ABSTRACT

This reception study, drawing on Robert White’s culturalist approach to religious media and Jane Mansbridge’s oppositional consciousness, explores the meaning-making process of Queer Christians in Sweden about Parvez Sharma’s *A Jihad for Love*. The study argues that against a background where Muslims and Queer Muslims facing multiple forms of othering in Western mainstream media, queer-affirming Muslim alternative media can be a precursor to interfaith encounter and interreligious dialogue between Queer Christians and Queer Muslims. The results show that *A Jihad for Love* potentially increased the imagination and political interest of Queer Christians in Sweden in Queer Muslim lives. Finally, this study contributes to the reception of queer-affirming Muslim alternative media which has long been neglected and offers interesting insights about Queer Christian conceptualization of freedom, tolerance, secularism, religion and media in Swedish society.

Keywords: A Jihad for Love, religious media, queer affirming alternative Muslim media, Queer Muslims, Queer Christians, Sweden, interfaith dialogue, secularism
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1. Introduction

In the post 9/11’s Western world, all that is said about Islam is centered around Muslim fundamentalism in the form of terrorist actions, forced marriage, honor violence, female genital mutilation. This permits conditions of gross misinterpretation and negative misperception of Islamic culture in the West. Misperceptions of Western culture exist within Islamic culture as well. The sheiks¹ issue fatwas and label any kind of cultural product and practice stretching from homosexuality to American car brand Chevrolet’s “Christian cross-like” logo as haram² and Western disease. As a result, miscommunication between Islamic and Western world rises.

Constantly featured in a negative light by the western mainstream media, Islamic culture is currently the cultural other of the Western world. The mainstream media in Western world, without a doubt, have a tremendous role in disregarding the rainbow culture of Islam and rendering it as a monolithic entity as well as the diametrical opposite of Christianity.

Today, the arguments of cultural scholars (Hall 1997, Barnett 2003) and alternative media theorists (Cammaerts and Carpentier 2008), well demonstrate that while mainstream media have the power of constructing dominant ideological frameworks about how we should define ourselves and others, alternative media can give voice to marginalized groups. After Muslim women who are shown as victims in the hands of radical Islamists, Western mainstream media’s latest victims are Queer³ Muslims. Western journalists have been unwilling to report on the liberal Islam and progressive Imams who have conducted Muslim marriage contracts for same-sex couples or on parents who have supported their gay children. Instead, they cover dark sides of the relations between homosexuality and Islam.

This coverage seems to only exacerbate the plight of Queer Muslims on a very serious level. Queer Muslims, who already have been suffering from homophobia in their own societies and from Islam phobia in the Western world, are now starting to be excluded from non-Muslim LGBT community as well. There is however one social group left who might share the same destiny with Queer Muslims: Queer Christians whose homosexuality clashes with Christian

¹ Here, Sheik refers to an Islamic scholar who gets this title after graduating from the basic Islamic school.
² Haram corresponds to the concept of ban in Arabic.
³ This thesis uses queer as an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications. It supports Judith Butler’s and David Halperin’s idea that “queer does not designate a class of already objectified pathologies or perversions, rather, it is an identity under construction, a site of permanent becoming. More information can be accessed from http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-Dec-1996/jagose.html.
doctrine and religious affiliation is degraded by the *secular hegemony* in non-Christian Queer culture. (Yip 2005, O’Brien 2004, Shannahan 2010) Like their Muslim counterparts, Queer Christians are excluded from both Christian community and non-Christian Queer community. Furthermore, both Queer Muslims and Queer Christians are instrumentalized in the hands of Christian and Muslim religious leaders who raise their voices together against homosexuality. These marginalized groups and how they make sense of their identity are hardly represented by the mainstream media, western and non-western alike. The exclusion of Queer Muslims and Queer Christians from mainstream media, their religious communities, secular Queer community, and interfaith dialog is the very background this thesis elaborates on.

1.1. Aim and Research Questions

This thesis aims to make a reception study of queer-affirming Muslim documentary *A Jihad for Love*, with Queer Christians in Sweden. The reception study will provide insight into Queer Christian meanings in Sweden after their viewing experience of *A Jihad for Love*. For this purpose, this thesis adopts two research questions:

1) How will Queer Christians in Sweden interpret *A Jihad for Love* in relation to their identity?

2) Does *A Jihad for Love* potentially lead to a mutual understanding and oppositional consciousness? And if yes, how?

For the first research question, this thesis employs the *culturalist* approach on media, religion and culture. For the second research question, it draws on Cammaerts and Carpentier (2008) approach “alternative media as alternative to mainstream media” and John D.H. Downing’s *reception of alternative media* which is based on emotion and Jane Mansbridge’s concept of *oppositional consciousness*. This thesis does not offer a theory of religious counterpublic sphere nor will it speculate on the secular character of Swedish society. This reception study is to contribute to the relevant literature in terms of media, religion and identity as well as to provide insights about the role of alternative media in understanding Islam, Muslims and Queer Muslims. Such insights might be valuable for media professionals and religious organizations targeting interfaith activities in Sweden.
2. Background

The following sections will provide a background to contextualize the research problem and questions presented in the introduction part. Initially, A Jihad for Love will be introduced followed by a brief presentation of a) white gay imperialism in western (queer) media; b) secular hegemony in queer culture c) the call for intersectional studies about LGBT faith communities.

2.1. A Jihad for Love

*A Jihad for Love* is not the only documentary by Muslims about Muslims. Muslims have expressed their self-understanding in a number of documentary films which give a more accurate view of Islam. Zareena’s Grewal’s 2004 documentary *By the Dawn’s Early Light: Chris Jackson’s Journey to Islam* and Zarqa Nawaz’s short films *BBQ Muslims and Death Threat* are some examples (Hussain, 2009, p.136). However, A Jihad for Love is the first-ever-feature-length documentary which explores Queer Muslims’ counter-discourse against orthodox Islam and its attitude towards homosexuality. The documentary’s progressive content is not the only factor making this reception analysis interesting. The aims of this thesis clearly also overlaps with the aims of *A Jihad for Love*’s director Parvez Sharma and producer Sandi DuBowsksi who report:

“We have felt for a long time that as gay people, some of our last and most bitter battles are going to be on the front lines of religion. They all have something profound to say that I felt needed to be heard by both a Muslim and non-Muslim audience. For us, the film will work best to bring awareness and to stimulate discussion in the Muslim communities and in the non-Muslim communities. Our goal is to break the silence, focus on a shared humanity, bridge religious divide and open dialogue. We are launching a Muslim dialog project with this film, which will be transformative and create change.” (Director, Parvez Sharma and Producer Sandi DuBowsksi)

*A Jihad for Love* is a long journey through which the audiences are immersed into Queer Muslim negotiations and understandings over Islam and homosexuality. Filmed in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Egypt, Bangladesh, Turkey, France, India, South Africa, the United States, the United Kingdom and in five languages, the documentary also presents Islam’s remarkably

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4 More information about the sayings of Director, Parvez Sharma and Producer Sandi DuBowsksi can be retrieved from the following websites: http://www.fest21.com/blog/toronto_film_festival/film_in_focus_a_jihad_for_love http://www.wluml.org/node/4441
rich and multifaceted character. Islam’s different colors and historical, cultural heritage are given a particular focus and the myths around such distorted concepts as Jihad are dispelled.

We witness Moroccan lesbian Maryam’s guilt over her lesbianism, Eyptian Mazen’s "habitual debauchery" charges after he was arrested in May 2001 aboard a floating gay nightclub on the Nile, openly gay Imam Muhsin Hendrick’s search for space and reform in Islam. Moreover, we meet four Iranian refugees who spend many months in Turkey because they left their homes in fear, and applied for asylum with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. However, the documentary does also illustrate happy experiences of Queer Muslims who remind the audiences that Islam is a religion of hope, peace, richness and infinite struggle. This is achieved by filming different systems of beliefs, Muslim communities and practices within Islam. The documentary does not give a narrow definition of Islam which is limited to Sunni Islam, the largest domination of Islam. It also sheds light on other denominations, Shia Islam and Sufism and their religious figures.

In Turkey, where a long history of Islamic mystical tradition (i.e. Sufism) exists, the lesbian couple of Kiymet and Ferda are in harmony with their understanding of God, religious practices and lesbianism. Ferda and Kiymet put that,

5 Sunni Islam is the orthodox version of Islam. The majority of the world’s Muslim population follows the Sunni branch of Islam.
6 Shia Islam is the second largest denomination of Islam. After the death of Muhammed, the Muslims accepted Abu Bakr as the first caliph. But many years later, a new sect known as Shiaism was founded. Those who accepted Abu Bakr were known as Sunnis, in order to differentiate between those who accepted Abu Bakr as caliph and the new sect of Shiaism. According to Sunni Muslims, the first four caliphs were known as the Rightly guided Khalifs the first was Abu Bakr Siddique, followed by Umar ibn al-Khattāb, the second of the Four Rightly Guided Caliphs. Uthman ibn Affan and Ali ibn Abi Talib also were called by the same title. In contrast to other schools of thought, the Shia believe that only God has the right to choose a representative to safeguard Islam, the Quran and sharia. For this reason, the Shias look to Ali, whom they consider divinely appointed, as the rightful successor to Muhammad, and the first imam. The Shia believe that there are numerous narrations where Muhammad selected Ali as his successor. More information can be retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunni_Islam
7 In her book called Mystical Islam: An Introduction to Sufism, Julian Baldick explains that Sufism is a mystical tradition which, when compared to Christian and European institutions, could be put somewhere between monasticism and Freemasonry. It has many of the characteristics of monasticism, but does not usually preach celibacy. It does enjoin mortification of the flesh, and exalts the ideal of poverty, but it includes ordinary members of society in its ranks, with no distinction of clerical versus lay. It emphasizes the love of God, and teaches that God and the Sufis have a special relationship which goes back to a primordial Covenant: the Sufis are God’s friends, perpetually engaged in remembrance of him. Sufism should be distinguished from other traditions in the Muslim world which have also represented strongly mystical trends. One of these is the Islamic continuation of Greek philosophy. More information can be retrieved from Mystical Islam: An Introduction to Sufism.
“God says I created you from My love and from My own image. Whatever I am, God is. Whatever I feel God wants me to feel. Islam is a religion of peace but we can only understand this by understanding Sufism, not by how some people interpret Islam” (Ferda, Turkish lesbian, Sufi Muslim quoted from the documentary A Jihad for Love)

“My atheists friends always asked me, “How can you be a lesbian and have such a religious faith?” For me, each has its own place. If God has planted this love in my heart, then it is legitimate.” (Kiymet, Turkish lesbian, Sufi Muslim quoted from the documentary A Jihad for Love)

Finally, A Jihad for Love can be characterized as an archeology of British colonialism and Pakistani Sufism. The documentary reveals that it was British laws which first punished homosexual relations in Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. Today, Pakistani mystics still commemorate the love between Sufi mystic Shah Hussain and a Hindu man named Madho Lal who was born as Hindu yet later converted to Islam. Pakistani mystics continue to believe that this love was ordained by God. They bow down in front of the lovers’ graves to show reverence.

2.2. White Gay Imperialism

As a writer on alternative Islamic voices in the internet, Aini Linjakumpu presents the idea that before studying alternativity, the concept of authority must be studied. (2011:37) Linjakumpu (2011) poses the question of who is holding the authority on behalf of Islam. This question has been recently transformed into a new one of who speaks on the behalf of Queer Muslims by queer theorists in the UK and USA. They draw attention to the problems of single-issue politics of representation which equates gay with white and heterosexual with ethnic minority and immigrant communities.

US-based queer theorist and the author of Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times Jasbir K. Puar (2007) argues that “the paradigm of gay liberation in the West has produced all sorts of troubling narratives: about the greater homophobia and stricter family values in these communities”. (Puar cited in Shannahan, 2010, p. 675) In their article "Gay Imperialism: Gender and Sexuality Discourse in the 'War on Terror’" Jin Haritaworn, Tamsila Tauqir and Esra Erdem point out that in pre-9/11 Britain ‘Muslim’ and ‘homophobic’ are increasingly treated as interchangeable signifiers, and that the agency of gay Muslims, who had
already begun to organize themselves with Al Fatiha\(^8\) UK in 1998, was ignored by Western mainstream and alternative media. (2008:71)

Tamsila Tauqir, the cofounder of Safra Project\(^9\) for Queer Muslims, notes that he received numerous requests, not only by such mainstream publications as Times but also by the Pink Gay.com and Gay Times which wanted him to respond to the difficulties of being gay and Muslim as well as to the homophobia of Muslim communities in Britain and abroad. (2008: p. 76) Haritarown et al. impressively elaborate that following American and European armies which fight for the liberation of Muslim women, White Gays, who have been the most salient Other of Western societies, seem to readily grasp their civilizing mission for the liberation of Queer Muslims who live in backward societies which fall behind the western criterion of sexual freedom. Waites (2008) and (Haritaworn, 2008) describe this new imperial project:

“As Britain, America and other Northern governments add sexual orientation into their to-do-lists in Muslim countries, conceptualizations of Northern queer subject-hood is rewritten.” Waites cited (65) in Shannahan, 2010: 673)

Regarding the authority of White Gays in Europe and the US over the representation of Queer Muslims, the existence and proliferation of such queer-affirming Muslim media as A Jihad for Love seems to be more important than ever.

### 2.3. Secular Hegemony within Queer Culture

There is a shortage of queer religious cinematic representation which would not contribute in mocking religion or impose the idea that one should leave religion in order to preserve homosexuality. In her review of Netalie Braun’s short film Gevald (2008), Thea Gold (2010) problematizes Western intellectuals’ non-reflexive use of such secular ideals as autonomy, creativity, freedom and expression. According to Gold, “the liberal dichotomy of the “enlightened” homosexual versus the “backward” religious fundamentalist prevails in many cinematic dramas including Nitzan Gilady’s Jerusalem Is Proud to Present (2008)” (2010:624).

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\(^8\) The Al-Fatiha Foundation is an organization which advances the cause of gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslims. It was founded in 1997 by Faisal Alam, a Pakistani American, and is registered as a nonprofit organization in the United States

\(^9\) The Safra Project, which was set up in October 2001 by Muslim Lesbian, Bisexual and Transsexual and Transvestite women, is working on prejudices based on sexual orientation, gender, religion, race, culture and immigration status. More information can be retrieved from http://www.safraproject.org/aboutus.htm.
Gold (2010) argues that these cinematic dramas both pit religious against gay and fail discovering the complex relationship between queerness, religion and secularism. Israeli movie *The Bubble* (2006) directed by Eytan Fox narrates the love story of a Jewish Israeli soldier and a Palestinian young man and challenges the assumed heterosexuality of a Palestinian freedom fighter.

In the secular queer media, ‘coming out’ narratives of people having a religious affiliation predominantly condemn religion as being repressive and incompatible with Queer identity. These coming out narratives do not only depict Islam as inherently homophobic but also as a backward religion which would inherently exclude the ideas of revolution within Islamic thinking. To illustrate, *I exist* (2003, directed Peter Barbosa and Garrett Lenoir) is another documentary which features the experiences of gay and lesbian middle-eastern identified first and second generation Muslim migrants living in the US. According to the Farhang Rouhani (2007), *I Exist* only replicates the familiar Euro-American narrative territory of *coming out* as a developmental process and a vehicle of immigrant assimilation. *I Exist* identifies religion as a cause of oppression. Rouhani adds that this is a problematic construction that prevents us from seeing how queer Muslims can actively interpret and reclaim their religious identities (2007:174).

The underlying thread of Islamophobia within secular queer spaces and the stigmatization of Islam as a repressive religion might lead to Queer Muslims’ ultimate isolation. According to Waites (2008), another risk for Queer Muslims lies in the production of Islamophobia within queer religious activist spaces (69–71 cited in Shannahan, 2010: p. 675). Inspired by Waites, it can be argued that this production of Islamophobia might lead to the polarization between Queer Muslim and other queer faith communities. Moreover, LGBT community and academy still preserve their indifference towards religion. As a result of this indifference, LGBT Muslims and Christians are rendered to be more invisible compared to their non-religious counterparts. There is a need for LGBT research which would take the role of religion/spirituality in LGBT lives and politics seriously.
2.4. Intersectionality: Queer Muslims and Queer Christians

*Intersectionality* is a tool for analyzing the ways in which different forms of social inequality and discrimination overlap. The term is originally coined in 1989 by Kimberle Crenshaw. In her famous article *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Color*, Crenshaw (1991) criticizes contemporary feminist and anti-racist discourses on the basis of their failure in intersectional identities such as women of color. In her article, Crenshaw concludes that Intersectionality might be more broadly useful as a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics. Very rare studies incorporated intersectionality into the dynamic relation between contemporary LGBT religious/spiritual and sexual identities. (Yip 2002, 2005, 2007; Dillon 2007; O’Brien 2007; McQueeney 2009). These studies stress that religion/spirituality is a crucial resource for many LGBT individuals, in enriching their sexuality and life, and in empowering them to seek social justice within and outside faith communities.

Yip (2007) claims that the antagonistic attitudes of LGBT community and academy towards religion depend on their perception of religion as the most patriarchal, heterosexist and oppressive social institution to LGBT people. Yip (2007) warns LGBT scholars to be cautious before rushing to conclude that religion is anti-LGBT. The lack of intersectional studies on LGBT faith communities might cause these communities to fail in seeing their common struggles, enemies and needs. To illustrate, during one of his interviews, Gay Muslim Imam *Muhsin Hendricks*¹⁰ puts that “linking up with queer networks of other religious traditions and engaging the issue of sexual diversity in interreligious setting can be important to see the similarities in the struggles of Queer Jews, Christians and Muslims with patriarchy as the common enemy and in the interpretation of religious stories.” (2011: 500)

Following Yip (2007) and Muhsin Hendricks (2011), it can be argued that the reception study of A Jihad for Love by Queer Christians in Sweden would be important in the sense that the documentary can provide Queer Christians in Sweden with an awareness of common enemies, needs, struggles and causes with their Muslim counterparts. One might doubt this importance given the seemingly different circumstances surrounding Queer Christians in Sweden

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¹⁰ Muhsin Hendricks is the director of the *Inner Circle*, a group providing support for South African Muslims and he also featured in A Jihad for Love.
and Queer Muslims. After all, while Queer Muslims mostly live in societies where it is commonly accepted and even appreciated to be religious but viewed as problematic to be gay, Queer Christians in Sweden live in the most secularized society in Europe where it is commonly accepted and even appreciated to be gay but viewed as suspicious to be religious. Secularized Sweden can hardly believe that there are Swedes who are both Queer and Christian. Queer Christians in Sweden long for acceptance as queer and Christian in Sweden where they, as this thesis will show, are still denied religious positions in the Church. Moreover, Anders Bäckström, one of the researchers from the IMPACT\textsuperscript{11} programme, observes that while religious activity is diversified with regards to immigration and formation of new communities like, for example, Syrian Christians from Turkey or Muslims from a variety of places (mostly Iran and Iraq), Swedish society experiences a growing complexity in the relationship between religious and secular understandings of freedom, equality and tolerance. (2010:1) This complexity is highlighted by a growing religious pluralism, where the presence of Islam plays an important role. (2010:2) While Muslim believers are standing at the center of the discussion about the challenge of religion in a pluralist society, Queer Christians in Sweden are never studied by Swedish scholars.

The exclusion of Queer Muslims and Queer Christians from secular queer culture, conservative religious communities and by patriarchal religious leaders (a); the lack of knowledge about queer Muslims and queer Christians in Islamic and Christian world (b); are two pillars which make incorporating an intersectional focus into this reception study important. More importantly, there are complexities between religion, secularism and queerness which this reception study aims to shed light on.

3. Literature Review

The literature review consists of two parts. In the first part of the literature review, the first research question “How will Queer Christians in Sweden interpret \textit{A Jihad for Love} in relation to their identity?” will be approached from four complementary perspectives: a) the shortcomings of the functionalist and propaganda paradigms in the study of media, religion and culture b) the

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\textsuperscript{11} The Impact of Religion – Challenges for Society, Law and Democracy” (IMPACT) is a Linnaeus Research Programme at Uppsala University 2008-2018. The Impact of Religion is organized six themes. These are “Religion and Social Change”, “Integration, Democracy and Political Culture”, “Family, Law and Society”, “Health”, “Welfare State Models, Organizations and Evaluations”, “Science and Religion”. More information can be retrieved from www.impactofreligion.uu.se
new culturalist approach c) the new media and religion landscape d) the media, religion and identity.

