Being Muslim, gay and an imam in Europe: "The Koran doesn't say anything against homosexuals"

Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed has been fighting extremist interpretations of Islam for years, promoting a tolerant religion with room for people like him.

To some, he is a homosexual apostate. To others, a tolerant imam. His acts of defiance have resulted in intimidation from Salafists and threats from some Algerians who want his nationality revoked on the grounds that he is a "son of hell". He now travels between European capitals to educate Muslim refugees who have recently arrived in Europe on tolerance. Ludovic Zahed, a 37-year-old French-Algerian, has been fighting against the more conservative wing of Islam for years, since he was a teenager, when he came out as gay and decided to reconcile his homosexuality with his religion. "Muhammad was a rebel," he says, and "he would marry homosexuals today, without question."

"The alleged duty to kill homosexuals and transsexuals is a lie, invented by people who represent very dogmatic and extremist ideas. Islam is a religion of respect and tolerance. The prophet Muhammad welcomed effeminate men with no desire for women into his home," declares the imam. In his view, what the Koran does condemn are "sexual practices that are violent or pagan, or that involve the domination of others, or that are inhumane, such as rape." He adds: "The Muslim holy book does not mention homosexuality, much less does it say what many people claim, that if you encounter two people of the same sex having relations you should kill them, whether they are actively or passively involved."

On the way to Berlin, where he is due to give his next course, Zahed explains that there are around 3500 gay Muslims in the German capital. According to him, a significant proportion of these gay Muslims are refugees who are "against the threats made by their fellow refugees, but are not at peace with themselves." The imam says that many of them suffer pangs of conscience, brought on by social and religious pressure. "They come from unstable societies, where they are victims of Islamist hostility, just like women or ethnic minorities are," he explains.

His battle, he says, is against Islamophobia and homophobia, two sides of the same coin that play a major role in the modern world. "From childhood, they are brought up to believe that homosexuality is prohibited by Islam and they have the idea instilled in them, but Allah doesn't say anything against us in the Koran," he says. This is his explanation for the attacks reported in refugee centres in European countries, where many homosexuals have been assaulted and have even received death threats. With his courses, which have such titles as "deconstructing homophobia", his aim is to help refugees from conservative countries in the Middle East live in peace with themselves and others, with their religion and with homosexuality as a reality. He points out that he isn't going to tell them "how they should behave", but simply that Islam welcomes "all sexual orientations".

Visitors observe prayers in the Grand Mosque of Paris at an open day on 10 January 2016 (Reuters)

The first inclusive mosque in Paris

Since the start of the year, Germany has opened several reception centres specifically for lesbian, gay, transsexual and bisexual refugees to help them avoid harassment and discrimination from other refugees in other shelters. Discussions are ongoing in the Netherlands about whether to take the same steps, although many Dutch politicians believe that doing so would, as Prime Minister Mark Rutte puts it, "vindicate the radicals".

Michil Satel, who was born 30 years ago in Aleppo, told *El Confidencial* about the attacks he and some of his fellow gay refugees have suffered. "I'm scared because I've had death threats. They piss on my bed, throw food and rubbish, and tell me I'm going to hell," he says nervously. The young Syrian arrived in Holland last November and is now living in a refugee camp on the German border while he waits for his asylum document, which will allow him to move.

Despite stories like these, Zahed remains optimistic. "Although it's not over yet, sexual minorities are no longer the victims of witch-hunts," says the imam. He is convinced that "not even the prophet Muhammad himself would be homophobic" if he were alive today, and what's more, "he would bless same-sex marriages." Zahed is Algerian by birth, although he has spent much of his life in France. There, right in the centre of Paris, in 2012 he opened the first inclusive mosque where all Muslims are welcome, regardless of their sexual orientation or the way they dress. Men and women pray together in the same space, even if the women do not have their hair covered.

He is aware of the risk and mindful of the threats he receives from the more conservative factions. What he has done is considered an act of heresy by those around him and elsewhere. "There are those who try to impose a dogmatic and totalitarian version of our traditions, but we are becoming an increasingly international and organised movement, working with other people and promoting the creation of inclusive, egalitarian mosques in countries all over the world," he explains. When his local community realised that Zahed was trying to send a message of tolerance and openness, "people started coming to ask if I would marry them, pray for the dead, or give fatwas (non-binding religious rulings)."

Not everyone was appreciative, however, as he also remembers the insults and threats. After all, he didn't just build a mosque that broke the rules of traditional places of worship, where men and women have to pray separately and women are obliged to cover their hair with a scarf, he also conducts same-sex weddings. The 39-year-old French-Algerian's latest act of rebellion happened in Stockholm, where he married two Iranian women, one of whom suffers from a genetic medical condition. It was an act of "insolence" that angered fundamentalists considerably.

Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed

News of the scandal reached Salafists in Algeria, his country of origin, who threatened him and asked for his citizenship to be revoked. They called him a "homosexual apostate", a label he ignores. "That wedding was really a blessing. It's a great story and for me they were the perfect couple, joined together by an imam," he tells us. The religious marriage was a complement to the civil ceremony that the two women had previously had in Sweden.

For his part, he came out as gay at the age of 21 and then decided to face up to the situation with his family. "My father told me that he had suspected it for some time. My mother took a long time to understand that it's not a perversion or a psychological disorder. In the end, she told me that she would accept my husband if I ever got married, and she did," says the Muslim activist, who became an imam via Buddhism – a paradox that he uses to explain the difficulties he had on his way to becoming a religious leader and accepting himself.

An anthropologist and theologian, he had his first sexual experiences several years before deciding to talk to his parents. He met his first love at the Salafist school where he was studying Islam, although the relationship was impossible within a religious brotherhood. There, the two of them read the Koran, prayed five times a day and dreamed of devoting themselves to their religion. Zahed decided to become an imam, a Muslim scholar, and study in Mecca. His lover, a Salafist, followed another path, rejecting the slightest possibility of maintaining a relationship. This marked the beginning of the doubts that led him to give up Islam and find new friends.

"When I was 19, my partner at the time, who was not a very honest person, infected me with HIV. Nobody is to blame for being HIV positive, and it isn't a punishment for perversion, as some people say it is," says Zahed, referring to a period in his life before university when he decided to shave off his beard and stop praying. He chose to replace that world with partying and drugs, which led to some bad experiences - experiences from which he took a lot of positives. "There are many, many people who have HIV, but you have to be honest in your relationship and tell your partner. When I look back, I realise how much I learned from that time," he says.

This experience, he explains, only reinforced his decision to devote himself to religion. He learned about Buddhism and, after some time and reflection, he embraced Islam again and became a Muslim leader, although he is an exception to the rule. His battle has been fraught with difficulties, including Islamophobia and terrorism. The appalling images of Islamic State extremists throwing young people off the top of buildings as a punishment for their homosexuality are what hurt Zahed the most because "extremism is exactly what I have always been fighting against."

He points out that Islam "clearly prohibits terrorism," and he defines the religion as one of peace. Groups like Daesh are "a monstrosity born out of the crisis in Islam," and, for that reason, he firmly condemns them. Zahed says that he is "very satisfied with the entire path" he has taken since coming out, adding that he will not let anyone, "not intellectual fascists and not terrorists," destroy his achievements.

Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed, the gay imam, poses in front of the Grand Mosque of Paris in November 2012 (Reuters)