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Do foes of gay marriages simply fear joy itself?

Tarek Fatah

Last month, we attended a number of weddings in Toronto. Each had its own flavour, from Pakistani to Palestinian, from elaborate Orthodox church ceremonies to modest mosque rituals. Though the rites differed, the grooms and brides were all beaming with joy.

As these couples embraced their future together, we couldn't help but feel sad for Canada's gay and lesbian couples being pilloried for seeking the same happiness. We were also taken back to a humid August evening in Karachi in 1974 when we were permitted to marry.

Gays and lesbians wishing to marry face a gantlet of opposition and we, as a heterosexual Muslim couple, can empathize with their pain. To become husband and wife, we, too, had to confront deep-seated prejudices. Culture, religion, and family would not permit the daughter of a Shia Muslim of Gujarati ethnicity to marry the son of a Sunni Muslim of Punjabi ancestry.

Four years earlier, our paths had crossed at a noisy demonstration at the University of Karachi. Two 20-year-olds pursuing graduate studies in English literature; one, an orator with two stints as a political prisoner; the other, a Beatles fan with a Ringo Starr mop of hair, who had never been to a protest rally in her life. They fell in love. In true Islamic tradition, she proposed, he accepted.

However, it was not to be that easy. This was traditional Pakistan where nothing happened without parental assent. When news got out that Nargis Tapal and Tarek Fatah wanted to wed, all hell broke loose. Both families vetoed the match. Devastated, we contemplated eloping, and were accepted at Oklahoma State University, but just to get there would cost a fortune, and we were penniless.

With nowhere to run, we persevered and several years later, both sets of parents buckled and gave their consent. To this day, we still cannot understand why it was so difficult to achieve such simple joy. After 29 years as husband and wife, we want no one denied the happiness we enjoy.

Sadly, the gatekeepers of bliss and the purveyors of grief are still alive and well. From prelates and imams to rabbis and pundits, the forces of religion are arrayed against the gay and lesbian community. Once again, we are witnessing an attack on joy and happiness in the name of religion and tradition.

As practising Muslims, we acknowledge that no faith, particularly Islam in its traditional interpretation, permits same-sex marriage or condones homosexuality. However, neither does faith allow hate and bigotry to be camouflaged as a quest for religious purity.

Most Canadian Muslims reject the notion of same-sex marriages and they are perfectly entitled to their beliefs, if, indeed, the issue is one of belief. But we think the position taken by religious leaders attacks the basic humanity of gays and lesbians. Dehumanizing "the other" is the first step to setting them as targets of bigotry and hate. Invoking religion to accomplish this task is shameful.

A Muslim monthly magazine asked its readers in an editorial, "Would you rather have church or state in your bedroom?"

Without answering the question, and oblivious to the implications of inviting church, mosque or state into our bedrooms, the writer goes on to predict moral disaster.

Accepting homosexual relationships as "marriage" will be the last nail in the coffin of human morality, according to the editorial. We Muslims allowed and promoted the delinquency in our daily life and kept quiet; we tolerated the illegitimate relationships of consenting adults outside marriage; we turned a blind eye to the "coming out of the closet" and hid behind the curtain of "hate the sin, but love the sinner" ... Even if we are looked upon in the West as "fundamentalists" or "homophobes," it is an obligation for all Muslims to do our part just as the Catholics are doing.

Last nail in the coffin of human morality? Not the Holocaust, not the genocide in Rwanda, not the massacres in Bosnia? Just same-sex marriage? Not murder, not hunger, not rape, not war, not honour killing, not illiteracy, not sexual assault by clergy, not its cover-up? To the editorial writer, nothing seems to be as vile as homosexuality.

Muslims should know better than to fall into this trap. They have been at the receiving end of slander and hate and it has taken collective action of some courageous people to defend the human rights and humanity of Muslims as equal citizens in our society. Even though an overwhelming majority of Canadians does not believe in the Qur'an as a word of God and Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, as a Messenger of God, we Muslims have been given a status, at least in the law, as equal citizens, no matter how offensive others may find our religion.

The same holds true for the other side. After all, Muslims do not believe that Jesus was a Son of God; or that God should be worshipped in physical depictions such as statues; or that God does not exist at all, as atheists say. However, not only have we learned to accept Canadians with whom we have profound differences of religious belief, we have developed a society in which these differences are no hindrance to our relationship with each other.

It has been the intrinsically tolerant nature of Canadian society that has defined the rights of Muslims as equal citizens, despite our minority status. How can we then campaign against the very values that accord us the dignity we deserve?

If you believe your religion doesn't permit gay marriage, then simply don't marry a person of your own sex. End of story. Why would you wish to impose this standard on people who believe that religion, in their interpretation, does not exclude same-sex marriages?

The same religious groups that today say their only objection to the proposed law is the word "marriage," were at the forefront of challenging Bob Rae's Bill 167 in 1994; a proposed law that did not mention same-sex marriage and spoke only of same-sex rights.

The law drafted by the federal government as presented to the Supreme Court makes an explicit declaration protecting the right of any church, mosque, synagogue, and temple to refuse to perform same-sex marriages.

So why the fuss over gay marriage? Could it be the same forces of religion, tradition, culture, and hate that opposed our heterosexual marriage 30 years ago are still making their presence felt? Is it joy that they fear? Happiness, it seems, is an affront; they simply cannot fathom the idea of two people wishing to live together as a family, and to be accepted the way the Almighty created them.

As a happily married Muslim couple who almost weren't, we need to speak on their behalf, even though Islam does not permit same-sex marriages. If gays and lesbians wish to pursue their own path in life, who are we to place obstacles in their way? If their choices are contrary to that of the Divine, only the Divine can be certain. Let us find God in our kindness and compassion instead of hate and self-righteousness. For isn't God the most merciful and the most compassionate?

Only God knows whether we are right in standing up for our gay friends, but we do so in all sincerity and with the hope that no one should shower grief over the happiness sought by another human being. Let us learn to live and let live.

Tarek Fatah is the host of Muslim Chronicle on Vision TV. Nargis Tapal writes short stories and poetry.

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Tarek Fatah and Nargis Tapal faced cultural and religious opposition to their marriage, much as gays and lesbian couples do today.

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