PART I

3.1. Media and Religion

The secularization theories (see Weber, Berger, Cox, Luckmann, Casanova) developed from the 1960’s onwards rendered religion as a dead culture and a realm distinct from the rest of culture (Redden and Bailey 2011). However, the mediated events of September 11, 2001 terror attacks, public struggles within religious groups over social values such as gay rights and US political campaigns prove that religion and the media seem to be ever more connected. The post 9/11 leads to the revitalization of the role of religion in politics. While having expelled from fields of social and cultural study, religious matters now can hardly be avoided because religion is mediated, administered, lived, contested and adapted by socially situated agents, just like other forms of culture- and in relation to them. (Redden and Bailey 2011:3)

In their article “Geneology of an Emerging Field: Foundations for the Study of Media and Religion”, Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum (2002), the editors of Journal of Media and Religion, present three reasons for the neglect of media and religion studies. First, they argue that addressing religion might be taken as advocating particular ideologies. Then, they proceed that others may fear the mixing of academic study with theology. Finally, they put that religion is by its nature a complex, nuanced, sensitive, paradoxical, and multilayered phenomenon. Stewart M. Hoover, the founder of The Center for Media, Religion, and Culture, University of Colorado at Boulder, observes that “there has been a tendency of the media scholars to think of religion as trivial or fading dimension of social and cultural life.” (2002:25).

Before theorizing about religion and media from a cultural perspective, the religion and media research has been dominated by two paradigms of interpretation and analysis, namely, the instrumentalist/essentialist and propaganda/effects paradigms. The next part describes these paradigms and explains their shortcomings.
3.1.1. Religious Media: The Instrumentalist and Propaganda Paradigms

The instrumentalist/essentialist paradigms to study religious media originate from French sociologist Emile Durkheim’s famous work, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912). Rejecting the view of Herbert Spencer who held that religion is an exercise in metaphysical speculation about the unknowable, Durkheim argued that religion is a form of authority and custom that powerfully links the individual to society. (Durkheim cited in Cosman 2001 p. 12) Scholars operating in this paradigm hold that religion is so intertwined with social and cultural consciousness that the media of a given age must necessarily mirror the normative picture of religion. Among the most prominent adherents to this paradigm have been those approaches that have focused on ritualized aspects of media use. (Babin & Iannone, 1991; Carey 1988, 1989; Goethals, 1981; Price, 2000; Rothenbuhler, 1998) The propaganda paradigm has looked at how religious messages might have some certain effects in audiences. The researchers look for concrete consequences in church attendance. (Abelman & Hoover, 1988 and 1990; Gerbner et al., 1984; Schultze, 1990, 1991)

None of these paradigms, however, seem to be adequate in order to grasp the role of religion in social and cultural life. They have limited themselves with medium and effect and have not offered opportunities to observe the religion as lived, negotiated and interpreted. According to Hoover “these researches’ limitations were derived from an implicit theory of the religious individual that he or she is a blank state on to which meaning could be written with the right combination of medium and message” (2006:34).

Hoover later suggests that the instrumentalist and propaganda paradigms assume that the necessary mode of religious communicational practice is an impulse to project religious symbols or ideas in ways that are consistent with the aspirations of religious authorities. (2011: 611) In other words, these paradigms assume religion and media as separate realms hence disregard the interface between media, religion and culture. This functionalist emphasis, however, is about to change with the ideas of Robert A. White (1983) supporting the culturalist approach for studying religious media. Inspired by critical cultural studies tradition which position religious media as a part of a life context and history, the study of religious media started to focus on the use of media by different subcultures to build religious meanings.
3.1.2. The Culturalist Approach

This part represents the culturalist approach to studying media, religion and culture. Robert White (1983) articulated that traditional instrumentalist and propaganda models of communication should be replaced by a focus on the context and process of media audience practice where meanings are intended, made, exchanged. White (2007) stresses that religious expression is generally found within institutional religion, but the formal creed, rituals and moral codes do not exhaust the personal experience of religion.

The fault lines of culturalist approach to studying media, religion and culture can be summarized by four points. First, religion is a personal response, seeking meaning in life thus every individual and group has its own concept of what is religion and may project a religious meaning on to media. Second, the focus shifts from the institutional representations of religion to more poetic representations of personal spirituality, a sense of unity with personal identity and inspirations of others. Third, this requires to understand the experience of transcendent community in film, music, and visual or plastic arts. Finally, the culturalist approach looks at what people do with religious/spiritual media at the larger contexts of the creation, circulation and consumption of religious/spiritual resources. (White, 2007:9)

Touching upon all these points, however, can be a difficult endeavor without guidance of conceptual tools. In order to explore the meaning-making process of Queer Christians in Sweden about religion and spirituality, this thesis employs two notions, mediation and mediatization; which are also the parameters of a new media and religious landscape.

3.1.3. Media and New Religious Landscape

Famous for his analysis of culture as a web of mediations, Colombian scholar Jesus-Martin Barbero (1997) holds that mediation is the idea that the media play a role of mediating between the individual and her culture. The purpose of the study of the media, according to Barbero, should be seeing and conceiving the media as the locus of the constitution of identities and as a space for configuration of communities. Applying the culturalist approach to studying media, religion and culture, this thesis finds Barberos’s (1997) conceptualization of media and religion a particularly apt one:

“The media are not just economic phenomena or instruments of politics and that nor are the media interesting simply as one more instance of rapid technological change. Rather the media must be analyzed
as a process of publics that are “subjects of action”. To conceptualize the relations of modernity, religiosity, and media, one must see the media as a central factor in the constitution of social actors” (Barbero 1997:102)

The concept of mediation can be useful to describe the circumstances under which Queer Christian meanings about A Jihad for Love are made. Jesus-Martin Barbero explains the role of media in religiosity referring to Hugo Assmann’s (1988) phenomenon of electronic church, that is, Latin American Pentecostal churches’ intensive use of radio and television. Barbero (1997) states that the significance of electronic church is that some churches have been able to transform radio and television into a new, fundamental mediation for the religious experience. Bringing together the media and religious experience Barbero writes: “The medium is not simply a physical amplification of the voice, but rather adds a quite new dimension to religious contact, religious celebration, and personal religious experience”. (1997:108-9) Redden and Bailey also indicate that mediation of religion is not limited to the media technologies but it also refers to an ongoing social process of meaning-making through which religious discourse articulate with the agents who negotiate on the authority of religious symbolization and who bind the religious to the broader public space in the course of action and expression. (2011:6)

The mediation of religion, however, has existed, long before the phenomenon of electronic church. Jeremy Stolow (2005) and Daniel A.Stout (2012) demonstrate that religion always encompasses techniques that we think of as ‘media’ and weaken the arguments for media and religion being as two distinct spheres:

“The communication with and about ‘the sacred’ has always been enacted through written texts, ritual gestures, images and icons, architecture, music, special garments, saintly relics and other objects of veneration, markings upon flesh, wagging tongues. It is only through such media that it is at all possible to proclaim one’s faith, mark one’s affiliation, receive spiritual gifts, or participate in any of the countless local idioms for making the sacred present to mind and body” (Stolow 2005 125).

Before continuing with the new ways of thinking about media, identity and religious experience, this thesis wants to introduce the concept of mediatization of religion. Mediation and mediatization are two concepts that are falsely used interchangeably. While they are closely related and inseparable phenomena, they need to be defined and explained separately.
Danish scholar Stig Hjavard (2008) holds that while mediation refers to the specific circumstances of communication which influence both the message and the relation between the sender and the receiver, mediatization refers to the long-term process where the media’s religious representations challenge the authority of the institutionalized religions. Stig Hjavard (2008) aims to develop a theoretical framework for understanding how media work as agents of religious change and evolution. For this purpose, he draws on Michael Billig’s concept of banal nationalism and launches the concept of banal religion.

By banal religion, Hjavard means that we have to consider that media do not only report on the established/institutionalized/organized religion but they also change the very ideas and authority of religious institutions and the ways in which people interact with each other when dealing with religious issues. (2008) In banal religion, media provide a backdrop for our understanding of what religion is.

The treatment of religion in popular adult dramas as a valuable context for religious meaning and exploration is an increasing research trend in the area of media, religion and culture. (Paul C. Peterson 2002; Todd V. Lewis 2002, and Erica Engstrom & Beth Semic 2003)

The increasing omnipresence of religion in this new media landscape makes one question the myth of modern media as agents of secularization. Jeremy Stolow (2005) writes that “despite the growing body of scholarship challenging the conceptual viability of modernization as a process of ‘secularization’, assumptions about religious decline or crisis continue to dominate accounts of the institutional, discursive and performative conditions of mediated communication in the modern age” (page 122). Stolow (2005) argues that today, it is very difficult to deny the role of different communication technologies and forms in the expansion of religious communities, movements, institutions and cultural forms. Throughout the world, the blogs, websites, cartoons, documentaries and television dramas inform, inspire, encourage and empower larger groups of audiences having different religious affinity. They provide the latter with knowledge about the unknown religious movements, groups, practices and symbols.

The myth of modern media as agents of secularization seems to continue in a global era where the role of religion is believed to be decreasing. According to Hoover (2002) and Beckford (2003), globalization and secularization theorists fail to see that religions are not
simply the effects of external forces but that they are also agents, observers and critics of their own development. In a global era, the media can also be said to fuel the imagination of religious communities about others’ understanding of the sacred in their worlds. This might be especially important when one thinks about the potential of media for creating new opportunities for marginalized religious communities and their identity construction. Accordingly, the media today can create the interconnectedness of Queer Muslim community with the world.

3.1.4. Media, Religion and Identity

Robert A. White argues that “the religious communities of today design their future largely in terms of the materials provided by the media”. (2007:12) Furthermore, in his article “The Role of Media in the Threats and Opportunities of Globalization for religion” H. Ayatollahy (2008) addresses that media can improve understanding between different religions by strengthening the imagination of believers about other religions so that they would understand the strength of others. Ayatollahy (2008) proposes that although the media are guilty of giving poor impressions of some religions, they can present an opportunity for a more mutual understanding among different religions. It is also worth highlighting that religious scholars, such as Liyakatali, have pointed that “the exposure to the ‘rainbow nature’ of Islam can educate non-Muslims not only about Islam but also about differences within the Muslim community and the hermeneutical tradition within Islam”. (2004:351)

Douglas Pratt puts that “in the contemporary western world, the primary challenge is that of understanding Islam, of allaying fear through proper knowledge and information” (2005:2). According to Pratt, this is a necessary precursor to, and concomitant requirement of, interfaith encounter and interreligious dialogue. (2005:2) Echoing Liyakatali (2004) and Ayatollahy (2008), Pratt (2005) also predicts that an educational and informative encounter with Islam via media can demystify the Western myth that surrounds Islam and Muslims, in other words, the notion that Islam forms a single monolithic entity. Pratt writes that “Underneath a veneer of apparent normative ‘sameness’ there can be found a rich diversity of religious expression and Muslim cultures, which is not unlike the internal diversities that mark the variegated identities within both Christianity and Judaism”. (2005:3)
PART II

3.2. Alternative Media

Alternative media is an under-researched topic in the social sciences. In his article *Alternative Media as Critical Media*, Christian Fuchs (2010) puts that “there are 44 papers that contain the term ‘alternative media’ in the title in Social Sciences Citation Index”. (accessed 13 March 2010) The term alternative media, with its incomparable qualities, has been a contested area for media theorists. It should be noted that this thesis is not to offer a theoretical discussion about what alternative media is or to describe all the instances where alternative media differs from mainstream media. Instead, it broadly aims to explain in which aspects *A Jihad for Love* can be considered as an alternative media and how the reception of *A Jihad for Love* can be conducted. In the next section, the intents behind *A Jihad for Love* and the documentary’s relationship to mainstream media are explained with a focus on Bailey Cammaert and Carpentier’s approach called “alternative media as an alternative to mainstream media”. In the last section of the literature review, the reception of *A Jihad for Love* is introduced with a focus on Jown D. Downing and Jane Mansbridge ideas about oppositional consciousness in order to explore how the documentary is received by Queer Christians in Sweden.

Before proceeding with these sections, it can be wise to note that there are three different main features of alternative media that this thesis draws and elaborates on. Firstly, Mitzi Waltz (2005) and Tim O’Sullivan (2005) state that alternative media products, which are in opposition to mass-media products that are widely consumed, can be used as instruments for social change. Waltz predicts that “socially marginalized or dissenting groups, subcultures, ethnic minorities, and others who inhabit luminal spaces in mainstream cultures may be most likely to seek out alternative media and to create their own if it is not found” (2005:8).

Secondly, John D.H. Downing (2001) puts that the main feature of alternative media is their alternative political vision to hegemonic policies and perspectives. In his article “Alternative Media As Critical Media”, Christian Fuchs (2010) introduces the notion of alternative media as critical media and describes the content of critical media products as showing the suppressed possibilities of existence, antagonisms of reality, and potentials for change.

Finally, regardless of the variances between their definitions of alternative media, Waltz (2005), Tim O’Sullivan, Rodriguez, Downing (2001, 2003) , Atton (2002), and Fuch (2010) all
agree that alternative media content give voice to the voiceless and fight with censorship of information by state monopolies, or cultural monopolies in public communication. All of these three main features of alternative media are discussed regarding *A Jihad for Love* in the next chapter.

**3.2.1. A Jihad for Love: Queer Muslim Underground Work**

This thesis focuses on Cammaerts and Carpentier approach to “alternative media as a supplement to mainstream media or as a counter-hegemonic critique of the mainstream”. Cammaerts and Carpentier claim that “it is important to grasp the relationship between media and representation since one reason for the very existence of alternative media is to voice the ‘ideologies’ of those under- or misrepresented in the mainstream channels of communication which reproduce a constructed and preferred view of ‘reality’“. (2008:16) Following cultural scholars (Hall 1997, Barnett 2003) who highlight the power of cultural representations (e.g. images and narratives) for constructing identity, they argue that media determine how we should define ourselves and others. (2008:17) However, they also point out that while the mainstream media exercise power by privileging dominant and hegemonic meanings, subordinated groups can also generate their non-conformist meanings through alternative media. (2008:17)

*A Jihad for Love* represents a haven for Queer Muslims that have been marginalized by Western mainstream media. The documentary film can be approached as an alternative radical Muslim media for three reasons. First, it is an articulation of the social process whereby Queer Muslims stand for reformation within Islamic thinking and use media to flag their identity to both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences. It is the first documentary film which allocates a particular space to issues long distorted by Western mainstream media. Conventional media “omit or bury items which might jeopardize the socio-cultural structure and man’s faith in it”. (Breed 2004, p.419 cited in Kenix) As “an alternative” to the stories covered by mainstream media or conventional media, the documentary film shows that Islam has many other sides than Muslim fundamentalism, terrorist actions, Islam’s threat to freedom of speech, forced marriage, honor violence, female genital mutilation and Sharia law. With a focus on Islam’s multi-faceted character, *A Jihad for Love* circumvents its Western mainstream counterpart. The western myth that Islam is inherently backward, suppressive and homophobic is criticized. The director of the
documentary, Parvez Sharma, sheds light on the unrevealed aspects of Islam as culture and religion in different Muslim geographies.

Second, *A Jihad for Love* reflects on the agency of Queer Muslims who question political, cultural and institutional forces behind Islam. As a resistance against the narrow definition of Islam as institutionalized/organized religion, the documentary goes beyond ritual practices and a community of Orthodox believers within Islam and invites audiences to explore Queer Muslim meanings. *A Jihad for Love* supplants the dominant ideological frameworks about Islam and Queer Muslims with a frame of radical alternative vision. These characteristics of *A Jihad for Love* mirrors Downing’s (2001) accounts for alternative radical media: radical media has a mission not only to provide facts to a public denied them but also to explore fresh ways of developing a questioning perspective on the hegemonic process and increasing the public’s sense of confidence in its power to engineer constructive change. In this constructive change, Gramscian organic intellectuals, as “communicator/radical media activist”, are engaging a central role in resistance movements where they operate against a broader context of state repression, execution and police surveillance.

The final feature of *A Jihad for Love* which makes it an alternative to mainstream media is related to the circumstances under which it is produced. Downing puts that placing radical alternative media within the larger context of state power, hegemony and insubordination is a necessary step toward understanding them (2001:19). He indicates that we need to be alert to multiple forms of power and subordination, often interlocking and to the centrality of culture as the ground on which struggles for freedom and justice are fought out. (2001:19) *A Jihad for Love* was created with great risk and secrecy in nine languages and twelve countries where government permission was not an option. Nevertheless, *A Jihad for Love*’s director Parvez Sharma managed to carry Queer Muslim discourses about Islam and homosexuality to many other cultural platforms. Screened in many international film festivals and universities in Sweden, the documentary is a strong counter-hegemonic instrument with which the power of mainstream media is balanced and the struggles for Queer Muslims are fought out.

Jane Chapman, in his book called *Issues in Contemporary Documentary* talks about the need to scrutinize the balance between the filmmaker and the marginalized groups since the desired messages of the film and likely outcomes of the project might not be the same for the
producer/director as they are for the social actors. Chapman suggests that there is a dilemma for
the filmmaker in making a documentary on notions of power and powerlessness coupled with the
likely impact of the film (2009:162). However, there is a counter-balance in much of the work
by ‘ethnic’ and ‘minority’ and Third World communities have developed as a reaction to those
with political and economic power (2009:107, 109).

The filming tactics of A Jihad for Love are unusual in the sense that Parvez Sharma tries to
tell the stories of Queer Muslims who are under the threat of death, so they have to be filmed in
secret. Helen Hok-Sze Leung classifies these kinds of media which are secretly produced as
“Queer underground movies”. They are made by independent filmmakers dealing with queer
politics and filmed in societies where queer content in the cinema is still outlawed (2003:16).
The underground character of these films results in a style that is typical of guerilla cinemas,
often with lots of handheld work, undercover location shoots, make do-sets. Parvez Sharma is
filming Queer Muslims by using guerilla-filming tactics while Queer Muslims secretly touch
hands, watch the prayers, hug each other in private places. In the following, Sharma explains
how he employed guerilla filmmaking tactics in Islamic countries where he knew he would never
be granted government permission for his taboo subject matter:

“I would shoot touristy footage on the first fifteen minutes and the last fifteen minutes of a tape,
hoping that if the tape was actually confiscated at customs...they would not find the key part of the
interviews, because they would just scroll through the beginning or the end.”

Sharma employed further guerilla tactics pretending to be a tourist in one country, a worker for
an Aids charity in another.

3.2.2. Alternative (Queer) Muslim Media

Before setting about the reception study of A Jihad for Love with Queer Christian
audiences, however, the previous research on the creation of Queer Islamic space in the
alternative media deserves attention since mainstream media hardly locate Queer-Affirming
Islamic voices. Similar to mainstream media where Islamic terrorism and extremism have
received considerable coverage, media research has most of the time focused on the political
Islam. “Political Islam” or “Islamism” refers to Islam as a political ideology rather than as a
religious or theological construct.(Ayoob,2004: 1) Generally and at the most basic level,

12 More information can be retrieved from http://www.thenation.com/article/gay-muslims-unveiled-jihad-love
13 More information can be retrieved from http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2007/sep/06/gayrights.religion
adherents of political Islam believe that “Islam as a body of faith has something important to say about how politics and society should be ordered in the contemporary Muslim world. (Ayoob, 2004: 1)

One of the recent academic media research about “political Islam” or “Islamism” is the study of Convey and Mclnerney (2008) which approaches large amounts of Jihadi video content on YouTube as innovative avenues for exploration of the support base for political violence. However, the hegemony of media researches dealing with Islamic terrorism and extremism seems to be counter-balanced by different studies which aim to discover the potential of alternative media for being a site of agency for subordinated Muslims asserting their cultural identity.

Alternative media has become a supplement to the mainstream media for Muslims and Queer Muslims who want to transcend the borders of orthodox Islam. One of the recent examples of these new studies is the research of Sabina Mihelj, Farida Vis and Liesbet Van Zoonen (2008) which looked at YouTube videos uploaded by Muslim women responding to the anti-Islam short video “Fitna” produced by Dutch anti-Islam Member of Parliament Geert Wilders. The researchers contrast the gender portrayal and narratives in Fitna with those in alternative videos. They found that in the YouTube videos, young and active Muslim women, coming from across the globe, produce committed explanations of their own understanding of Islam by claiming their right to speak within Islam. The researchers argue that Fitna represents Muslim men as perpetrators who preach and enact violence, oppress and abuse Muslim women and Muslim women as victims of extreme violence; as complicit in the encouragement of anti-Semitism and anti-Western feelings and as a part of allegedly changing Dutch landscape (2008: 112).

