state schools. Jeff Spinner-Halev points to another reason why accommodating conservative religious parents and children is important:

[I]t is particularly important to try to accommodate fundamentalist parents because they *don't* share many liberal beliefs. Many fundamentalist parents do not want their children to be autonomous citizens in any kind of robust way; having them attend public schools is one way to subvert their parents' wishes in a way that supports liberal citizenship. (Spinner-Halev, 2000, p. 136)

Many, including Halstead,¹⁷ will object to Spinner-Halev's motives to ‘subvert’ parents' wishes. Yet his point is important nonetheless, for if we believe that children ought to be exposed to more perspectives than those of their parents, giving parents

an excuse to withdraw their child and place him or her in a comprehensive religious school will have uninviting consequences both for the child and the school. The child will arguably experience less inclusion in a multicultural society, and s/he will be more likely to hear only perspectives that mirror those of his or her parents. Of course, these students still might develop the powers of practical reason necessary to reflect critically on the unchosen commitments they have adopted from their parents, but it is doubtful whether the comprehensive school environment will actively promote such critical reflection. Comprehensive religious schools are in some cases ethnically and economically diverse, but rarely are the ideas espoused by the students and faculty so.¹⁸

Other children in the common schools, conversely, will be less aware of others who espouse conservative views. I say *less* aware because common schools are full of children with conservative values, but many of them either do not know why they have these views, or else they are discouraged from expressing them openly. Muslim children can help fill this gap. I believe Shelley Burtt is mistaken when she says, ‘familiarity with and appreciation for ways of life completely alien to one’s own is unnecessary’ because such lives are simply unavailable to folks ‘given who they are’ (Burtt, 2003, p. 203). Hearing from informed Muslim students who believe¹⁹ that heterosexual relations are only permissible within marriage will do at least three things: a) it will force children with different opinions to reflect upon the reasons why they disagree; b) it will oblige Muslim (and other religious) children to provide reasons for holding the views on sexuality that they do; and c) finally, taking this approach will engender an atmosphere of inclusion, tolerance, and mutual respect by taking account of different perspectives.²⁰

To realize these goals is no easy task. Halstead (1997, pp. 326–328) himself recognizes the formidable challenges that await the policy-makers who must reconcile the public interest with all of the competing claims that might inform how educators discuss homosexuality. I will not discuss all of his points, but I will highlight three: first, it is highly improbable that sex education can be taught *value-free*. Inevitably, some values will be promoted in sex education classrooms; for example, teachers may tell students to adopt ‘responsible sexual behaviour’ concerning sex in order to combat teenage pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (Halstead, 1999b, pp. 275–276). Many will consider this approach broad-minded and non-judgemental, while others will likely deem this tactic licentious and morally capricious.

Secondly, even with parental involvement and input, it is unlikely that a full consensus is attainable given the fundamentally different ideas about ‘responsible sexual behaviour’. For one group this may simply involve an understanding about how to use contraceptives; for another group this may require total abstinence. Lastly, ensuring that conservative religious perspectives are fairly and equally represented in the classroom may empower these groups, but others are likely to consider the abstinence approach unrealistic and even dangerous in its avoidance of purveying information to youth in a society infused with sexually explicit behaviours.

Conclusion

In this article, I have challenged three aspects of Halstead's opposition of homosexuality to Islam. First, I have shown that he has not properly taken into consideration the problems associated with homophobic prejudice by leaving unchallenged the fundamentalist views of some Muslims. Many Muslims are seeking for new ways, as have Jews and Christians with their own scriptures, for understanding passages in the *hadīth* and the Qur'ān that seem to reject homosexuality. Halstead ignores the problems associated with narrow, decontextualized interpretations. Secondly Halstead does not address the problem of gay and lesbian Muslims who suffer shame and rejection from within their own communities because of these interpretations. In some cases, there is even fear of death. Halstead does not successfully reconcile his interests in children's autonomy and his defence of Islam's proscriptive disposition toward homosexuality. Finally, I have shown that Halstead's approach to teaching *about* homosexuality is too limiting and permits groups to exercise a tremendous power over Muslim young people by uncritically initiating children into a highly intolerant religious value system (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998, p. 61).

Halstead calls out for Muslim youth to develop knowledge about the broader society in what he calls their 'secondary socialization'. However, there remains the tension, as I have said, between Halstead's call for an education for democratic citizenship and an education for specific cultural attachment, particularly when many of these attachments foment anti-homosexual prejudice. While Halstead seems interested to 'make children aware of alternatives [in the event that] they find their own group too stifling' (1995b, p. 374) he would appear to discourage what I would call 'authentic interactions'. These will allow for reciprocal learning *from* others (and not merely learning *about* others) in ways that Halstead seems unprepared to accept for Muslims opposed to homosexuality.