Drawing on Edward Said’s understanding of ‘Orientalism’ as a stereotypical representation of the peoples of the Middle East, Liesbet Von Zoonen write that “the visual dominance of diverse kinds of Islamic headwear for women in Fitna coincides with mainstream media coverage, in which hijab, niqab, jilbab, burqa and headscarf are treated as a singular sign of female oppression and Islamic ‘Otherness’; and more specifically as religious and cultural otherness that is at odds with (European) national values” (2008:113).
They conclude that YouTube offers an alternative space to express one’s opinions in different formats than those of mainstream media coverage; cut-and-paste and testimonials are the typical YouTube genres that young women from Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds (otherwise marginalized actors) used to criticize Geert Wilders and Fitna (2008:120). YouTube proved to be a space to perform religious identity, seeking and debate. The videos represent young Muslim women speaking out against Fitna arguing that Wilders took Quranic verses out of context, highlighting their meaning in the clip, and furthermore questioning his authority to interpret them at all. (2008:123)

Aini Linjakumpu explores ‘hidden’ Islamic voices in the Internet and the phenomena of queer and everyday Islam. The pluralization of Islamic doctrine, practices and worldviews is mainly contextualized by the general deterritorialization of religion intertwined with the globality of internet communication and political activity. (2011:38) The creation and dissemination of potentially contradictory understandings of Islam through the internet provided Muslims with power for alternative Islamic expression that might be aimed against mainstream ideas and ideologies in different domains (2011:39). The deterritorialization of Islamic world and the individualization of Islam offered the opportunity for Internet communities and individuals to make the ‘queer reading’ of sources, where sources are recontextualized and the incompetence of earlier interpretations is shown (2011:43). Furthermore, while Linjakumpu is underlining the importance of internet and networking in the context of police- and court abuse against Queer Muslims, she adds that alternative struggles in cooperation with sexual minorities in non-Muslim countries are also relevant in terms of queer Muslim awareness and actions.

Meem, Alexander and Gibson discuss how some types of alternative media- as opposed to the more mainstream media products- are used by LGBT people to build a community (2009:400). The authors see documentaries as locations where LGBT people can find expressions of queer identification and a sense of home. They refer to such documentary films as Shinjuku Boys (20th Century Vixen, 1995, directed Kim Longinotto and Jano Williams) and Dangerous Living: Coming Out in the Developing World (After Stonewall Productions 2003, directed John Scagliotti) which explore the connection between identity and the quest for place. According to the authors, the search for home can rarely be an individual journey; it is often a collective journey, as groups attempt to form new families, communities, and counter-publics.
The authors conclude that for LGBT people, reinvented concepts for home and family through alternative spaces and artifacts can function as lifelines to community.

Albeit rare, there are also some studies on the cultural and sexual situation of Queer Muslims in the West as they seek meaning, belonging, identity and faith in late capitalism. In his article *Sodomized By Religion: Fictional Representations of Queer Muslims in the West*, Ibrahim Abraham (2008), analyzes two films (My Beautiful Laundrette and Touch of Pink) and two novels (The Taqwacores and Bilal’s Bread), as fictional representations of queer Muslims in the Western world. Abraham (2008) argues that despite queer Muslims facing multiple forms of alienation and othering, these media reject the rhetoric of a clash of civilizations by creating new hybrid identities and developing relationships between Muslims and the West. Abraham thinks that these media can open up debates about Muslim culture and politics to non-Muslim audiences. Abraham states all of four fictional representations of Queer Muslims reveal that we should not assume that non-Western sexual identities and practices will so quickly disappear through the experience of migration or globalization. As Abraham analyzes, these representations are having subtle messages about the reality of same-sex sexual practices in Muslim majority world. For instance that same-sex sexual activity certainly takes place, but is not openly discussed, and not seen as a socially legitimate lifestyle or identity category (2008:144).

### 3.2.3. The Reception of Alternative Media

As it can be seen from the review of previous research on the creation of Queer Islamic space in the alternative media, the reception analysis of a queer-affirming Muslim documentary with non-Muslim audiences has not been conducted yet. Downing (2003) argues that usage of alternative media represents a huge gap in our research knowledge, one with direct implications for the study of community formation, minority-majority ethnic relations and transnational political regimes, the arts and internet. Downing (2003) suggests that in their reception studies of alternative media, researchers should adopt two research priorities, namely, the question of oppositional consciousness and the rise of emotion.
In her book called “Oppositional Consciousness: The Subjective Roots of a Social Protest”, Jane Mansbridge defines oppositional consciousness\textsuperscript{14} as an empowering mental state that prepares members of an oppressed group to act to undermine, reform or overthrow a system of human domination. (2001:4) It is usually fueled by righteous anger over injustices done to the group and prompted by personal indignities and harms suffered through one’s group membership. She writes that at a minimum, oppositional consciousness includes four elements: identifying with members of a subordinated group, identifying injustices done to that group, opposing those injustices, and seeing a group having a shared interest in ending or in diminishing those injustices.

There are two important dimensions of research on oppositional consciousness in alternative media users. First, we must acknowledge that the hegemonic media habits interact with alternative media uses. Downing notes that “people do not categorically switch off mainstream media in the present moment, however intense that moment, nor can they select simply to erase their accumulated mainstream media inheritance by some magical act of will” (2003:637). “It is normal for there to be a dynamic mental co-habititation among users between the two types of media source and their variants” (2003:637). The question of the credibility of alternative media is one index of this. Second, Downing puts that “the questions researchers ask alternative media users need to be infinitely more complex than those posed in commercial surveys and to engage with most media users in explicitly political ways” (2003:638).

The oppositional consciousness and emotion are hard to separate since the former is deemed to stem from the later. As Mansbridge puts it, oppositional consciousness takes free-floating frustration and directs it into anger and it turns strangers into brothers and sisters, and turns feelings for these strangers from indifference into love. Finally, Aminzade and McAdam (2001; 17-8) (cited in Downing 2003) argue that emotion is directly relevant both to collective mobilization and the onset of individual activism. Downing adds that the emphasis on the emotive and affective dimension in research on alternative media users is not however to disregard the rational-actor model of social movements but to complement and balance more rational forms of collective action.

\textsuperscript{14} Oppositional consciousness is originated in Karl Marx.
4. Methodology

In the following, the method chosen for the implementation of the reception study of *A Jihad for Love* will be presented.

4.1. The Reliability and Validity of Reception Study

The reliability and validity are two prominent concerns in the reception study. To satisfy the reliability criterion, the study should be conducted in such a manner as to convince readers that its findings report on the informants’ media experiences, not on the researcher’s preconceived notions of how people experience the media product. (Drotner, Kline, Murray, and Schroder (2003): p. 147) Accordingly, it would be wise to note that even though this thesis adopts Downing’s oppositional consciousness and emotion as guiding for the reception analysis of *A Jihad for Love* by Queer Christians, this does not mean that the thesis limits itself with these two. In the following, additional themes are introduced.

I tried to give enough space to the interviewees who talk about maybe the most sensitive parts of their identities and their relation to *A Jihad for Love*. I aimed to fulfill the requirements of the validity criterion which is the extent to which the interview has been able to bring forward the informants’ innermost experiences and evaluations of the media product. (Drotner, Kline, Murray, and Schroder 2003: 147)

4.2. Interviews

Interviews are the ideal tools to observe the meaning-making process of Queer Christians about *A Jihad for Love* and to get insights into Queer Christians’ interpretive repertoires about Islam, Muslims and Queer Muslims. The aim of the interviews is not to reach findings that are “true” or “adequate”. Instead, the aim of these interviews is extending into a single-case study of Queer Christian members of Queer Mässan in Sweden. This thesis does not claim to create generalizable findings. The meanings created by Queer Christian members of Queer Mässan might not refer to the other Queer Christian groups which are inside and outside Sweden. Grasping the meanings of other Queer Christian groups belonging to the rest of the Christian world stays beyond the scope of this study. Only a cross-cultural study with a focus on the
particular impact of Christianity in different societies can explore different Queer Christian meanings about *A Jihad for Love* to a fuller extent.

I consider myself a *qualitative researcher* digging into the perspectives, perceptions, and interpretative understandings of Queer Christians members of Queer Mässan about Islam, Muslims and Queer Muslims before and after they see *A Jihad for Love*. I perceive interviews as conversation where both the interviewees and I as the researcher are involved in meaning-making. In conducting semi-structured interviews, I consider myself dealing with the hermeneutic element in social science. A different way of thinking about interpretive understanding is to regard it not as a matter of finding more or less true or adequate or authoritative interpretations, but as a matter of adding to the range of interpretations, thereby enriching an ongoing creative conversation. (Sayer: 2000)

### 4.2.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

One might question why I conducted semi-structured interviews rather than focus groups. I chose semi-structured interviews because even though the members of Queer Mässan already knew each other and it could be easier to create an ideal atmosphere than would be with Queer Christians who never met before, the interviewees were not willing in the first place to talk about their feelings, opinions, attitudes in the presence of others. Therefore, the focus group ceased to be an option for me. The sensitivity and privacy of religion and homosexuality issues have been the most salient reasons for their refusal to take part in focus groups.

### 4.2.2. Design of Semi-Structured Interviews

A semi-structured interview guide was created around themes related to the theoretical framework as well as John H.D. Downing’s oppositional consciousness and emotion criteria for the reception analysis of alternative media. The interview guide had two sections. In the section called “Before *A Jihad for Love*”, the questions are designed in a way that would enable the interviewees to address their own understanding of Christianity, their experiences in Christian and queer community, their perception of Islam, Muslims and Queer Muslims’ media image. In the second part of the interview guide called “After *A Jihad for Love*”, the questions target Queer Christian meanings made through *A Jihad for Love* and those meanings relation to their identity. This part includes questions that would enable them to reflect on their previous understandings about Islam, Muslims and Queer Muslims derived from Western mainstream media. The first
priority in planning a reception interview is to get people to speak from the depths of their hearts about their experience of the media product the researcher is exploring. (Drotner, Kline, Murray, and Schroder (2003): 149) In the end of this part, the interviewees are asked to think on the problem solving strategies for Queer Christians and Queer Muslims.

The semi-structured interviews are conducted face-to-face and fully transcribed. The tone adopted in the reception interview is also another issue that has to be considered. I tried not to be too serious and aimed to achieve a mutual openness with my interviewees. I interviewed six Queer Christians members of Queer Mässan. During the interview, the interviewees might forget to tell the things that they actually meant to tell. Most of the time, I shortly summarize what they have said and asked if they do not want to add something more before I promote the next question. Given the sensitivity and privacy of the topic (i.e. Christianity and homosexuality), just after the recording is turned off, I always ask them if they would like to add a last word.

4.2.3. Selection of Queer Christians

On Tuesday, 24 January 2012, I attended a seminar called “Release - ”gud är större - ett material om tro, hbt och sånt” organized by Religion Hjärta HBT”. In the seminar, everyone I talked to from the project leader of Sverige förenade HBTQ studender to religious authorities advised me to go to S:t Jacobs kyrka (translated. Church of S:t Jacobs) where Queer Christians in Sweden meet every even week in the month for Queermässan. In the second week of February, I attended Queermässan. On their Facebook page, the administrators note:

“We who stand behind Queerkyrkan is a group that feels a need to meet beyond boundaries like physical norms, sexual identity or gender - but also beyond parish and church membership - to raise questions about faith, identity and a god that loves. Our Ambition is therefore to promote a spiritual community where we gather to worship regularly, exchange experiences and to support each other.”

It has been very easy to attract Queer Christian into my thesis project. They have shown a real interest in the thesis topic. Except one interviewee, all interviewees are born in Sweden. The age interval the interviewees represent is considerably wide. The ages of the interviewees ranged from 20 to 50 years. Efforts were made to recruit Queer Christians from a wide range of occupations, educational levels and social backgrounds.
4.2.4. Analysis and Presentation of Interview Data

The analysis of the data is done in accordance with the themes that emerged from repeatedly reading the transcripts. The first research question is to be answered around six themes as in the following;

1) Surrender to God
2) Killing Prejudices
3) Kämpa På: Stay within Religion
4) We are Sisters and Brothers
5) Queer Christian? How Does that Work?
6) Christianity as a Buffet.

The second research question is to be answered around seven themes as following;

1) The Dark Side of Islam
2) Political Correctness
3) Freak Show Media
4) Enlightenment: Islam in New Perspectives
5) Tolerance in Islam
6) Islam has Gay Sheiks: Wow Great News!
7) Emotion and Oppositional Consciousness

In order not to harm the anonymity of the interviewees, the interviewees are not called by their real names. Before submitting my thesis project to Stockholm University, Media and Communication Studies Department, the interviewees have been given the opportunity to read the thesis project.

5. Results and Discussion

In this chapter the results of the semi-structured interviews with six Queer Christians who belong to the Queer Christian community called “Queer Mässan” in Stockholm will be presented. Due to lack of space the findings will also be analyzed and discussed in relation to the theoretical framework in this chapter.

PART I

In this part, the first research question is to be answered around six themes as stated in the analysis and presentation of interview data. These are “Surrender to God”, “Killing Prejudices”, “Kämpa På: Stay within Religion”, ”We are Sisters and Brothers”, “Queer Christian? How Does that Work?” and “Christianity as a Buffet”.

30
5.1. Surrender to God

After watching *A Jihad for Love*, Queer Christians were asked to explain their own relationship to God, homosexuality and homosexual love. The interviewees were puzzled over the similarity between their own and Queer Muslims reasoning about God, homosexuality and homosexual love. The basic principles of the faith of Queer Muslims featured in *A Jihad for Love*, including “surrender to God”; “a loving God”; “the will of God over their self and identity”; “unity with God” and “guidance from God” ranked particularly high in the interviewees’ comments. The acknowledgements that “The God I believe in is the God who made me” and “Homosexuality is a gift from God” were the most common ways to reconcile the interviewees’ homosexuality and Christianity. The interviewees usually used the pronoun “we” expressing a group identity with Queer Muslims. Below, some related comments are presented:

*We trust in God. We trust our lives to God. We trust God wants good for us. We will take directions from God. God loves us. When I was watching the documentary, I was thinking my own personal relationship to God. Like the Imam said in the beginning of the film, “God is everything to me, He is the source of my strength, he is the center of my life”. I totally get that and that is my relationship to God as well. God is everything to me, what is necessary for me. Then somebody else said “I was made in Muslim cast, I can’t be different” and I can say that yes I am Christian and I can’t be different. I think like Turkish women in the movie who said that God puts this love in me so then it is legitimate. If God is everything then how can homophobia exist? God is so much bigger than homophobia. Like somebody said in the film, as long as I don’t hurt anyone else, God really doesn’t care. (34 years old, Swedish Christian lesbian woman, born and raised in Sundbyberg, Social insurance investigator-lawyer)*

*A Jihad for Love* appears as a cultural artifact which does not only create the bonds between Queer Christians and Queer Muslims but also brings their shared imagination about God, homosexuality and homosexual love to light. As in line with the culturalist approach to studying media, religion and culture, these findings present how the interviewees project their own religious meanings about Christianity, God and homosexuality on *A Jihad for Love*. The findings also illustrate Robert White’s theory that religious media can inspire others by creating a sense of unity with their personal identity. (2007:9) Accordingly, the interviewees are observed to see their own personal relationship to God in their Muslim counterparts.

Furthermore, following the paradigm of culturalist approach, this reception study dedicated a particular focus to what the interviewees do with *A Jihad for Love* in the larger context of the creation of religious source. As these findings demonstrate, the interviewees resisted the
dominant discourse of a punishing and homophobic God by promoting a movement towards adopting more universal spiritual principles (i.e. I am not harming anyone so homosexuality is not a sin) rather than the religious doctrine.

The commonness of the meanings Queer Muslims and Queer Christians create around God and homosexuality was not the only reason for the identification of Queer Christians with their Muslim counterparts. The family support and acceptance of Muslim families for their homosexual children were further reasons.

5.2. Prejudices

Before watching A Jihad for Love, the interviewees were asked what they would expect Queer Muslims experiences to be. The rejection of Queer Muslims by their families and honor killings ranked particularly high in the interviewees’ comments. However, after watching A Jihad for Love, most of the interviewees revised their expectations about the attitudes of Muslim families for their homosexual children. The comment offered in the following summarizes the revised views of the majority of interviewees:

Probably this is a prejudice that is coming from media and I am very influenced by them. I believe that Islam as a religion that is less tolerant than Christianity. I experienced nothing in my daily life but in Swedish mainstream media the representation of Islam is mostly related to hedersmord. (translated: honour killings) (...) My personal view that Muslims are exactly the same way as Christians is confirmed by this documentary. I saw people who were not accepted by their communities, by their societies but they were definitely accepted by their mothers. All those homosexual guys from Iran and Egypt, they turned to their mothers and their mother never pushed them away. Their mothers accepted them for whom they are. The good receiving that two Turkish lesbian couple got from Ferda’s mother is similar to every time I present my partner to my parents. (31 years old, Christian homosexual man, born and raised in Poland, living here in Sweden for 11 years, language teacher)

These findings demonstrate that their stereotypes and prejudices about Islam and Muslims coming from Western mainstream media lead to self fulfilling prophecies. In other words, the interviewees, because of their prejudices towards Islam and Muslims, see in Queer Muslims life experiences what they expect to see on the basis of their prejudice about Muslim families, with the result that they inevitably make wrong predictions concerning the attitudes of Muslim families towards their homosexual children. Accordingly, these findings represent how important the role of media is in forming the meanings made by non-Muslims about Islam and once again justify the importance of this reception analysis. The role of media is worth reflecting on since media can be both the cause of and possible solutions to the negative relationship between
Muslims and non-Muslims. These findings give support to Ayatollahy’s (2008) proposal that although the media are guilty of giving poor impressions of some religions, they can present an opportunity for a more mutual understanding among different religions.

When the interviewees were asked to compare and contrast between Islam’s and Christianity’s attitudes towards homosexuality, although the interviewees anticipated that Islam might be as diverse as Christianity, they still keep their reserved, if not openly negative, stance on Islam by voicing an expectation that Islam would be more strict and homophobic. When they were asked about the reason behind their reserved attitude towards Islam and Muslims, they commonly indicated that it was the mainstream media which made them equate Islam with non-modern Muslim women, the concept of honor and patriarchal family relations in an oppressive Muslim world. Below, one related comment is presented;

*Islam can be expressed very differently. It can be broad like Christianity. We have Catholics, Pentacoastals, Orthodox. We have homophobes and queer Christians. I think these can also be in Muslim world too. I just have not experienced so much. In my imagination, Islam is more strict than Christianity. I think Christianity is having more queer expressions in it. I have met with one Muslim homosexual person who had it hard with non-Muslims, that person did not have any problem with the family. I think media is creating this imagination in me that Islam is more strict and homophobic. I really didn’t meet with Muslim people or Queer Muslim. (20 years old, Swedish Christian inter-gender, born and raised in Stockholm, dancer and leader of the young people of Swedish Church)*

These findings illustrate the argument of religious scholar Liyakatali (2004), that “the exposure to the ‘rainbow nature’ of Islam can educate non-Muslims not only about Islam but also about differences within the Muslim community and the hermeneutical tradition within Islam”. (page 351) Furthermore, the persistence of prejudices about Islam, Muslims and Queer Muslims upholds Douglas Pratt’s (2005) idea that in the contemporary western world, the primary challenge is that of understanding Islam, of allaying fear through proper knowledge and information. This is a necessary precursor to, and concomitant requirement of, interfaith encounter and interreligious dialog.

5.3. Kämpa På: Stay within Religion

After watching *A Jihad for Love*, the interviewees were asked to name sources of conflict between Christianity and homosexuality. They realized that their struggle of keeping their religion and homosexuality in harmony are disturbed by the same denominational teachings, scriptural passages and congregational prejudices in Islam and Christianity.
With their impression of Islam as a more strict and dogmatic religion than Christianity, the interviewees expressed their surprise over the fact that the theological justification for Islam’s rejection of homosexuality (i.e. the story of Sodom and Gomorrah) was the same as Christianity’s. The interviewees’ expectations that there would be more places in Quran condemning homosexuality were disqualified.

*There are few Bible verses that are interpreted to be against the homosexuality. In the Quran, as it also showed in the documentary, there was the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. It was the only text. I thought there would be more places about that. As far as I understand, in general Christianity is more negative to homosexuality than what Islam is.* (41 years old, Swedish Christian bisexual woman, born and raised in Stockholm, social worker, engaged in a Christian organization)

Furthermore, the interviewees also became conscious that Christian and Muslim religious figures hush up homosexuality with similar techniques. These stretch from advising them to get married to threatening them with eternal condemnation in hell. Asked to compare Christianity’s attitude against homosexuality to Islam’s attitude, an interviewee commented as follows:

*Christianity and Islam both talk about unnatural desire and sin when it comes to homosexuality. They lose the problem of homosexuality by simply telling young people to go and get marry or to go to psychologist.* (31 years old, Christian homosexual man, born and raised in Poland, living here in Sweden for 11 years, language teacher)

When the interviewees were asked whether they could relate to Queer Muslim’s crisis of faith, they said that they had similar experiences with Christian religious leaders: Below one related comment is presented;

*The young boy in India asked to the religious authority about homosexuality and he said it is forbidden. Then the boy asked why it is forbidden. The religious authority told him not to ask anything more. He said “don’t ask me more it is just forbidden”. The boy got so frustrated over that and I could relate to it. When I talk to people, they just say the same. It does not matter what you tell to them. They have their opinion and they don’t want to change their opinion. In one way, I ask myself: Should I just keeping trying or should I just leave?* (41 years old, Swedish Christian bisexual woman, born and raised in Stockholm, social worker, engaged in a Christian organization)

What these findings show is that *A Jihad for Love* as an alternative Muslim media can provide Queer Christians with a generative space for openness to Queer Muslims. Based on the fact that the interviewees revised their biases about Islam’s attitude towards homosexuality and identified with Queer Muslims’ crisis of faith, it can be argued that the intersectionality theory should be given a place in media, religion and culture studies. After watching *A Jihad for Love*, the interviewees discovered that they deal with the same problems while they struggle to
preserve their religion. Accordingly, the findings of this research give support to the main findings of the previous research which incorporates intersectionality into the dynamic relation between contemporary queer religious/spiritual and sexual identities. (Yip 2002, 2005, 2007; Dillon 2007; O’Brien 2007; McQueeney 2009).

Similar to the narratives of queer Muslims in *A Jihad for Love*, the interviewees negotiated on their religious and sexual identities and responded to the patriarchy and hierarchy of their religious institutions. Based on these arguments, it can also be suggested that after the introduction of Queer Christians to more queer-affirming Muslim media, they might also begin to reflect on their self-perception and question whether their minority status can be changed or not. In order to know this however, there must be more reception studies regarding queer-affirming Muslim media which would refute or support the findings of the research at hand.

The interviewees also explained that Queer Muslims’ strategies for staying within Islam were very similar to Queer Christian ones for staying within Christianity. The interviewees listed the reasons why Queer Muslims and Queer Christians should not leave their faith behind and encouraged them to maintain their faith. *A Jihad for Love* reminded Queer Christians of their permanent struggle for self-definition and evoked a resistance to be defined by others. Below, one related comment is presented:

*Queer Muslims are doing a lot of similar things that I have been doing. First of all, they look at religious sources. They ask what is really said and if the doctrine really says that I am banned. Then they look at the translations about what they really mean. They are talking about it was actually a molestation and corrupt state. I hear the same reasoning within interpreting Christian beliefs. It is not consensual loving relationship what it is talked about. How can I turn to a God that rejects me? If the doctrine does not speak of me then how can I take comfort in that doctrine? I think we are all trying to find our ways to have access to the doctrine. To find a way to get around the fact that there were human beings in this world that tell us God doesn’t love us. God is important to me, if God would not be important to me, then I wouldn’t have to care. But I care because God is the center of my life, I have to know God loves me. It is vital. It would be devastating for my life if God doesn’t love me. It is not about Islam, Christianity or God. It is about tolerant and intolerant human beings. Intolerant people don’t own Christianity, intolerant people don’t own Islam. They don’t own God. (34 years old, Swedish Christian lesbian woman, born and raised in Sundbyberg, Social insurance investigator-lawyer)*

The main finding of the previous research, which is the presence of religion/spirituality as a crucial resource for many LGBT individuals in enriching their sexuality and life, and in empowering them to seek social justice within and outside faith communities. (Yip 2002, 2005, 2007; Dillon 2007; O’Brien 2007; McQueeney 2009) strengthen these findings.
The idea of “Ijtihad”, (i.e. independent thinking within religion/Islam) which is expressed by South African Gay Imam, Muhsin Hendricks featured in the documentary, was the most frequently cited strategy by the interviewees who were suppressed by the religious doctrine and the dominant interpretations of it. Many of the interviewees included independent interpretation of the religious books, friendly discussion about religion with the conservative believers and atheists in their practices of independent thinking. Contextualization of religious stories considering the circumstances under which they were written and turning to infallible Jesus and God rather than the fallible religious authorities were two strategies offered by the interviewees in order to find a new place between religion and homosexuality. Their employment of these strategies enables them to accept themselves, their sexual orientations and their affiliation with Christianity despite their orthodox Christian communities’ condemnation of it. An interviewee, who is a minister in the Church of Sweden, cited her South African colleague Muhsin Hendricks and echoed his interpretation of the story of Sodom and Gomorah as follows:

Christianity and Islam have exactly the same problem with Sodom and Gomorah. They are not really clear about what they are condemning but people who are against the homosexuality tend to see it as a commitment to homosexuality whereas I think that it is commitment to the lack of homosexuality and against violence. They were raping and killing people. If you are against homosexuality, you can always interpret these things being against homosexuality. Jesus did not say anything about homosexuality. The important thing is always rereading the text and reinterpreting the situation. You should always see the minority that you leave behind like Jesus would. (34 years old, Swedish Lutheran Christian bisexual woman, born and raised in Stockholm, a minister in the Church of Sweden, in the Lutheran denomination.)

The same interviewee referred to the self-destructive tendencies of young Queer Muslims who falsely reason about homosexuality, guilt, punishment and God, and added that these tendencies are also seen among young Queer Christians in Sweden.

In the documentary, I observe a lot of discussions about homosexuality and how they should read the Sodom and Gomorah in Quran. In Paris, for instance, they were discussing and asking to each other “based on what is homosexuality a sin”. The lesbian woman in Paris was having a problem and acting with her heart. In Christianity too, people don’t act with their head but with their heart. This is making hard for them to find a new place. (34 years old, Swedish Lutheran Christian bisexual woman, born and raised in Stockholm, a minister in the Church of Sweden, in the Lutheran denomination.)
Following Gay Muslim Imam Muhsin Hendricks (2011), it can be argued that their viewing experience of *A Jihad for Love* enabled the interviewees to link up with queer Muslim network and see the similarities in the interpretation of religious stories.” (page. 500) These findings are also representative of Barbero’s (1997) writings about the mediation of religion in two ways. First, *A Jihad for Love* added a quite new dimension to religious contact, religious celebration, and personal religious experience of Queer Christians in Sweden. Second, as Redden and Bailey (2011) also indicate, their viewing experience of *A Jihad for Love* referred to a process of meaning-making through which the interviewees negotiated on the authority of religious symbolization in Christianity and Islam. (page. 6)

These findings foreground the potential of queer Muslim voices previously unheard by Queer Christians for these minorities. They demonstrate that the media do not always assume a role in the creation and sustenance of religious conflict and that the alternative media products such as *A Jihad for Love* can inspire Queer Christians to deliberate on a) the ways to get around institutional and doctrinal restrictiveness of Islam and Christianity b) the impact of religious authority on homosexuality in Islam and Christianity. These findings might be interpreted as promising a cooperative project across queer faith communities. It is clearly seen that queer affirming Muslim media can expand queer Christian imagination about queer Muslims and can even lead to an alternative interfaith dialog between these groups.

Despite their relatively more free status in the states and societies they live, Queer Christians living in Sweden were observed to have the shared experience of identifying as queer and religious with Queer Muslims. They showed concern over the oppression of religious authorities on their identity and involve themselves in strategies of resistance and revolution. However, it would be wise to note that this study is limited in that it only explores the experience of progressive Queer Christians living in Sweden in the context of Queer Mässan. Even within the context of Queer Mässan, there was an undercurrent of suspicion among some members of Queer Mässan when they learned of this reception study being conducted. Accordingly, before talking about a transnational queer alliance between Sweden and Muslim countries, more reception analysis of queer affirming Muslim media should be conducted. Only an increasing amount of reception analysis can explore whether or not creative alliances across queer faith
communities can be established and to what extent religion can be an important element in transnational political LGBT identity projects.

### 5.4. We are Sisters and Brothers

Commonalities between Christianity/Christians/Queer Christians and Islam/Muslims/Queer Christians was another dominating theme that emerged from the interviews. When the interviewees were asked to compare and contrast the two religions after watching *A Jihad for Love*, most of the interviewees emphasized the importance of focusing on the similarities, rather than on the differences between the two religions. Comments such as “Islam is a lot like Christianity”; “We all search for love and God” and “I feel more like brothers or sisters with Queer Muslims” were typical among the interviewees. Below, some related comments are presented:

*It is always easy to find differences, you can always focus on differences because the whole world is different. (...) Islam is just the continuation of Christianity. I don’t think that we can separate Christianity and Islam as two different entities. This is where I have a problem when people separate Christianity and Islam. I don’t want to accept that Christianity and Islam are different thing and they speak of certain things.* (34 years old, Swedish Christian lesbian woman, born and raised in Sundbyberg, legal historian-lawyer)

Another common feature in Queer Christian comments was that the interviewees share the same ontological belief with Queer Muslims that they are created from God’s image.

*A Muslim lesbian in France said that on the day of judgment, she will face God and tell him that she simply loved a woman but she does not harm anyone. So this is also how I feel and think about God. It is in the deep nature of both religions. Both Islam and Christianity are ontologically very similar when it comes to God being the father of every creation. God is the creator of everything and this means that there is a reflection of God in everything and divine aspect of everything. This means that if I am queer, God also must be a little bit queer right? The guys from Iran also believed that they were created from the image of God too. I also definitely believe that I am created from the image of God. That is what my religion says too.* (31 years old, Christian homosexual man, born and raised in Poland, living here in Sweden for 11 years, language teacher)

Waites’ (2008) argues that the further risk for Queer Muslims lies in the production of Islam phobia within queer religious activist spaces. It can be suggested that *A Jihad for Love*, as a queer-affirming Muslim media, can play an active role in introducing this ontological similarity. As the quote demonstrates, this ontological similarity can bring Queer Muslims and Queer Christian together and reduce fear and suspicion towards Islam.
After watching *A Jihad for Love*, the interviewees describe Islam as closely similar to Christianity. This description is very important for two reasons. First, it shows that a queer-affirming alternative media can make non-western audiences go beyond Western mainstream media’s inclination to assume that Western norms and values are the sole points of reference and that Islam and Western culture are not compatible. The Western mainstream media stresses the differences and the distinctiveness of Islam and emphasizes the superiority of Western culture. In Western media, neither Islam nor Muslims are discussed in relation to Christianity and Christians. Rather, Islam as a religion is compared to Europe as region. Against this background where Western media is not interested in understanding the behavior of Muslims but in portraying every single aspect of Muslim life as an extreme religiosity, the interviewees complained about the absence of everyday life of a Muslim. Below, a related comment is presented;

*Islam in A Jihad for Love is more diverse. Mostly in Swedish mainstream media, when they document Islam, they document a problem. They are not interested in portraying everyday life of Muslims and Christians. They don’t show Christianity and Islam by themselves. They use them in comparison to something else, for instance Christianity and Islam versus secularism.”*(34 years old, Swedish Lutheran Christian bisexual woman, born and raised in Stockholm, a minister in the Church of Sweden, in the Lutheran denomination.)

In the light of these findings, it can be argued that queer-affirming alternative Muslim media can create a counter-hegemony against the misleading tendency created by Western mainstream media, that is, to view Islam as a threat to the Western world.

**5.5. Queer Christian? How Does that Work?**

*A Jihad for Love* did not only enable the interviewees to unveil Queer Muslim lives but also to evaluate their own relation to the society in which they live. Touched by Queer Muslims’ exclusion from orthodox Muslim communities and the states by which they are persecuted, Queer Christians reflected on their own status and experiences as “Queer and Christian” in Sweden, the most secularized country in Europe. The interviewees criticized Swedish society’s attitude on the basis that they can’t conceive the real meaning, function and extent of religion. They put that Swedish society perceive being Christian and homosexual as two separate and diametrically opposite entities. One interviewee complains about Swedish society’s rudimentary understanding of Queerness and Christianity and describes the difficulty of being Queer Christian in Sweden as follows:
I always say that it is easier to be gay than being a Christian here in Sweden. I can understand people thinking negatively about religion because the Church has been doing many bad things to queer people over years. On the other hand the things are changing. History is a part we have to deal with. People don’t like to talk about deeper religious beliefs and if you are religious person and want to talk about religion, they look at you as if you are narrow minded religious person. This is really sad because then you don’t talk about so much about your faith. You can have an interesting discussion about your faith. It makes me sad because I like to talk about those questions. It is not so much about religion but it is about the life in deeper sense. (...) People have some particular ideas about how a Christian should be. If you come up and say that “I am Christian and queer”, then they say “then you are not a Christian”.

(41 years old, Swedish Christian bisexual woman, born and raised in Stockholm, social worker, engaged in a Christian organization)

Following Barbero (1997) who thinks that the purpose of the study of the media should be conceiving the media as the locus of the constitution of identities and that the media must be analyzed as a process of publics that are “subjects of action”, it can be argued that A Jihad for Love fuels a discussion of modernity, religiosity and secularism in Sweden. The interviewees are observed to reflect on the circumstances under which they try to express their religion and sexual orientation.

These comments also illustrate Hoover (2002) and Beckfords’ (2003) argument that globalization and secularization theorists fail to see that religions are not simply the effects of external forces but that they are also agents, observers and critics of their own development. As it can be seen from the comments above, while the interviewee admits that the Church’s bad treatment of homosexuals should be discussed, she also conceives religion as a dynamic entity which is subjected to change and adopt a suitable path in contemporary modern society.

These comments echo Thea Gold’s (2010) problematization of Western intellectuals’ non-reflexive use of such secular ideals as autonomy, creativity, freedom and expression. Accordingly, the interviewees state that they are better to stay silent because in Sweden the desire of talking about religion is attributed to being narrow-minded.

After being asked to compare her relation to her own faith and Queer Muslims’ relation to their faith, the same interviewee comments;

“Religion is a natural and important part of their lives which made me jealous. Religion was taken for granted and they were proud of their religion. I don’t feel this and this is not because I am not proud of my religion but because if I talk about my religion so much people will look at me as if I am crazy.”

(41 years old, Swedish Christian bisexual woman, born and raised in Stockholm, social worker, engaged in a Christian organization)
Similar to the comments of this interviewee, another interviewee indicated that people in Sweden would have the same amount of confusion when a Muslim says that she/he is a queer as when a Swedish queer person says that she/he is Christian. Swedish society has some particular response codes for queer and religious people. Queer Christians and Queer Muslims blur and transgress the socially agreed hence limited picture of religious and queer people. These marginal groups disturb the structured picture of a Muslim and a Christian in Swedish people’s minds. As the other interviewees also put, both Queer Muslims and Queer Christians suffer from stereotyped ideas about who they can be and who they can’t be. This is summarized by the following comment which summarizes the views of the majority of interviewees:

*It is more difficult to come out as a Christian than coming out as a queer because in Sweden Christianity or religion in general has not had a very natural place in people’s lives since 1950’s. We are the most secularized country in Europe. People can accept very strange views from other people when it comes to politics and sexuality but if you tell them you are a Christian then they automatically assume a lot of things about you. Like if you say that you are a Muslim, they automatically see you in a certain way. (...) If they don’t know that I am a queer person, they automatically assume that I am against queers. If they know that I am queer, then they are like “ how can you be a queer and Christian?”. They think there are some implosions in my head. Most people want to believe that the reality is structured. If someone comes and breaks up with the picture, they get really nervous because they learned in this way. If you tell them you are a queer and Christian, they get very confused.* (34 years old, Swedish Lutheran Christian bisexual woman, born and raised in Stockholm, a minister in the Church of Sweden, in the Lutheran denomination.)

Based on these findings it can be said that Swedish society has some assumptions about what it means to be a Christian and a Muslim. Swedish society seems to have some difficulties renegotiating the religious and queer. In the context of Swedish society, it can be said that to be religious and queer in a secular society is a struggle for Queer Christians. Furthermore, religion appears to be a challenge in Swedish society and mainstream media which avoid talking about it. Swedish scholars dealing with the study of religion are predominantly interested in the fact that religious activity is increasing in Sweden with immigration and formation of new communities like Syriac Christians from Turkey and Muslims form a variety of places including Iran, Iraq and Turkey. However, as these findings demonstrate, maybe it is time for Swedish sociologists of religion and scholars who operate in interdisciplinary study of religion to turn the focus on Queer Christians in Sweden and their religiosity.
5.6. Christianity as a Buffet
Against a social and cultural background where religion is trivialized, mocked and kept at bay, Queer Christians express discontent and resentment about the way religion is framed in Sweden. When asked to talk about the status of religion in Swedish society, the interviewees commonly expressed that Swedish people could hardly go beyond a fundamentalist and oppressing model of religion. When they were asked to explain their own meanings about religion, most of the interviewees shared their ideas about different aspects of religion which are usually disregarded by the dominant convention about religion in Swedish society and its non-religious queer culture.

As one of the interviewees describes;

*Non-religious queers think that you are stupid because you must be stupid if you are religious. They think that you are evil and it is weird that you are queer and religious too because to them you can’t be both. Even young queer people seem to think that they are oppressed by Churches even though they have not been themselves and Church of Sweden is not like that anymore. It makes me sad.*  (50 years old, Swedish Christian trans man, born and raised in Dalarna, working with children having otism)

Most of the interviewees maintained that the existence of progressive religious thought; the diversity within Christianity; the capacity of religion for renewal, peace and growth and the complex issues that Queer Muslims and Queer Christians confront today are forgotten.

One interviewee by disagreeing with Swedish argument that religion is a residual and fading feature of a modern society, states:

*I think that most people that are religious tend to see religion as strict and structured. But as Muslim or Christian practitioner, you can always relate to religion in different ways. Some people relate to it in a very strict way, other people relate to it in a very constructive way. The Swedish convention about religion is that it is old fashioned, is not liberal and enlightened so it cannot develop and it is going to disappear eventually. For me, it is very clear that religion can be very a positive force in society.*  (34 years old, Swedish Lutheran Christian bisexual woman, born and raised in Stockholm, a minister in the Church of Sweden, in the Lutheran denomination.)

Another interviewee, depicts the diversity within Christianity as follows;

*There is no single Christianity as a monolith but it is a buffet and you chose. You have your personal relation to The Bible as the source of God and then you chose which group you want to belong to according to your belief simply. It is not said anywhere in the Bible that there is any single form of Christianity holding monopoly for explaining the proper Christianity.*  (31 years old, Christian homosexual man, born and raised in Poland, living here in Sweden for 11 years, language teacher)

These comments show how Queer Christians in Sweden make sense of religion and Christianity after they watch *A Jihad for Love*. Their comments reveal the possibility that
religion might become a progressive resource instead of a problem, limitation and suppression. In a society like Sweden which can be considered as totally secular, what these comments signal is that there is difference between what definition of religion Queer Christians use and what definition of religion Swedish society use. After watching A Jihad for Love, Queer Christians in Sweden reflected upon their own understandings of freedom, progress, equality and tolerance. The relationship between religious and secular conceptualization of freedom, progress, equality and tolerance in Sweden demand further investigation.

**PART II**

In this part, the second research question is to be answered around seven themes as stated in the analysis and presentation of interview data. These are “The Dark Side of Islam”, “Political Correctness”, “Freak Show Media”, “Enlightenment: Islam in New Perspectives”, “Tolerance in Islam”, “Islam has Gay Sheiks: Wow Great News!” and “Emotion and Oppositional Consciousness”.