It is interesting to note that Halstead does not address sex education in Islamic schools. In Islamic schools, children will hear sex education—if at all—according to a traditional Islamic view that characterizes sexual relations as the heterosexual privilege of the married. (Many Muslim teachers continue to counsel their students to marry young.) This is hardly surprising because, as Macedo points out, 'Schools whose primary constituency is [a] particular community will tend to stand, internally, for the values of that community' (2000, p. 270). We also learn from a leading Islamic educator that no justification exists for liberating children from their spiritual or moral moorings or putting doubt in their minds about revealed knowledge (Ashraf, 1988, p. 1). Yet because Muslim students living in the West cannot escape the influence of the culture in which they are brought up, are schooled, and find employment, there are reasons to believe that Islamic schools may fill an important gap in this matter of sex education according to the wishes of the parents and consistent with a set of beliefs. Learning how other youth feel about sexuality will come, liberals say, when social mixing occurs as well as through the popular media. Depending on how isolated the Muslim community is, this may or may not be true.²¹

Alliances between, say, comprehensive religious schools and local state schools might curtail an ignorance of others that sectarian schooling seems fated to promote. Still, the biggest challenge yet remains: would either side welcome such an interaction? There is little empirical evidence to support my proposals. Indeed, common school educators will feel bound to treat all (liberal) views equally, while religious communities and the schools that endeavour to embody their values will be likely to reinforce the values specific to their sometimes illiberal beliefs. Mutual exclusion would appear to be the outcome. Still, I have reason for optimism. Extensive conversations I have had with Islamic school principals provide important anecdotal evidence for these kinds of encounters already beginning to take place among Muslim high school students. Even where principled differences exist, alliances form that confront different types of prejudice; it has even led to examples of Muslim students joining others in denouncing psychological or physical violence towards homosexuals. With the right leadership and a shared concern for democratic citizenship, genuine encounters between homosexual and heterosexual children may gain the momentum that interfaith and interethnic alliances have in the preceding decades.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Harry Brighouse for his helpful suggestions, and D. C. Phillips and Neil Burtonwood for additional comments.

Notes

1. In the principal article this paper will reference, Halstead co-authors with Katarzyna Lewicka, but I shall speak only to Halstead in this paper, as his work spans more than twenty years, and he alone responds to one of the critics of the article he co-authored with Lewicka.
2. Cf. Berger & Luckmann (1980).
3. By 'defence', I do not mean that he agrees with it personally, but that he does very little if anything to challenge the view.
4. Halstead considers several interpretations in *Values in sex education* (Halstead & Reiss, 2003), but only in reference to Christianity.
5. Suras 7:79–84; 11:77–81; 15:58–77; 26, 160–175; 27: 54–59; 29: 28–35.
6. Halstead explains that the executions of Iranian homosexuals during the Islamic Revolution between 1979–1984 probably had more to do with 'an attack on western decadence and the public transgression of morality than with homosexuality per se' (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998, p. 59).
7. The hidden curriculum, for my purposes here, will refer to the *implicit* messages conveyed to schoolchildren through the attitudes and actions of school staff, peers, and materials used in classrooms.
8. E.g., *Al-Fatiha* and SHAKTI. Halstead acknowledges its existence in his book with Michael Reiss (2003) *Values in sex education* (p. 100). Many other support groups encourage one another through the Internet. See discussions taking place in organizations such as MuslimGayMen, MuslimPflag, and Queer Jihad. Many of these are taking up fresh discussions on the interpretations of various *hadīth* and Qur'ānic passages used by Muslim authorities to condemn homosexuality in ways that Christians and Jews also have for centuries. For a sensitive treatment of homosexuality from the Jesuit founder of the Catholic gay alliance, Dignity, see McNeill (1977).

9. Take the observations of Kambiz GhaneaBassiri (1997, p.186): ‘Muslim countries’ definitions of Islam are contested by many Muslims who live in the United States. Hence, while Muslims in the United States remain unable to delimit their own definition of Islam, they are also unwilling to accept another Muslim community’s definition’.
10. Halstead correctly notes that the number of homosexuals in Britain is roughly equivalent to the number of Roman Catholics, i.e., about 6% of the population, though this figure only reflects those who *exclusively* identify as homosexuals. See Halstead & Reiss (2003, p. 160).
11. Beck and Halstead quibble over ‘specific discursive categories’, including whether gays and Muslims have *incommensurable* or *incompatible* perspectives, but I am not concerned with this discussion here. For much of his polemic, Beck builds on the arguments provided by Patricia White (1991).
12. For an excellent critique of the natural law thesis, see Leiser (2000).
13. In many places Halstead refers to ‘core Islamic values’, ‘fundamental beliefs and values’ and ‘distinctive beliefs and values’. See, for example, Halstead (1995a, p. 27; 2003, pp. 283, 292).
14. The reasons for this usually have to do with the malicious attitudes towards homosexuality among many conservative religious groups. One could surmise gays and lesbians to be rather indifferent to these religious groups if these groups were not so wont to cast scorn on homosexuals.
15. He does say that education for democratic citizenship would require that children be taught that ‘homophobic *bullying* is always wrong, an affront to individual dignity, and a failure to respect fundamental rights and freedoms’ (Halstead, 2003, p. 292; emphasis mine).
16. I choose ‘identification’ over ‘lifestyle’ or ‘preference’ because the latter imply far more choice in the matter than most people attest to *vis-à-vis* their sexuality.
17. Halstead (2003, p. 283): ‘[T]he democratic negotiation of values presupposes certain shared liberal values, forces minorities to justify their beliefs and practices using unfamiliar concepts, and commits them to an outcome agreed by the majority, all of which put non-liberal religious minorities at a disadvantage.’
18. My view is not shared, *inter alia*, by Shelley Burrtt or Jeff Spinner-Halev, both of whom believe that critical reflection is encouraged by educations for strong religious and cultural identities by virtue of their being outside of the cultural mainstream.
19. Of course, not *all* Muslim children believe this.
20. I am aware that this last point is controversial. It is very possible that such encounters will have the opposite effect.
21. In larger cities, for example, where Muslims (like other religious and ethnic groups) congregate in the same neighborhood, social life revolves around the community mosque, and satellite television orients immigrant parents to their countries of origin, the possibilities for preparing children to enter the world beyond the borders of the Muslim community may be too constricting.

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