**5.7. The Dark Side of Islam**

After watching A Jihad for Love, the interviewees were asked to reflect on what they see about Islam, Muslims and Queer Muslims in Western mainstream media. Western mainstream media’s reductionism in covering Islam, hence the lack of a holistic picture of Islam, was a general point made by the interviewees. Comments like “Western media generally take the easy way in its representation of Islam” and “the representation of Muslims in Western media is unfair” were typical. One interviewee mentions the failure of Western mainstream media in differentiating between political Islam and cultural Islam as follows;

*Especially after what happened 11 years ago in New York, there is some kind of propaganda against Islam in majority of media and I think this is very unfair. There is Islam and Islam, there are people and people. Even if one percent of Muslims are terrorists there is still 99 who are not. All western media reinforce many kinds of fears and xenophobia between religions. Mostly you can read about Muslims when something bad happens. If there is a terror attack, it is turned into a meeting between Muslims and Christians. This also promotes a lot of discussion about Muslims in Western society, cultural shocks and clashes. I did not see anything about queer Muslims in the media. (31 years old, Christian homosexual man, born and raised in Poland, living here in Sweden for 11 years, language teacher)*
Echoing this interviewee, another interviewee narrates her experiences in the wake of the terrorist attack made by Anders Behring Breivik, a Norwegian right-wing fundamentalist Christian. Together with the previous interviewee’s suggestions for differentiating between political and cultural Islam, the narration of this interviewee once again predicated the importance of discussing what Islam is.

In the wake of July 22, in Norway, people got ashamed. I was looking at BBC that day. They said that it was possibly a Muslim suicide bomber and then they realized that it was a White Norwegian guy. This gave people to discuss what it is the picture. Before that they were very one-sided, they were mostly discussing about poor oppressed women. (34 years old, Swedish Lutheran Christian bisexual woman, born and raised in Stockholm, a minister in the Church of Sweden, in the Lutheran denomination.)

It can be noted that Western mainstream media determine Queer Christians perspective of the Muslim world and the way they perceive Muslims. The constant report on terrorist activities, uprisings, conflicts and extremisms must have fostered dark feelings about Islam and Muslims. Against this background, the reception of queer-affirming Muslim alternative media appears as a unique and informative field in which one can explore the fact that queer Christians in Sweden have very little knowledge of Muslim world and Queer Muslims.

5.8. Political Correctness

When the interviewees were asked about Swedish mainstream media’s representation about Islam and Muslims, there appeared two competing visions among Queer Christians. Some interviewees thought that even though Swedish mainstream media’s reporting, representation and rhetoric about Islam and Muslims were generally deemed “acceptable” and “balanced”, Swedish mainstream media was still no different than Western mainstream media. The other interviewees explained that the way Islam and Muslims are represented in Swedish mainstream media is changing depending on the geographical position of Muslims. The interviewees adhering to the later vision put that Swedish mainstream media generally paint a dichotomous picture of Islam and modernity when they report on Muslims outside Sweden yet they try to become “politically correct” when they represent Muslims living in Sweden. A multicultural and morally assertive view of Swedish society was showed to be the biggest factor behind the idea of political correctness. Two competing visions about the representation of Islam and Muslims are summarized as follows;
The representation of Islam and Muslims in Swedish media, like the representation of Christianity and Christians is poor. Sometimes they are picking a Christian or a Muslim person and show them to everybody and tell people that “they are people too”. Most of the time, they just spend a lot of time to feeding the questions that are not really interesting for most of the Muslim people. For instance, they are making a big fuss about Hijab. (34 years old, Swedish Lutheran Christian bisexual woman, born and raised in Stockholm, a minister in the Church of Sweden, in the Lutheran denomination.)

The mainstream media in Sweden are quite good at not connecting Islam with lots of bad things. They try to sort of balance, they don’t say that all Muslims are terrorists. When it is here, they write quite balanced but when it happens somewhere else. They write about all those horrible people over there and they are Muslims. I think they are trying to be politically correct, they don’t write bad things about Muslim people here in Sweden. (50 years old, Swedish Christian trans man, born and raised in Dalarna, working with children having otism)

These findings show how significant a carrier of information media can be if they provide non-Muslims with an accurate and complete presentation of Islam and Muslims. As the interviewees put however, mainstream media have a disproportionate focus on some particular elements of Islamic culture including “hijab”, neglecting the others.

5.9. Freak Show Media

When they were asked about whether or not they see Queer Muslims in mainstream Swedish media, the interviewees put that Swedish mainstream media, which is obsessed with the idea that Islam/Christianity are full of taboos and prohibitions, perceive Queer Christians and Queer Muslims as “dangerous”; “exceptional” and “weird”. The interviewees generally stated that they never saw a Queer Muslim in Swedish mainstream media. This said, they were asked to talk about Queer Christians in Swedish mainstream media. The construction of Queer Christians as “freakish” was one of the common features of the representation of Queer Christians in Swedish mainstream media. Having been interviewed by a Swedish mainstream magazine as a Queer Christian minister who is very open about queer rights and Christianity, an interviewee narrates her experiences as follows;

(...) They made me look as weird person with these views. The general picture about Christians is still Christians are against everything. When I became a minister, the mainstream media wanted to interview me because they thought it was fun that a queer Christian young girl with nail polish became a minister. I am used to be portrayed as weird and it bothers me. In a way, I understand that they wouldn’t interview me if they did not find me interesting but on the other hand I think it is very sad that we still care about those silly things. It is like freak show media. (34 years old, Swedish Lutheran Christian bisexual woman, born and raised in Stockholm, a minister in the Church of Sweden, in the Lutheran denomination.)

The mainstream media in Sweden does not talk about Queer Muslims. If you are supposed to have a queer person in mainstream media you will have to be a queer person who is as normal as possible. You
should not be dangerous. If they put a queer Muslim, they would be like “oh yes he/she is a Muslim”. (34 years old, Swedish Lutheran Christian bisexual woman, born and raised in Stockholm, a minister in the Church of Sweden, in the Lutheran denomination.)

The greater visibility of Queer Christians and the absence of Queer Muslims in Swedish mainstream media seem to be very important issues to discuss. As these findings demonstrate, while Queer Christians are poorly presented, Queer Muslims are not presented in Swedish mainstream media at all. Prejudices of Swedish mainstream media regarding who Queer Christians and Queer Muslims can be demand careful investigation about the future and the place of these minorities in Swedish mainstream media. This kind of investigation can also reveal future social and political discourse surrounding Islam and Christianity since mainstream media have a significant effect on forming them.

5.10. Enlightenment: Islam in New Perspectives

After watching A Jihad for Love, the interviewees were asked to compare what they see about Islam, Muslims and Queer Muslims in Western and Swedish mainstream media to what they see about Islam, Muslims and Queer Muslims in A Jihad for Love. The interviewees report that the documentary introduced them to the diversity within Islam; the everyday life of Muslims; the existence of homosexuality within the Muslim world. The different socio-cultural characteristics, political systems and religious histories of the Muslim world were also highly commented matters by the interviewees. Again, it can be argued that these findings are very meaningful considering the fact that Middle-East is one of the most misunderstood and stereotyped regions in the world due to its limited representation by Western mainstream media. In Western mainstream media, Muslim countries are lumped together as if Islam is a single entity devoid of any separate cultural heritage, ideology, interpretation and lifestyles. The Muslim world has a plethora of distinctive cultures, languages and histories which demands a more comprehensive representation of it.

Below, some related comments are presented;

I think that this is a documentary that opens your eyes for the fact that Islam is heterogeneous and that the understandings within Islam are changing from country to country. How much power Islam gets in society can be different in South Africa and Turkey where the states are not religious. A Jihad for Love reveals a lot of aspects of a distant culture and its secrets. It opens a discussion about whether or not homosexuality is absent in Muslim community. It shows that by simply stating that homosexuality is forbidden, you don’t get rid of it. Queer Muslims exist. (31 years old,
According to the interviewees, another difference in *A Jihad for Love* was that Islam, unlike its Western mainstream representation, is a subtle, complex and nuanced religion. Furthermore, an interviewee qualified *A Jihad for Love* as a media project which present the lives of Muslims and Queer Muslims in ways that make them understandable as “human beings” and proceeds as follows;

This is more humane. Media say that Islam is about law but Islam is about your personal relationship with God. Media say that every Muslim think and do the same as Quran say. Of course there will be always orthodox people but this gives me hope that more Muslim people, who are not that orthodox, will open up. People of other religions will understand that Islam is not only orthodox. (20 years old, Swedish Christian inter-gender, born and raised in Stockholm, dancer and leader of the young people of Swedish Church)

Finally, during the interviews, Queer Christians showed a great interest in knowing more about Sufism. The interest in Sufism and defining it as a more open-minded, liberal, egalitarian and progressive form of Islam was common among the interviewees.

### 5.11. Tolerance in Islam

When they were asked to compare how they see Islam’s attitude towards homosexuality after their viewing experience of A Jihad for Love, “Islam is tolerant”, “The doctrine about Islam and homosexuality can be changed” “Muslim people are open minded” were typical comments among the interviewees. Queer Christians put that they realized that the independent thinking and “personal autonomy” in matters of religion and faith could actually also exist in the Muslim world. Call for progressive thinking within Islam (i.e. Ijtihad which means independent thinking within Islam) ranked particularly high among the interviewees.

Having asked what they think when the documentary ended, most of the interviewees put that they felt hopeful and happy about the future of Islam given the blooming discussion about homosexuality and Islam. Below, some related comments are presented;

I hope both homosexuals who are against Islam and think that Islam is hopeless case for them or people who are Muslims and who can’t imagine homosexuality being right should watch it. I hope a lot of people will see it so then they can see all these people who live with Islam and really try hard to change the world and the people. I want to tell everyone about it. Muslim people actually want to discuss and to see different perspectives. Like that little old lady in South Africa, who said that, we all must learn through life. She was fantastic and that makes you very happy to see there are people
everywhere who really want to learn new perspectives. They know that they have to think for themselves and that is very relieving. (50 years old, Swedish Christian trans man, born and raised in Dalarna, working with children having otism)

This lesbian couple in Turkey was so open-minded. They could leave openly. They could kiss and hold hand at the streets. They were visiting her mother. It made me surprised, I never thought that it would exist. I thought the Muslim world is so close. Islam is not always black, it is more colorful than that. South African Imam started to talk about homosexuality and Islam. He interpreted the Quran differently than the traditional way. It makes me glad because something is happening there as well. (41 years old, Swedish Christian bisexual woman, born and raised in Stockholm, social worker, engaged in a Christian organization)

The fact that Queer Christians in Sweden preserve the act of seeking, questing, and independently thinking within religion to themselves can be explained by their continuous immersion into the “oppressed” and “backward” Muslim image of Western and Swedish mainstream media. Many interviewees were surprised over the facts that:

a) Muslim community is not as intolerant as they are represented in Western and Swedish mainstream media

b) There exists some room and understanding for homosexuality within Islam. Despite the general consideration of homosexuality as an unlawful act by contemporary Muslim scholars, all Islamic schools of thought and jurisprudence, a movement of progressive –minded Muslims in non-Western world does exist and rise.

These findings are very important for two reasons. First, they push the notion of an exclusive Western queer subjectivity. In other words, the interviewees are introduced to a new scope for Queer Muslim reflexivity in which Queer Muslims resolve their Queer-Muslim identity conflicts by reinterpreting religious doctrine and emphasizing aspects of Islam that stands for inclusion, justice, peace and tolerance. Second, these findings demonstrate how Western mainstream media contribute to the image making that distorts the cultural, social and intellectual realities of Islamic world as well as the perceptions of Westerners, in this case, Queer Christians in Sweden.

All these findings and discussions support Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier’s (2008) approach to alternative media as a supplement to mainstream media or as a counter-hegemonic critique of the mainstream. They claim that “it is important to grasp the relationship between media and representation since one reason for the very existence of alternative media is to voice
the ‘ideologies’ of those under-or misrepresented in the mainstream channels of communication which reproduce a constructed and preferred view of ‘reality’”. (page 16) However, the distortion of Islamic world’s cultural, social and intellectual realities can be counteracted by increasing the capacity of Westerners to see the developments in the Islamic world. For this purpose, the critical reception of documentaries and films where Middle Eastern sexual minorities feature should be given importance.

The tendency of the previous research about the alternative media was to direct our attention towards the production of Muslims/Queer Muslims’ own understanding of Islam via alternative media and the latter’s capacity to open up debates about Muslim culture and politics to non-Muslim audiences. (Abraham 2008; Nihelj, Vis and Zoonen 2008; Linjakumpu 2011) By not denying the importance of these studies, this reception analysis argues that it may also be appropriate now for the researchers to start inquiring about how non-Muslim audiences will experience alternative Muslim/Queer Muslim media.

5.12. Islam Has Gay Sheiks: Wow Great News!

After watching A Jihad for Love, the interviewees were asked whether they find something new and unexpected in the documentary. Their answers indicate how much power Western and Swedish mainstream media might have in limiting the imagination of Queer Christians about Islam, Muslims and Queer Muslims. There is of course nothing new to Western mainstream media’s practice of stigmatizing and demonizing Muslims. What is new, however, is the finding that whereas the interviewees criticize the impact of Western mainstream media in denigrating and stereotyping Islam and Muslims, they themselves were observed to have some prejudices about what is possible and what is impossible in Islam and for Muslims. Queer Christians became aware that their knowledge about Islam was quite limited. The interviewees got curious and wanted to learn more about the historical relationship between colonialism and homosexuality in Pakistan and further Islamic sources (e.g. Hadiths of Mohammed concerning homosexual acts) that are not fully covered by the documentary. Below, some related comments are presented;

This Imam in South Africa, he can be openly gay and Imam, that is new for me. I didn’t think that it was possible even. Turkish lesbian women being so open was impressive. The courage of these young people and their living quit openly made me think that there was some sort of room for them. I think there is place of everyone in Islam. I was very surprised over the gay saint sheik, the gay couple, the
religious figures. I never heard anything like it in Christian history. Because of the way Islam is presented, I know very little about Islam. It was impressive. I also did not know that anti-homosexual laws were in fact brought to Pakistan and India by a Christian nation which is England. They also mention about hadiths but they did not say so much about that. I would like to know more about what Mohammed said about homosexuality. (34 years old, Swedish Christian lesbian woman, born and raised in Sundbyberg, Social insurance investigator-lawyer)

Muslims from Pakistan were talking about the homosexual love between Sufi mystic and Hindu man converted to Islam. I knew about Sufism and dervishes but I had absolutely no idea about this. Men were being bathed in rose leaves in their shrines. I thought wow great news! (31 years old, Christian homosexual man, born and raised in Poland, living here in Sweden for 11 years, language teacher)

In the light of these findings, it can be argued that A Jihad for Love made Queer Christian members of Queer Mässan rediscover Islam by arising a visible interest, curiosity and inquiry in Islam as culture and religion. As these findings demonstrate, a significant outcome of the proliferation of queer affirming Muslim alternative media can be creating mutual understanding between Queer Christians and Queer Muslims.

5.13. Jihad is a War with Heart

After watching A Jihad for Love and hearing about Queer Muslim interpretation of the word Jihad, the interviewees were first asked to evaluate the representation of Jihad in mainstream media and then to explain Jihad with their own words. They commonly revealed that Jihad represented in A Jihad for Love was so far from the way it is portrayed in Western mainstream media. The interviewees said that before they saw the documentary “revenge”, “holy war”, “militaristic war” were the first three things they associated with the word of Jihad. After A Jihad for Love, the interviewees offer diverse meanings about Jihad. While some thought that Jihad could be a war of queer people against the majority living gender norms, others related Jihad to the sayings in the Bible and interpreted Jihad as a war against homophobia. The mainstream media promotion of Jihad in conjunction with absolute theocracy, public militancy violent repression, terrorist groups was replaced by a peaceful and constructive conceptualization of Jihad. Below, some related comments are presented;

Jihad is a peaceful struggle when you discover that you are different from other boys and girls and from the majority of people. In addition to this, you have to struggle against people who tell you that even the love of God is limited. The Jihad in the documentary and Jihad in the mainstream media are two different Jihads. I understand why the documentary got this title. Here, Jihad is a very personal and private fight for Queer Muslims to those free themselves from the oppressions, or from the troubles they have with laws. In the mainstream media, Jihad is a only fight between religions, a fight for spreading Islam around the world (31 years old, Christian homosexual man, born and raised in Poland, living here in Sweden for 11 years, language teacher)
In mainstream media I only heard about Jihad as a war with weapons. Jihad is not a war with a gun but it is a war with a heart. I can also relate it a lot to the Bible, we don't fight against flesh and meat but to the spirit. I can also relate Jihad to the homophobia. We don't fight against people, we fight against the homophobia, the ghosts inside people’s heads. Jihad is a war against homophobia, we can interpret like this or Jihad can be said to be a war against unjust thinking and doing. (20 years old, Swedish Christian inter-gender, born and raised in Stockholm, dancer and leader of the young people of Swedish Church)

As these findings demonstrate, Queer Christian members of Queer Mässan got to know, interpreted and reflected on the Islamic concept (i.e. Jihad) which is used by Queer Muslims to describe their struggle to keep their sexuality in harmony with their faith. Queer Christian members of Queer Mässan did not only understand the strength of Queer Muslims and the way they employ Jihad but they also embraced the concept of Jihad to advocate their own struggle. These findings can be attributed to Meem, Alexander and Gibson’s discussion of how some types of alternative media- as opposed to the more mainstream media products- are used by LGBT people to build a community (2009:400). Accordingly, A Jihad for Love can be seen as a location where LGBT people can find expressions of queer identification and a sense of home.

5.14. Emotion and Oppositional Consciousness

So far it has been clear that the interviewees commonly contend that Western and Swedish mainstream media create their prejudices about Islam, Muslims and Queer Muslims. While they criticized Western and Swedish mainstream media mainly on the basis of their lacking a representation of “Islam as a whole” and being “unfair” to Muslims, they described A Jihad for Love as a “educational, enlightening, informative and diverse” media product humanizing their Muslim counterparts. Comparing the representation of Islam, Muslims and Queer Muslims in Western and Swedish mainstream media to what they see in A Jihad for Love enabled Queer Christian members of Queer Mässan to gain a sense of sympathy, affinity, harmony and imagination for their Muslim counterparts. A Jihad for Love, in other words, potentially led to mutual understanding by introducing Queer Christians to enlightening new perspectives about Islam, Muslims and Queer Islam. Recognizing what a crucial source religion is to Queer Muslim lives, Queer Christians also took a critical stance towards Swedish society’s and mainstream media’s treatment of religion and queerness and their own experiences in Sweden.

If this mutual understanding offers the first step towards the individual activism and collective action, emotion and oppositional consciousness are the further steps. The intensity of the interviewees’ comments, in other words, whether they spoke about certain issues with depth
of feeling, was another matter to explore. In order to understand whether the interviewees identified with Queer Muslims as an unjustly subordinated group and recognized a group identity of interest, the interviewees were first asked how they felt when the documentary ended. It was found that *A Jihad for Love* triggered such emotions as anger, sadness and frustration on behalf of Queer Muslims.

During their viewing experiences, Queer Christians had a hard time to see some scenes in the documentary. After watching the torture of Egyptian and Iranian gay man in the hands of Egyptian and Iranian state authorities, they release a lot of their emotions in a very explicit way. As one interviewee expresses;

*I am sad about how all this pain came to people. It just bothers me that this man is separating from his family. Would God want that? How is that possible?* (34 years old, Swedish Christian lesbian woman, born and raised in Sundbyberg, Social insurance investigator-lawyer)

The suppression of her lesbianism by a Muslim woman called Sena was another matter the interviewees expressed their despair.

*The other girl who was wondering if she would feel better if she was punished, it is heart-breaking that she would feel that way. She can’t feel that her God would think that she is good in the way she is. I hope she will have strong friends who will commute her. That is the worst part. If you believe that God you believe in says that you are wrong, how can you feel that God is always with you? She can’t feel like that, she feels so alone. They must be so strong not to give up.* (50 years old, Swedish Christian trans man, born and raised in Dalarna, working with children having otism)

The future attitudes of the Muslim community toward homosexuality was another matter the interviewees reflected on. Most of the interviewees wanted to know whether or not the open-minded attitudes of South African Muslim congregation would be the same in the future.

*I would like to learn what happened to two Iranian guys who didn’t get their permission to leave Turkey for Canada. I would like to learn what happened with South African Imam because the community seemed to be very open-minded and they kind of approved him but I would like to know what would happen in two or three years later. Will they still be that enthusiastic or will they go back?* (34 years old, Swedish Lutheran Christian bisexual woman, born and raised in Stockholm, a minister in the Church of Sweden, in the Lutheran denomination.)

Having asked what could be done for Queer Muslims and Queer Christians, the interviewees were observed to engage themselves in thinking on the origins of the problems that Queer Muslims and Queer Christians face and try to come up with different methods for their emancipation. They suggested that changing the status quo of religious institutions is a must for their emancipation. They defined orthodox Islam and Christianity as the most powerful system of
domination by stating that they have to problematize the nature of religious power and its misuse.

In all religions, there are always people who use religion to control others, to get power. They make laws and they make up things just to get their ways. It is so horrible that it works that way. (He seems confused and sad) How can it be possible to use religion in that way? If anything makes me doubt the goodness of the humanity is the way people use religion to get power. It is really horrible. (50 years old, Swedish Christian trans man, born and raised in Dalarna, working with children having otism)

The same interviewee highlights that religion and the risk of punishment are always instrumentalized in the hands of Islamist teachers, religious figures and politicians in order to pursue violent objectives.

I do not think that it is Islam. I think governments and people with power just use religion to get power and oppress people. If you have power, you can condemn any number of things. You can condemn being black or being homosexual or being red hair or whatever. As long as you can force the law, you can control people, it doesn’t matter what. You can turn into it is immoral to have red hair. They just want to control people. (50 years old, Swedish Christian trans man, born and raised in Dalarna, working with children having otism)

Considering the denial of gay individuals’ desire to be a minister as a violation of human right, one interviewee describes some homophobic and heterosexist features of Christian religious heritage and some dilemmas which institutional religion poses for gay and lesbian people. The Christian institutions fail to accept or support openly gay individuals. It is revealed that Sweden still has churches which reject marriage rights for same-sex couples and that these churches do not support openly gay individuals professionally, pastorally and doctrinally.

I heard people in the church saying that it is okay to be a member of the church but they don’t want people to get married in the church. The ministers can be in the same-sex marriages but gay members of the church can’t get marry in the church. I heard that attitude and (she is sighing, it makes me sad). One way, they say that they accept you but you are a part-time member. I want to a full member of the Church and want to get married. The church is my home anyway, why can’t I just get marry there? Some churches do not accept gay people who want to be minister. Maybe those people are gifted by God, maybe they are so good at preaching. They say that they can’t accept them. This is so narrow-minded. I think they have to stand up and fight. We have to fight with this attitude because we want to change it. This is just against human rights, you have to be equal with everybody else. (41 years old, Swedish Christian bisexual woman, born and raised in Stockholm, social worker, engaged in a Christian organization)

Influencing institutions of organized religion, working within these and the injection of the idea of progressive, independent, non-traditional way of thinking about religion into non-queer Christian and Muslim believers was a common feature of the interviewees’ accounts.
We have to believe that we can influence the religious organizations. We should try to make our ways into the big organizations and try to influence people there. If we think that we as Queer Christians and Queer Muslims should work outside the main Church or main mosque, I think that is a pity. We should try to work inside them and try again and again because if we work our own way, we can start our own new churches, mosques, groups and organizations but then we leave these people with their old believes. They will still be big. We can influence. You have to take it person by person, like the Imam in the South Africa. He sat down with people and talk to them. We should try to get closer. We should take person to person and show them who we are and our way of life is good and get to know people. But it is hard because if you are afraid, you are afraid (50 years old, Swedish Christian trans man, born and raised in Dalarna, working with children having otism)

Based on these findings, it can be argued that the non-conformist meanings created by Queer Muslims functioned as a space for becoming and belonging to Queer Christians having the similar problems and agendas. The alternative media content of A Jihad for Love is observed to rise mutual understanding and to promise a formation of Queer Muslim-Queer Christian counter-public where these two queer faith communities collaborate on the basis of their common needs, problems, solutions and goals. This said, it is also important to discuss Mitzi Waltz (2005) and Tim O’Sullivan’s (2005) argument that alternative media products, which are in opposition to mass-media products that are widely consumed, can be used as instruments for social change. Following Downing (2001), although it is possible to say that A Jihad for Love as an alternative radical media enabled Queer Christian members of Queer Mässan to develop questioning perspectives on the hegemonic process of institutional Christianity and Islam, it is still too early to talk about a social change. However, as these findings and Jane Mansbridge (2001) point out, it can only be said that Queer Christians’ emotions including sadness, angerliness, frustration, curiosity turn into a mental state that provoke them to influence institutional Christianity and Islam.

The reception of A Jihad for Love by Queer Christians of Queer Mässan included four elements of oppositional consciousness. Accordingly, the interviewees identified with Queer Muslim as members of a subordinated group, identified injustices done to them, opposed those injustices, and had a shared interest in ending or in diminishing those injustices.

6. Conclusion and Limitations

The research questions of this master thesis were twofold. The first research question was to explore how Queer Christians in Sweden will interpret A Jihad for Love in relation to their
identity. The second question was to see whether *A Jihad for Love* potentially lead to a mutual understanding and oppositional consciousness, and if yes, how. Considering the first research question, it can be concluded that *A Jihad for Love* proved to be a space to seek queer identification and exercise religious identity for Queer Christians in Sweden. Having their understandings, opinions and attitudes about Islam, Muslims and Queer Islam broadened by *A Jihad for Love*, Queer Christians in Sweden discover the ontological similarities between Islam and Christianity and detect the similar strategies used by Muslim leaders to hush up homosexuality as by Christian leaders. More importantly, recognizing that they share most elements of queer Muslim’s faith and queer readings of religious stories which condemn homosexuality, Queer Christians identify their Muslim counterparts as their sisters and brothers. Accordingly, the reception of *A Jihad for Love* showed that queer –affirming Muslim alternative media can be a necessary precursor to, and concomitant requirement of, interfaith encounter and interreligious dialogue.

Considering the second research question, it can be concluded that *A Jihad for Love* potentially led to a mutual understanding and oppositional consciousness by increasing Queer Christians’ imaginative and political interest in lives and realities different from their own. The documentary promoted respect, reliance, empathy, reciprocity, hence mutual understanding between Queer Christians and Queer Muslims. While they criticized Western and Swedish mainstream media mainly on the basis of their lacking a representation of “Islam as a whole” and being “unfair” to Muslims, they described *A Jihad for Love* as “educational, enlightening, informative and diverse” media product humanizing their Muslim counterparts.

After watching *A Jihad for Love*, Queer Christians fulfilled all four criteria of Jane Mansbridge’s (2001) oppositional consciousness. They identified with their Muslim counterparts who are suppressed by Orthodox Islamic leaders instrumentalizing religion, they identified injustices (i.e. state persecution, suppression of their sexuality) done to Queer Muslims, they question the nature of religious power and finally they saw their emancipation in working within orthodox Islamic and Christian institutions and the injection of the idea of progressive, independent, non-traditional way of thinking about religion into non-queer Christian and Muslim believers.
Furthermore, the interviews conducted with Queer Christians in Sweden include very important findings about religion, secularism and Sweden on the one hand, and Swedish mainstream media, Queer Muslims and Queer Christians on the other hand. After watching A Jihad for Love, Queer Christians in Sweden take a critical stance towards their status in Swedish society and mainstream media. The findings of this reception study indicate that there is a difference between what definition of religion Queer Christians use and what definition of religion Swedish society and mainstream media use. Prejudices of Swedish society and mainstream media regarding who Queer Christians and Queer Muslims demands careful investigation about the future and the place of these minorities in Swedish mainstream media. This kind of investigation can also reveal future social and political discourse surrounding Islam and Christianity since mainstream media have a significant effect on forming them.

Finally, after watching A Jihad for Love, Queer Christians in Sweden reflected upon their own understandings of freedom, progress, equality and tolerance. The relationship between religious and secular conceptualization of freedom, progress, equality and tolerance in Sweden demands further investigation.

I would like to make several comments about the limitations with the study in hand.

In the case of Queer Christians belonging to the community called Queer Mässan in Stockholm and their responses to A Jihad for Love, the relevant discussion concerns whether they are representative of all Queer Christian ideas in Sweden. This is not a question that can be answered in the scope of this reception study, yet it does point to the need for further research into more heterogeneous social groups from different geographical parts of Sweden, age groups, social class, educational status and different levels of Christian upbringing. Except one interviewee, every interviewee in this reception study is belonging to the same Queer Christian community (i.e. Queer Mässan). This, of course, might be one of the most valid reasons behind the homogeneity of comments. A second matter worthy of further reflection is that combining semi-structured interviews with focus groups could provide the study with a more varied understanding.

Moreover, focus group could also be more suitable for studying oppositional consciousness and collective action. Unfortunately, the interviewees, despite their belonging to the same queer Christian organization and familiarity with another, they denied to talk about religion and
homosexuality in front of others. Otherwise, semi structured interviews combined with focus groups could offer more insights into reception of *A Jihad for Love* by Queer Christians. Alternatively, focus groups could be conducted with a mixed group of Queer Muslims and Queer Christians in Sweden. However, as the findings clearly shows, Queer Christians would not be ready for that at all since they only recently gained an idea about their Muslim counterparts.

Queer-affirming alternative Muslim media can facilitate communication, interaction and dialogue between sexual minorities across different faiths. The study at hand theoretically and empirically contributes to the development of an alternative interfaith dialogue between Queer Christians and Queer Muslims in a world of media growth where religion and the media are converging. The research demonstrated that the media do not always assume a role in the creation and sustenance of religious conflict and that the alternative media products such as *A Jihad for Love* can inspire Queer Christians to deliberate on the ways to get around institutional and doctrinal restrictiveness of Islam and Christianity for Queer Christian and Queer Muslims’ emancipation. In the context of meaning-making practices by Queer Christians who see *A Jihad for Love*, this study explored the common problems, pressures, way-outs of Queer Christians and Queer Muslims who experience a faith crisis in a quite similar manner.

It should also be noted that this study does not deny that most of its findings are descriptive. This had to be so due to three reasons. First, queer-affirming alternative media is such a recent phenomenon and the researches about it are mostly related either to its content or its production. Second, except John Downing’s typology, there is almost no clear-cut methodology for the reception of alternative media. Finally, the incorporation of intersectionality and queer theory into the study of media, religion and culture is neglected. However, some of its descriptive findings can be useful to inform media professionals in Sweden since the findings include important insights about religiosity, modernity and secularism in Swedish society in broad and in Swedish mainstream media in narrow terms.

A further theoretical contribution of this study is that in academic literature there is a strong link between being a Muslim and being backward, devout, homophobic, women-hater and rapist. During this reception study, Queer Christians in Sweden, who are observed to have been highly effected by both Samuel Huntington’s (1997) idea of “clash of civilizations” and the representation of Islam in Western and Swedish mainstream media, obtained a different
perspective on Islam and its relation to homosexuality. The misconception about the “true” nature of the relationship between Islam and homosexuality is thrown into question and the reception study made Queer Christians reflect on that their knowledge of Islam, Muslims, Queer Muslims and homosexuality in Islam is quite limited.

Accordingly, I would like to make several recommendations about the future research. Future research should continue to explore the educational, persuasive and spiritual influences of queer-affirming alternative Muslim media including blogs, documentaries, films and Muslim punk-rock bands’ music videos on the sexual minorities from different faiths. In post-9/11, many Queer Muslims living in the western and non-western world alike use media to create symbolic sources and representations to seek their religious and cultural selves. Against this background, academic research persistently continues to deal with the dark side of Islam by exploring the problematic representation of Islam, Muslims and Queer Muslims. While this audience-and reception- centered study does not deny the importance of this academic endeavor, it suggests that academic research, with its disproportionate interest in the problematic representation of Islam, Muslims and Queer Muslims, exhausts its capacity to shed light on the dialogue between religious communities. This said, the reception study at hand, serves to Queer Christians and Queer Muslims by bringing the cooperation, mutual understanding, dialogue, oppositional consciousness, common policy to its focus.

To understand how queer affirming Muslim media are perceived by different sexual minorities across faith communities and to enhance dialogue among these groups should be given an increasing attention before the breakdown of communication among these minorities. In the construction of meaning, identity and religion in contemporary culture where media is proved not to be an agent of secularization, there should be more audience-and reception- centered studies describing the way that queer-affirming alternative Muslim media are received by queer-believers of all the Abrahamic traditions.
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Appendix

Interview Guide for Semi-Structured Interviews
Before A Jihad for Love

Issues to be considered before I start interviewing: a) informed consent (i.e. explaining the measures I have taken to protect confidentiality and anonymity.) b) asking their permission for tape-recording and note-taking.

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Background Questions about Interviewees Identity

-Can you present yourself shortly? (Basically their gender, marital status, age, place of birth, title, occupation.)

Christianity’s Approach to Homosexuality

What is the view of Christianity on homosexuality? Can you relate to this view? How does it make you feel?

Christianity and Interviewees sexual identity

What did you feel when you found out that you were LGBT?

What happened to your faith when you first discovered that your LGBT feelings?

Can you tell me more about the place of sacred/Christianity in your sexuality after you found that you were LGBT?

What are the ways to keep your faith and sexuality together?

Christian Community

Tell me about your experiences when you came out in Christian community?

Do you know other Queer Christians? How do you get to know them?

Non-Religious Queer Community

Have you ever talked to any -religious queer about your faith and sexuality?

If yes, how was/were her/his/their reaction(s)?

Experiences with Islam and Muslims
How do you perceive Islam?

Do you have personal experience with Muslims? Do you have any Muslim friend?

From what sources do you learn about Islam and Muslims?

Is there any point in your life when your attitude toward Islam changed?

What are the reasons behind this change?

Experiences with Queer Islam and Queer Muslims

Do you have any Queer Muslim friend?

What do you expect Queer Muslim experiences to be?

What kind of relationship might they have with their families?

Have you ever watch a documentary about from Queer Muslims about Queer Muslims?

If I say that we will see a documentary called A Jihad for Love, what would be the reason that would motivate you to see the documentary?

After *A Jihad for Love*

What do you think about the documentary?

Was there anything you find unexpected in the documentary?

How did you feel when the documentary ended?

What did you think when the documentary ended?

Did you feel particularly close to a character? Which character did you feel close? Why?

After seeing the documentary, how would you explain Jihad?

With this in mind, how would you describe the way Jihad is represented in the mainstream media?

What would you say about Islam now, after watching the documentary?

With this in mind, what can you say about the representation of Islam in mainstream media?

How do you see Islam’s attitude for homosexuality now?
What similarities and differences did you perceive between Christianity’s and Islam’s attitude against homosexuality?

How do you perceive Muslims now?

With this in mind, what can you say about the representation of Muslims in mainstream media?

How do you perceive Queer Muslims now?

With this in mind, what can you say about the representation of Queer Muslims in mainstream media?

What about Queer Christians? How do you think they are shown in mainstream media?

What can be done for Queer Christians and Queer Muslims?

If you had a chance to make a documentary about the relationship between your religion and sexuality, what would you say about your religion and sexuality?

Transcriptions of Semi-Structured Interviews

Interview 1 PART 1: Before *A Jihad for Love*

R: I am coming from Stockholm University, Journalism, Media and Communication Department, the research is based on a reception study of the documentary called “A Jihad for Love”. This reception study aims to learn from your understandings about A Jihad for Love. The study wants to see if the documentary can motivate Queer Christians and Queer Muslims to work together around common goals including interfaith dialogue and LGBT equality across faith communities. The information you provide in this interview and your identity will be kept confidential and anonymous. First of all, are you sure to make this interview?

I: Yes, sure of course.

R: Can I know you a little bit, can you present yourself shortly?

I: I am born and raised in Sweden. I was not brought up religiously. I am thirty five years old. What else is there to know? I am just regular person, I guess.

R: How would you define your gender?

I: I am a woman. I am born female. I identify as a woman. I am also in love with a woman.
R: I would like to have your opinions about sacred, holy in Christianity. It might be related to a religious figure or a religious philosophy. What is the first thing coming to your mind, when I say sacred in Christianity?

I: Yes it is Jesus. Because I have a strong, very strong relationship with the persona of Jesus. To me sacred is, yes that’s the first thing coming to my mind and why is that? Because I have a very deep believe in… His teaching is love. To me Jesus and love, they are almost .. I mean you can always replace them. They are almost identical.

R: Jesus and love?

I: Jesus and love. Because his message is very clear. The choice should always be love. I mean he is very clear in every instance. He makes the point that acting out of love, compassion, you know, is if you want, you know, if you want to use that word, the sacred thing to do, it is the human thing to do.

R: So you mentioned about Jesus and his message and choice of love. How would you relate this message to your sexual identity? Because you just mention that you were in love with a woman.

I: Yeah. I would say that. It has not been uncomplicated and I think that there is a reason that I have chosen the figure of Jesus to be my focus in Christianity because of this strong emphasis on love because there are other teachers and figures in Christianity and they are not that clear. I mean we have Paul and everything with talking about homosexuality as the deadly sin and the crime that we are actually … out of the salvation. You know, Jesus said anything like that. I mean Jesus always said that everyone deserves salvation and this is love. I had of course, I did have a crisis of faith when I realize that my identity might be lesbian. How can I a gay, lesbian, homosexual, you know that identity and how can I take comfort in religion if you want that, that is having an interpretation. A person like me is not included in the salvation that Jesus brings and Jesus being a core person and salvation being a core thing, you know, actually in Christianity is that Jesus saves it is very strong. Even though I am not a fundamentally a believer or something like that but it is very central and I had to. It is very hard and it was not easy to not lose faith.
R: It is a good thing that you mention about the different ideas within the Christianity tradition about homosexuality because I was going to ask you to tell about Christianity’s approach to homosexuality. As far as I understand Christianity differs in its approach to homosexuality.

I: Yes very much.

R: But what is your approach to homosexuality? Do you really feel most of the time yeah it is going hand in hand with homosexuality?

I: It is going hand in hand with Jesus. My crisis in faith is quiet recent. I am finding actually a survival strategy, I think. Spiritually and religiously. I just turned very much to Jesus. I don’t even read other parts of the Bible. Because it’s like my… You know, I can’t lose my faith. That would be me to me a disaster. So there are various approaches, there are actually people that think that homosexuals will burn in hell. I don’t believe in those ways, you know. In a way I don’t believe there is a underground, Lord, devil, Satan that I am going to burn with him. So how can I then have a problem with this dogma or this doctrine that homosexuals are banned? There are so many levels because I don’t feel like I have to be embraced by some religious Christian groups that ban homosexuals completely. I know that you know in the official state, I mean Swedish Church, we have homosexual priest and bishops and homosexual people are allowed to get married so there is a standpoint can be quit and that’s good you know but that’s people. For the same reason there are people, Christian people, I think they find a middle way for themselves to get you know the tolerant, tolerance in there somewhere, like they judge the action not the person. To me that’s less than comfort. I don’t need not to be judged. Because it’s not theirs to judge, really. And that’s the whole core point where I go like no person and no, in my opinion, true Christian really don’t have to mandate to judge, anyone. I don’t care if you are a killer. It doesn’t matter. People can’t judge, it is not theirs to judge and that helps me to stay hmm because it is about having an identity as a lesbian and having an identity as a Christian. Do I have to leave one of those identities? I have friends that have had talked to me. “Yes I know you love her but I also have those feelings but I have left that part behind me ” They have left what they call is you know that part, homosexual feelings, part behind them and they have chosen other, you know. So that’s confusing. But I think that’s very prevailing that has as vantage point has great success in Christianity is all we judge is the action not the person.
Because they can find a middle way but I don’t like that. I don’t share my faith with those people.

R: Can you tell me more about your experiences being a Queer Christian in a Christian community?

I: (She is angrily reacting) Ahhh! It is a, (she is thinking) ...I know some Queer Christian communities but I was never a part of a Queer Christian community. Maybe I should be. My experience is that, I feel, I don’t want to tell people that I am Christian and gay because I am worried about the reaction. I was a member of a Christian community and they did not know about me being a lesbian. Perfectly, honest, I was not very clear at that time but when I started to realize this we had a conversation because the pastor was preaching on homosexuality. After that discussion, it might be deadly sin, you know they did not agree with homosexual lifestyle. So I left them because I didn’t feel you know, it is like, I can’t be there. The reason I can’t be there is not because I don’t like them. They are nice people I know that.

R: What is the thing that you don’t like in them when it comes to your sexuality, in the dynamic between your sexuality and religion?

I: It is nothing to do with them. It is their opinions. If I listen to them, I start believing the things they tell me and if I believe the things they tell me then I will lose my God. Then I am excluded from salvation. I am excluded from my God’s grace because I am lesbian and I chose to live like that.

R: Did you come out as a lesbian and Christian to a Christian?

I: No, yes. Well yes.

R: Can I shortly learn about the experience?

I: It was in a quit safe environment, I would say. It is happened to two people and it happened at the same time. Basically, I did not know how the reaction was going to be. I mean what happened was that first I came out as lesbian actually because that was not, so they knew that. Then I just kind of filled in that, yes by the way I also call myself a Christian. So that way kind of worked for me. I don’t see how I could do this other way. If there was somebody that I know
that Queer Christian, that’s something else. But if just a normal Christian then I am not sure how I will be received. It is not like somebody is going to curse me or anything. It’s just that they will have a moral, there will be moral issues on my being Christian, claiming that identity and also being lesbian. Maybe they will maybe they won’t but I am afraid of their judging. What scares me is not that somebody else might judge me, but I will believe in their judgment so then I will lose my faith, that is a thing. They are free to do and think, wish and believe what they want. God bless them, I hope they are happy people but I can’t be in an environment where I risk to be rubbed of my fundamental belief, that is what I scared of.

R: I understand.

I: It is a very much , not so much like a outer threat or someone won’t like me or anything , it is not like that. If I start to believe them and I let them judging me then I will lose my faith.

R: What kind of judgment, do you think they might have ?

I: It is just the judgment that I am not worthy of the grace of God. If they believe that then I am not comfortable with that.

R: In a second we will see the documentary and I told you that its name is A Jihad for Love. So I was wondering whether you are familiar with Islam. I mean are you familiar with Islam as a culture and religion?

I: Maybe or maybe not. It depends on what is familiar. I have had Muslim friends. Non-Queer ones but mainly you know just regular people. People just like in France, you know.

R: Did you get any idea about their relation to Islam, about their faith?

I: I talked to some of them about faith. We are close. Actually one of the people that I share and talk mainly about God is actually Muslim.

R: Did you observe some differences and similarities between Christianity and Islam when you talked to them?

I: Yes, plenty. (She smiles) I think that the main focus is that the love of God. Maybe the main thing is if we follow God then we will be comfortable, happy. We were talking about how I as a
human, as a person make a lot of choices that God wouldn’t want me to make and then we experience some pain. And when I kind of find God, I am just more comfortable and happy and then happiness comes with finding God, the love for God. God as the benefactor, God will take care of you, God loves you, fathers you anyway.

R: So that fatherhood of God is common when you talk to your…?

I: Yes, yes to my Muslim friends.

R: Has your attitude towards Islam changed at a point? Let’s say with the introduction to Muslim friends? Can we talk about a change in your approach to Islam or was it always the same?

I: It was basically the same because I come from a multi-cultured part of Stockholm suburbs so I always had, I mean, when I was growing up I was like started to ride my bicycle, some of the girls would stop and help me with their veils because they were little Muslim girls and we would play. I think what has changed (the tone of her voice is one warning) me with Islam is the now the current media. Islam phobia has affected me because the people that I know that they are Muslims and my experience, my personal experience of Islam is something completely different from what is going on in the media and everything.

R: I am actually wondering those previous experiences about Islam before the media.

I: My previous experiences with Islam is that part of my getting closer to God, part of my exploration about God because like I said, I was not brought up religiously and I was hanging out with a lot of different people and believers, Islam believers were much more approachable, comfortable. I would say, in my opinion, a Christian person in Sweden, especially ten or twenty years ago, was very out with it. It was easier to find believers who were Muslims because you would know by their practice. So I would know that somebody was believer and it was stigmatized. It was easier to talk to them about God and believing. Whereas Christians were more in closet or fundamental. Do you know what I mean? I don’t know that’s my experience anyway. And this was also by the way when I was growing up some years ago. It was totally out to be a Swedish believer, like it is totally out, like you couldn’t do. Because I was brought up in Christian context, what I know of religion and God, what I have been indoctrinated from the society, even in the secular society is Christian. Like you know Christmas celebration and
everything, Jesus on the cross and Church and everything. But the personal relationship with God, I think I explored through Muslim culture and Islam society.

R: It is just interesting…

I: It is interesting, isn’t it?

R: I think it is very interesting. I never expected that a Swedish person would say like this.

I: I am quite surprised myself hearing myself saying that, I am just realizing. (She is laughing)

R: As far as I understood, you just said that that was actually Islam in the beginning and being subjected to Islam when you were growing up made you maybe to search on Christianity too.

I: I think it is like this, this is what I believe. God has an individual language for everybody. To some people he speaks Muslim, to some people he speaks Christian, to some people he speaks Hindu. He speaks in different languages. To some people he speaks nature. And to these people he spoke, their way of understanding God is the way God describes himself in Islam and when we were talking about God we were talking about the same God, but the way I understood God was not necessarily in the exact mode and expression that the exact way but it is so similar. It is just that I had more words in the language of Christianity, I didn’t have to go and learn this new language of Islam because I had a language of Christianity which was the language that I could understand God but it is the same God. With the Muslim people that I was talking to, we did not talk about a Muslim point of view or a Christian point of view, we were just talking about God and it was just personal faith. I mean no body actually cared about what religious practice it was, it was just God.

R: Do you have any knowledge about Islam’s attitude to homosexuality?

I: I would say that I have ideas. That it is less tolerant like we have the Sharia law, and the state in Iran and the places where homosexuals are. I mean we talk about asylum in countries like Sweden for homosexual people because they are being persecuted because of their sexuality. I think that it is not the whole religion. Islam is differing anyway. Like we talk about there are different vantage points there are also Christians that want me to burn in hell.

R : On my facial gesture. (I must have been looked surprised)
I: There is! Maybe not so much in Sweden but in the Christian community as a whole. If we are going to talk about Christianity, then you have Protestantism and you have Catholicism. A lot of people are going to have huge problems with gay people in Christianity. But I think the main point is that from a governmental point of view, at least since 60’s or 70’s, we should remember this, by then it was still considered as a disease in Sweden to be homosexual. That forty years later I don’t have to worry about getting thrown into prison or being by the authorities punished doesn’t mean that I don’t feel threatened. The threat to my persona (she is raising her voice) is still in a way present. I think there is one thing that has to do with like the legality or illegality and there is the Christianity of culture. I would say that it is different from countries to countries. There are Muslim countries where there are a lot of Muslim people they are just as tolerant as any person. But I think there is a harder stance on homosexuality being wrong in the general interpretation just like it was in Christianity earlier. It is more spread out, it is stronger. There is a stronger hold for that interpretation within Islam. That goes from little perspective of the individual up to the religious figures and then we have the non-secular states that would impose blablabla, if you want to go to Islam.

R: We are maybe slowly approaching to A Jihad for Love, and I would like to ask you what is the first thing coming to your mind when I say Jihad?

I: The first thing comes to my mind about Jihad is the holy war. A war sanctioned by God.

R: Let me to ask you when it was the first time you hear the word Jihad.

I: Oh my God when I was a teenager maybe.

R: Do you remember how was it used? In which context was it used?

I: It was used as a context where, it was in a political context. It was used because I think it was something to do with Saddam Hussein and it was just “Why they don’t just go there and kill him?” You know Saddam being like the bad person in the world and then someone said they can’t kill him because then there will be a jihad.

R: Okay.
I: Then you know the western world would provoke the Muslims or Iraqi people and then they would rise up in a holy war against the perpetrators killing their leader. Don’t piss off the Muslims because then they will have a Jihad, that’s the context.

R: Do you remember a particular time you started to hear Jihad in a very political way?

I: Oh yes of course we have 9/11 and all of that going on and then Jihad is used as that like a revenge. It is quit political, it is used quit politically. Do I know what Jihad is? No. Do I think I know what Jihad is? I think Jihad is, my interpretation of the little thing that I heard or read or know about Jihad from a non-political from religious point of view, I think it is some kind of just war that is sanctioned by God and that is you know in line with God’s will. Like you fight for something, that’s God’s will.

R: I was also taught in a similar way in Turkey.

I: Oh yeah? (She is laughing).

R: Exactly. To spread justice in other parts of the world.

I: To me justice and God are not necessarily, justice as such is too subjective, that’s just what my belief system is and I am having a problem with. Now we came back to Christian people can’t judge other people and how can we as people know what God thinks just. We can’t. So we can’t fight wars about it.

R: I would like to go back to the moment that you said Christianity and Islam are actually not so different.

I: Not at all.

R: Could you explain me how close do you think Islam and Christianity to each other? Or how distant?

I: I think that there is a closeness. The main similarity is the belief in the love of God. When I have talked to believers that are not political, non-political believers on both sides, there is a focus on the individual relationship to God, that’s the similarity. That’s the similarity that we trust in God, we trust our lives to God, we trust God wants good for us, we will take directions
from God, God loves us. That’s the thing, the very close and intimate and the humble before God and other people. That’s the similarity and then, you can always focus on differences because the world is just difference. Difference is like what world is, is diversity. And I think if we are going to religion and doctrine, I mean it is just the same religion, it is R: just different branches. It starts with Judaism, Abraham and then comes Jesus a little bit updated and then Mohammed, they are the big three from Abraham tradition.

R: What about their attitude to homosexuality? Can we still say that they are closer?

I: I don’t think in text, like the Bible and the Quran, I don’t know what the Quran says. I know quite a lot about what the doctrine in Christianity says on homosexuality and it is not much and Jesus never mentioned it. Here is one of my good Christian friends told me when I approached him, I said that you know I am having this problem with homosexuality in Christianity. He said you know what if it is so important, if it was going to ban you to hell and Jesus is God on earth, why didn’t he mention it? (She is laughing) He should have given heads off. Don’t do this because then you are damned. He never talked about it and there is Pole talking about it and there is also in the ancient story of Sodom and Gomorah. But I looked into it and then there is interpretation, and I know that in the Christian doctrine there is the word that is used, male to male rape. Even male to boy, grown man to young boy rape and so it’s a rape word. It is not a loving relationship word that is used. But I don’t what to Quran says.

R: Have you ever heard the word Queer Islam?

I: Yes, I have.

R: Can I learn when and where you heard?

I: think I mainly heard from talking to you. (She is laughing) But not before this, I never speculated on.

R: What do you expect Queer Muslims’ experience to be in Muslim community?

I: Hard

R: More?
I: Well, the Queer Muslims I know are not very out about being Queer. I mean I know they are because in some ways, it is quiet, people who are out and Muslim that I know, they live in London, Germany, New York and in Sweden. So that’s why I think it’s hard. I also have been in a Muslim cultural context, it was not a religious context at all and where somebody that was thought of or known in a way to be Queer was being quiet watched so that he couldn’t go to a gay club or something. They would be watched a little bit. That was just my experience.

R: If I tell you that we will see a documentary called A Jihad for Love, what would be the reason that would motivate you to watch this documentary?

I: Well, A Jihad for Love sounds interesting, a war for love, I don’t know. It is a definitely interesting title, isn’t it? I mean it is a struggle, it is a fight. What do you mean with A Jihad for Love, that’s what I am asking because there is no love in killing anyone. I don’t care for what the reason. So there is no love in hurting anyone. It is like what’s up with that?

R: So you want to learn about Queer Islam?

Yes, sure.

Interview 1 PART 2: After A Jihad for Love

R: Okay, now we just saw the documentary. What did you think?

I: It was interesting, I think it was moving in many ways. I mean, emotionally moving, yeah and I kept thinking that, I don’t like talking about. First it is not about religion and God, it is about human beings tolerant and intolerant. That’s what it is about. This fear, people are afraid of things. It is about fear and intolerance.

R: In which aspect was it interesting?

Well, I think is, for me. We talked about the doctrine. It is just doctrine about God. Intolerant people don’t own Christianity, intolerant people don’t own Islam and you know they don’t own God. Nobody owns the right to speak of, in my opinion, what God wants and does not wants and likes and doesn’t like. I think, there were two women, Turkish women in the movie that said that God puts this love in me so then it is (she can’t remember the rest of what was said in the documentary and I help her by complementing her sentence)
R: So then it is legitimate?

I: So then it is legitimate. To me, it is like that. I was talking to a friend of mine because I was feeling a little bit like these guys said, how I can be turning to Islam, is there any space for me here. And also came back later on in the movie, you know they are looking for the doctrine to find approval and you know and to me I was struggling with.

R: Struggling with?

I: With the fact that if God is everything then how homophobia can exist. And if it does exist, in a way I can say that, somebody told me that you know God doesn’t care about homophobia, God is so much bigger than that, God is not caring. And also like somebody said in the film, as long as I don’t hurt anyone else, then God really doesn’t care. I am sad about how all this pain came to people. It just bothers me that people can’t, I mean this man is separating from his family. Would God want that? How is that possible?

R: What do you think the documentary trying to say?

I: I don’t know what the documentary is trying to say, I have no idea what the documentary trying to say. But I think it is, I mean what I heard and I could identify with is I heard a lot of people saying a lot of things that I have been thinking and feeling myself. But I have no clue about what the documentary is trying to say.

R: Can we just go there then, the things you find similar to your experiences?

I: I was thinking when I was looking at this. It is a personal relationship to God and like the imam said in the beginning of the film, “God is everything to me, He is the source of my strength, he is the center of my life” I totally get that and that is my relationship to God as well. Like God is everything to me, what is necessary for me. And then somebody else said I was made in Muslim cast, I can’t be different and then I can say like yes I am Christian and I can’t be different. And also so it is important, in some way in somehow what this doctrine says. I am trying to distinguish between God and religion and what settles me a little bit about this is that religion is very powerful. It was also about secular and non-secular states.

R: You must have observed some differences between Turkey and non-secular stated then?
I: Yes, well there is an obvious difference because gay people from Iran in this film fled to Turkey because it is not illegal to be homosexual in Turkey and that’s the big difference. The woman said, the Turkish woman also said that they were quite open, they could live like that and there was a base in somewhere in the society for them in Turkey but not in all of Turkey. And also, talking about the doctrine, it is the same doctrine that both Christianity and Islam referring to. The sayings about homosexuality, the cities of the Plain, Sodom and Gomorrah are the same actual incidences that are spoken up. So the ground for religious homophobia is the same.

R: Did you think that these people are trying to deal with this doctrine?

I: Well, I think they are doing a lot of stuff that I have been doing which is first of all, looking at it literally like what is it really said, does the doctrine really say that I am banned, and looking at the translations like what did it really mean, they are talking about it is a molestation and it is a corrupt state and all of these things. I hear the same reasoning within interpreting Christian beliefs, it is not consensual loving relationship what it is talked about, and we have actually, I mean later, we also have a script of Paul that condemns homosexuality but again it is the same with what this Imam is talking about with corrupt state.

R: So let me to ask you immediately then, while we were watching the documentary did you feel close to particular character in the documentary?

I: I feel close to all of them. The ones that felt very saddened by the people, a couple of them that chose to hide or being secret or that were so much struggling and feeling bad.

R: Between their sexuality and religion?

I: She is nodding.

R: I think the lesbian couple. One of them moved to Egypt back and forth for 3 years.

I: And yes one of them wanted to be punished and I just feel sad about that because it is very sad and I wish she would not have to feel that way.

R: Please give me three reasons for why you felt close to almost all character in the documentary?
I: Because I think we believe and love, first and foremost, God. I mean for obvious reasons there is a, even our circumstances are different, a vulnerable position to be in. I just identified, I think. Why was I feeling close? I was identifying with their crisis in faith, looking, trying to find but how does it fit, how can I still be in this way, how can I turn to a God that rejects me. If I am looking at this doctrine that is religion and if that doctrine does not speak of me then how can I take comfort in that doctrine? So then I have to get rid of that doctrine and we are all trying to find our ways to have access to the doctrine, I think. To find a way to get around the fact that there were human beings in this world that tell us God doesn’t love us. God is important to me, if God would not be important to me, then I wouldn’t have to care, I would be like, yes yes whatever God doesn’t love me, I don’t care. You know? But no, I care because God is the center of my life, I have to know God loves me. I need to love me that God loves me. It is very important, vital. It would be devastating for my life if God doesn’t love me because I don’t want to be dramatic but it would be devastating for me. So, I have to find a way. I have to find a way because I have chosen the source which is Christianity and that source is giving me some mixed messages like for instance God doesn’t love me.

R: When you say mixed, do you mean ambiguous?

I: Yeah ambiguous. Just God loves you, know you, God created you, he is benign but then o if you are gay then God hates you. So if I want to read the God loves you part and then not the God hates you part, then how can I just make a mix, how can I just take one part and disregard the other part? O this part is true but this past isn’t. No I have chosen doctrine and this doctrine is for some reason important to me. And maybe I wish it wasn’t, you know, maybe I wish human beings didn’t need religion and didn’t need the doctrine but that’s a different story, apparently I do and I need that to make sense for myself, to be comfortable in my life and this is very private. I am thinking about, keep asking me something.

R: We just said that you identify with all of the characters.

I: In a way, I identify with all of the characters dilemma with religion and their homosexual identity because I think everyone has that and I identify with that.

R: How would you differentiate the way you try to reconcile your own sexuality with your faith than the ways Queer Muslims did?
I: I don’t think there is a difference. I think people are at that peace, I think I reason the same way they do, I approach God the same way they do, you know all of these things and I can just say what I identify with but I don’t identify with, I mean I just wouldn’t accept that God would judge me. I think that is a very hard position, I can’t see how you would end up there because I can’t lose God, and I am very happy that I found a way around it. But there are people in the documentary that didn’t found around it.

R: What is your way to make the peace between?

I: I have chosen a spokesperson that doesn’t talk about homosexuality in a negative way anywhere. That was the first thing I did, and it was also an advice given to me. Just read the Gospel because you don’t get that there and just turn and pray. To me it is double. One thing is reconciling with the doctrine, with the religion and one thing is being comfortable on the spiritual level within oneself. There are a little bit different. They kind of go into each other because in some way it matters and I am not very clear about that. What I did is I was looking very much into my relationship with God and I was turning to God actually and I didn’t ask a lot of other people, well I did talk to other people but I just don’t want to talk to people that wouldn’t bring me closer to the God. When it comes to reconciling the doctrine, I would look at the interpretations and there I found support that this is not, the word homosexuality as we today think about it. So that I kept reading the Bible and feeling that it is nothing to do with me, otherwise how can I take comfort in these verses? Well, it is not about me, that’s the reason that I had to get passed the semantics and the words in the doctrine but then it was clear to me because I found that my true identity given by God is this identity, this is what God wants me to be.

R: It is not hard to understand why you identify with the characters because they also think the same, that God gives these feelings to their heart.

I: Yes, definitely.

R: Before we start watching the documentary you mentioned about your understanding of Islam and I asked you about Queer Islam. I would like to know if the documentary changed your view of Islam. Did your understanding of Islam change?

I: I don’t know if it changed but I was quite surprised.
R: Why?

I: Because of the gay saint sheik, the gay couple, the religious figures.

R: In Pakistan

I: Yes, they were, I was like that’s pretty cool, I never heard anything like it in Christian history, that you know, we have a gay saint somewhere in Catholicism and people are celebrating gay love because the love was so big.

R: Did you think it was impressive?

I: It was impressive and because it is the way Islam is presented. I know very little and it is very hard to talk about something that I don’t know anything about.

R: Let’s focus on the way you think about Islam and you know something more about Islam and what is that more?

I: That they have gay saints that they celebrate. And also in Pakistan and India they were talking about anti-homosexual laws that were in fact brought to country by Christian nation which is England.

R: Yes.

I: And so, now I also know that the source of the condemnation of homosexuality in Islam and Christianity is basically the same. There was something about hadiths, I did not understand.

R: Hadiths is the sayings of Mohammed.

I: But they never told us what they say.

R: No, they just said that there were some hadiths of Mohammed where He thinks homosexuality in a negative light but they didn’t give any.

I: Yes but I would like to know about what he said. It would be interesting to read what did Mohammed say.

R: So, did you learn anything from the documentary that you had not known before?
I: I think it is interesting for one part actually. This Imam in South Africa and what he can do, that he can be openly gay and Imam, that was new for me. I didn’t think that it was possible even. He didn’t have an easy but he did it and it is quit impressive to me. And also Turkish women being so open was impressive and the courage of these young people, living quit openly and it just seemed that there was some sort of room for them.

R: In Islam or in their interpretation?

I: Religiously in their interpretation but I think there is place of everyone. I mean God has a place for everyone and of course there is a place for homosexuals in Islam because Islam has anything to do with God.

R: How different was the representation of Islam in this documentary than the representation of Islam in the media you follow?

I: Well, that’s quit. (She is hesitating) This is about Muslims who believe and have a personal relationship to God, this is not Islam as a political movement or religion. That’s the main thing I think, this is on a personal level. It is not militant, it is not political and actually far from the way Jihad is used in Western media, like some military, angry and more.

R: What did you learn about the word of Jihad from the documentary?

I: They said it is a struggle and then the Imam told us about the struggle with yourself.

R: How you think about different interpretations of Jihad? Do you think it is reinterpreted or seen from a new perspective?

I: Well, comparatively western media’s violent war Jihad, yes there is a difference. There is a definitely because in way it is on the personal level. Like the struggle with the self-like finding out what is the truth about me and what is the true way I should live and also I guess it is a struggle to change people’s minds.

R: Did you know these things before the documentary?
I: It was not like a totally unfamiliar. If we are going to talk about the way Jihad is used, it is used as a military term but also of course I know that Jihad can also be something else like a more personal thing.

R: What did you think that it wasn’t authentic? Were you thinking this is not authentic enough, I don’t think that or sensational? Like it is not real?

I: No.

R: Before the documentary you mention that you have some Queer Muslim friends living abroad mostly. As far as you know Queer Muslims, what did you think about the representation of Queer Muslims in this documentary? Again was it real to you the representation of Queer Muslims?

I: Yes but I think these Queer Muslims are quit you know, I think these people are talking to Imam, they are out in this film, they are thinking about it, they are reasoning about it very bravely, I don’t believe that mainly Queer Muslims live like this or behave like this because these are strong and free people anyway and because they are pursuing what is right and true for them. Some people may be more representative. The people that are feeling bad and maybe try to hide and live in silence.

R: As Turkish woman said, there are some girls in Southern part of Turkey, some girls who cannot live their lesbianism?

I: Yes exactly that’s more, the majority might live like that.

R: Suppressed?

I: Yes. I don’t know if there is a lot of room for this type of new, this free thinking and interpretation. I don’t know.

R: Was there anything unexpected in the documentary? You just told me that you find very unexpected that there are some gay saints in Islam. Did you find something else in the documentary that you think it was unexpected?
I: I told you many things that I find unexpected like out Imam in South Africa, the celebration of saints, the western-Christian tradition to prohibit homosexuality but in the same way Islam is just the continuation of, I mean the way it is read in history, it is a continuation of Christianity. It is a reinterpretation of Christianity so it is not, I don’t think that you can separate like that. This is where I have a problem like that separation between Christianity and Islam because I don’t think that they, yeah I don’t want to accept that there is a thing and the thing is called Christianity or the thing is called Islam and they are separate and defined and they speak of certain things, it is not like that. That’s the ground. Like what is Islam, what is Christianity? What is Queer Islam?

R: You don’t think that they are separate entities.

I: I don’t think that anything is separate.

R: How did you feel when the documentary ended?

I: Hopeful.

R: Hopeful?

I: Yeah.

R: You felt hopeful, you felt hopeful for what?

I: Because it seemed like a lot of stuff is going on there is more tolerance. I am just contradicting myself now I hear. There is more space and actually room to for more tolerant view or interpretation of Islam towards homosexuality and that’s hopeful I think. You know that people don’t have to live fear for being jailed, tortured or lashed. If this religious doctrine is what convinces people to do those things one another then the good thing is that the interpretation of the doctrine can be changed and it seems like the things are moving to a little bit right direction.

R: There is a tense relationship between Islam and homosexuality as we saw during the whole documentary but you just said that you were hopeful. Did you come up with a new idea about this problematic relationship?
I: I think so. I know that it is hard and it is not accepted in a lot of Islamic countries and I just thought that it can change and it seems that it can change and I actually see some similarities between this and the development in Christianity.

R: What kind of similarities?

I: Like I told you, just recently maybe only fifteen years ago it stopped being illegal or maybe not illegal but considered as a psychiatric disease just like the Imam told.

R: You said fifteen or fifty years?

I: Fifty. It is not a long time ago. Those gay people are alive today, they were condemned to psychiatric clinics or whatever. Sweden is secular and it has been for a while but still it is quit the same, but I think that it was seen benignly in the Christian world as well. It is not still.

R: If you come up with an idea for this problem of Queer Muslims? In other words, what can help Queer Muslims to deal with this problem?

I: Just turning to God and not to doctrine I think they kind of came to the point that, I also myself came to, like they said in the meeting with the Imam, whenever kick on every bush, you will find some religious figure.

R: You will find a sheik

I: Yes yes yes. Don’t listen too much or read or care so much about words on the paper because they were ultimately written by men, by human beings and human beings make mistakes all the time. I mean we are imperfect, religion is imperfect because there is only one perfect thing and it is God. And turn to God. Believe and find love in God and the answers would be given because God would provide you what you need. Just turn to God. There was also, there was a lot of sayings like, even the Imam told the gay man that was asking the Imam like I am gay, I felt like this and is it unnatural, you know.

R: Are you talking about India?

I: Yes, India.

R: Okey.
I: No, it is not natural. He also said and I think this is very much actually still is very similar to a lot of Christian thoughts on this. It is like no of course God will forgive you as long as there is hope for your soul and you ask forgiveness and God will forgive you. It is still banned, still unnatural so there is an ambiguity apparently and that’s similar but I think that the solution for me and what these people in the documentary have found as core solution is to turn to the source not to the doctrine and human description of the source and turn to God, don’t turn to the human books and sayings, and you know fallible humans. Just turn to God and you will find.

R: When you were referring to sheik, saying that sheik will pop out if you look behind every tree. How can we act on this problem? It might a Buddhist Queer, it might be a Christian Queer, it might be a Jewish Queer?

I: Acting is just by living in peace with God and ourselves and not resort to becoming militant and preaching because I do not think that we should have a counter-movement, like o no Jesus was a homosexual, you know because I think that’s not what it’s supposed to be. I think it is just by living the way we learn, tolerance, I want someone to be tolerant. I interpret my God to be a tolerant God and because he lives in that way, I should be also tolerant and that would be a way to show that way of life is possible within the realm of this religion. Like they say, you can still be Allah-conscious and homosexual and I can still be God-conscious and homosexual, you know, that to me is very core. It does not take away any of them and to live like that, to show that it is possible and talk about it but peacefully, lovingly.

R: Is it possible to work together?

I: Well yes of course.

R: You are a Queer Christian and I am asking if it is possible to work with Queer Muslims?

I: Yes, definitely. It really made me think that it is very similar. The problem and the solution mainly.

R: What kind of solution?

I: I am talking about the solution for everybody, I am not talking about a political solution, I am talking about a solution to me a peaceful, personal relationship to God.
R: If you try to work with Queer Muslim, tolerance and returning to God will be your solutions to deal with this problem?

I: If a person comes to me and has a problem with I am homosexual and I don’t know if God loves me, then I would say turn to God, don’t listen to people, just know that you know and probably do these things also these people have been doing, look at what the text says, and what does it come from historically.

R: So, last question. If you had a chance to make a documentary about the relationship between your religion and sexuality, what would you say about your religion and sexuality?

I: It is problematic, I would say there is a lot of but it is not impossible, you know I can still, I mean apparently, I can still believe and keep my faith.

R: The message of your documentary will be?

The message of my documentary will be that God loves you and that’s the only thing that matters, and God doesn’t care about anything except that you know that he loves you, I guess. I think God really wants to know and experience that Gods love us, nothing more or less.

Thank you so much for this interview.

Interview 2 PART 1: Before A Jihad for Love

R: Welcome to our interview. Can you present yourself shortly?

I: He is laughing. I am fifty years old, I am a trans man, I am a Christian. I work children with otism and (he is laughing), that is about it. I come from a Christian family and I also come from a family, my parents did not drink alcohol and I think that is quit important too. I used to drink alcohol but I stopped by now. I am also non-sexual and I have this network for asexual people in Sweden. So that is me.

R: Where did you born?

I: In Dalarna

R: Ah, Dalarna.
I wonder the view of Christianity. What would you say the view of Christianity on homosexuality?

R: Well, I was very surprised when I became a teenager that people in general had problems with homosexuality because my parents were old, they were born in 1920. They were old fashioned and they were Christian. But they had no problem with homosexuality at all. (He is emphasizing “at all”). So I was so surprised when I became a teenager and start to realize that people outside my family. (She is not finishing her sentence) But I did not get the impression that the Church, the Christian Church had bigger problems with it than people in general. It is not specific to the Church I have been to. Then, there are smaller Christian Churches that have problems with homosexuality.

R: What do they say about homosexuality?

I: Those smaller churches which have problems with it, they think it is wrong, they it is a sin. I had a friend who came from a church like that and in those churches you can’t live together if you are not married. One of my friends, and this was about 1988 and something like that, she was about 25 and she met a guy from another country but that does not matter and they lived together in London. They came to Sweden together. The priest from her church came to her home and sat down and cried because he was so upset and sad and she was not welcomed to the Church anymore because she was living with a man that is not married to her. And homosexuality was probably even worse for that church but I did not belong to a church like that. I always belong to Church of Sweden, the big Swedish Church. They have been always more open than the smaller churches. Of course, I mean they have been old fashion earlier too.

R: Can you relate to the idea of smaller churches about homosexuality?

I: No, I cannot relate to people make differences between people. I can’t relate to it at all. (He is smiling in a heart-brokenly)

R: How does it feel?

I: The smaller churches in Sweden have not been so powerful. It had been much worse, the Church of Sweden had been old-fashioned. When it comes to small churches, I feel more sorry
for people belonging to those churches for homosexuals and other people they criticize. I feel like they are so misinformed. I would like to help them. (Her face is having a pitying expression)

R: What did you feel when you found out that you are a transgender?

I: I was so happy. I realized what have been wrong in my life. I did not realize until I was 45. So that was very late at least for a Trans man. Trans women are usually older, they change gender when they are over 50 but trans guys are usually younger. Religiously it did not change anything because the God I believe in is the God who made me. The God must have made me this way so it is not problem for me.

R: I was going to ask you actually, what happened to your faith when you discover that you were…

I: If one thing happened, it became even much stronger. God I was so happy had, I was having this religion

R: Can we talked about the power that came into you when you discover yourself?

I: I think I felt like maybe God was thinking that finally this human being finally realized what I meant for him.

R: Quite strong.

I: Yeah, He is laughing. It makes me very happy.

R: Did you experience any difficulty?

I: Not with myself, not with my family. I have a couple of old friends, people that I have known since I was a child and they are very deeply believed Christians too and one of them had some problems at first when I told her. But she likes me so much because we were almost like siblings because our mothers were best friends from 1940’s and this friend of mine, her daughter is a priest, she is married to a priest and she is a priest herself. (We are both laughing) She had some problems when I told her. She said that it is not easy for me but I have to think about this. Later we met, she came to visit me and afterwards she said you know I told you I had a little bit problems with this at first because it was so new to me. She said I thought that you are what you are, you can’t change it. After we met I realized that it was just more of you and that is the good
thing. But the other one she is married to a priest too. She is living in Denmark because her father was a Danish priest and she belongs to the big Danish Church. Another friend I have, she belongs to a very obscure little Church that no one ever heard of, it is very small and very unknown and I can hardly remember its name and they are very old fashioned. I wrote to her a year ago and she likes me a lot too. She did not want to offend me and she did not want to be unfriendly, she told me that I do not think that we should discuss this in writing so I would like to wait until we can meet someday because it is very difficult for me and I appreciated that so we have not been in contact since then. I am sure she thinks about it a lot. I can wait because I understand it is difficult for her. We have not been in contact maybe for two years since I told her. But I am not offended, I am not sad because she was very honest.

R: You talked a little bit about your experiences about coming out in Christian community. If you do not have more to say about this experiences, I would like to ask you if you know other queer Christians in Sweden.

I: Hmm.

R: How did you get to know them?

I: This is a long story because I found LGBT world because I realized that I was asexual. I always felt very strong about LGBT society but I never found them. They were invisible to me when I was living as a heterosexual woman. I never saw them and that was very weird. I realized that I am asexual and started to talk other people who are asexual. They were part of the LGBT society and then I started to networking with them and then I met with some trans people and had a relationship with a trans guy and then realized I was trans. Everything is so mixed up for me. Through all years then I met someone who is Christian and then after a while all of Christian people were quit alone in LGBT society. They started to find each other then it became a Queer Church.

R: So then everything started on a very face-to-face social level?

I: Online too, but I realized that oh this person I talked to about asexuality is Christian too, these trans guys that are spoken to here told that he was Christian too. Then Facebook, it is so much easier because you really get to know people on Facebook.
R: How would you describe your relation to Facebook?

I: I found Facebook extremely useful for communication, interaction, exchange of ideas, to get information quick. It makes life so much easier. I never so internet as another world, to me it is the same. If I send an sms or a letter or I use telephone. Facebook is the same to me.

R: Which kind of information are you looking for on the internet?

I: Everything that interests me, it does not matter if I want to buy or I want to learn more about, if I want to meet people who are into something.

R: Have you ever talked to someone who is non-religious queer about your faith and sexuality?

I: Yes because I think there are more queers that are not religious than they are religious. (He is laughing) In the beginning when I found the LGBT society I thought that I wouldn’t really dare to talk about religion because there are many LGBT people who are anti-religion but that has become a lot better in these few years. I think because religious people found each other and now it is okey. (She is emphasizing “okey”)

R: What kind of reactions do you get from non-religious queer people?

I: Either they think that you are stupid. Because you must be stupid if you are religious because they do not believe in anything or they think that you are evil and they think that it is weird that you are queer and religious too because to them you cant be both. Even young queer people, a lot of them seem to think that they are oppressed by Churches even though they have not been themselves, even though Church of Sweden is not like that anymore and it makes me sad. But it is getting better, it has been going on a lot in the last five years both when it comes to religion and when it comes to asexuality I can tell.

R: Can we talk a little bit more about happenings about religion and homosexuality?

I: I think there have been different generations of LGBT people. The old fashions ones still think that the Churches are evil. The new queer people are most of time more open minded. On the other hand, in Stockholm Pride Festival, there is a big service in Church in Gamla Stan and that is very popular. I mean that service is also a very old fashion and homo-lobby thing too. It is not trans-inclusive, it is very binary, man and woman, there is nothing in between. You should be
gay, you can hardly be bi-sexual there. I am that interested in that because that it too old fashioned.

R: I would like to continue by asking about Islam. How do you perceive Islam?

I: I hope I don’t sound like hippie. (He is laughing) Christianity is the right thing for me but any way that God shows him or herself to someone is the right way for that person. Even if I am Christian and I believe in Jesus, I think that all religions are all the same thing, after all they are all from the same God. I have the same respect for Islam as Christianity. They are different ways of seeing things. It does not matter to me. Islam is like Christianity to me or being a Jew as long as they are good religions. If you believe (she is emphasizing “believe”) that you are doing the right thing, you are trying the best. Only if you want to be, you are an evil.

R: Do you personal experiences with Muslims? It can be an experience with a family member or maybe with a friend?

I: Not really. I have a close friend from Iran but he is not a Muslim. I mean he has been brought up in a Muslim society but he does not believe in it and any religion.

R: From what sources do you learn about Islam and Muslims?

I: I try to read especially something interfaith related, I am very interested in.

R: Can we talk about it a little bit then, which kind of sources you read?

I: Well, there are Facebook groups for interfaith activities, I cannot remember their names but I also try to connect people as much as I can from different religious foundations and perspectives. I am very happy about the house they are building in one of the suburbs of Stockholm where synagogue, mosque and church together. That makes me very happy.

R: I also learned about it when I was shopping in Hallunda. That project also made me excited. I wonder if there is a point when you attitude towards Islam changed.

I: No because I get that thing from my parents as well. They were deeply believing Christians but they had the same respect for other religions as well. I think it is just different ways of expressing it but I would like to know more about Islam. I know more about Judaism because I had Jewish
ancestors, my mother always talked about that and also my brother got married to a woman whose parents were Jews. They were in the concentration camp during the World War Two. I know more about Judaism but I want to know more about Islam.

R: So far, we talked about you are interested in and read about interfaith dialog and Islam. Do you have any Queer Muslim friend?

I: No, I only found a couple of people on the community of qruiser. A community for Scandinavian LGBT people. When I started to think about this interfaith idea, I asked around to some people if they knew any Queer Muslim. I got couple of names and I contacted them. There are some groups on qruiser called Arab initiative. Then Queer Church, Queer Mass started, then I involved in that thing.

R: I also went to Queer Mässan.

I: Did you like it?

R: Yes, there was a rabbi.

I: Yes and I missed it! (He regrets and gets angry with himself) I had been so happy when I heard that.

R: But there was no Muslim, I got a bit…

I: But he was the first Jew too, so you too were having the same premier there. (He laughs)

R: Oh, good.

I: Queermässan is very inclusive.

R: What do you expect Queer Muslim experiences to be?

I: There has been a project going on called HBQ-Hjärtat.

R: I heard about it.

I: And when that started, there was a seminar where they invited a young Jewish guy who is always in panels. (He making a detailed description of the Jewish person by giving his name)
There was also a minister from Finnish Orthodox Church and there was female Imam, an African, she was dark skinned from Muslim congregation in Stockholm. Even if she is talking as an Imam, she is expressing her own opinions. She was totally convinced that homosexuality is a sin, but I liked her because she was very clear and very open and she did not try to hide anything. She said this is what we believe, this is what Quran says. The problem with all kinds of churches is that people get upset. Oh this person is homosexual and this church says homosexuality is not accepted. And I say but you don’t need to belong to that church. You can go to another church. Every church in the world does not have to accept you because churches are allowed to believe in what they want to believe in. Otherwise we have one church but I realized that it is difficult to be homosexual or queer for Muslims living in Muslim countries. There are as many different Muslims as there are persons. The same goes for Christianity. Even if you go to the same Church, you don’t have to have the same faith because everyone had their own faith. It is very hard to talk about Islam or Christianity because they are many views on them. There are Muslims who think that homosexuality is okey and there are Christians who think it is the worst thing in the world. I would not blame Islam, I blame this person and that person.

R: What kind of relationships Queer Muslims might have with their families?

I: I get that a lot of queer Muslims, especially when they are young, have big problems with their families, they might get rejected. I think you must heard about the young woman here in Sweden was killed by her family ten years ago and that is what happens all over the world but is not exclusive for Islam. I don’t think that it has to do with religion, it has to do with culture.

R: Have you ever watched a documentary from a queer Muslim director for queer Muslims?

I: No. (She is smiling)

R: If I tell you that we are going to see a queer-Muslim documentary, what would be the reason motivating you seeing the documentary?

I: I hope to see really something positive, encouraging, something new to me because as I said, I do not know personally any Muslim and especially Queer Muslim. I am very curious and I very interested.
Interview 2 PART 2: After A Jihad for Love

R: What did you think about the documentary?

I: I think it was very good, very interesting, very educational and you really got close to the person and to their situations. It was good that there were many persons. It was not only one perspective.

R: Was there anything which you thought unexpected?

I: No. I could imagine all those kind of different situations.

R: How did you feel when the documentary ended?

I: I realized for like the thousand times, how privileged I am like living I do. I don’t think that you could have an easier life than I have here.

R: Did you feel particularly close to a character in the documentary?

I: Hmm. (She is thinking) I don’t think that it was because I could relate personally like there were similarities but I felt like the guy with glasses who was joking with his friends in the end when he got to Canada. He really appealed to me.

R: The Iranian guy?

I: Hmm. You could tell he was concerned about his friends and everybody and he joked a lot not to show too much I think, he was closed but then in the end he was the one who showed most feelings. He was very nice.

R: After we saw the documentary, how would you explain the word of Jihad?

I: I remember one man saying struggle and I think you can use it for any important fight or struggle you keep on doing for the most important things in your life. Not for using it for war but for a struggle.

R: If you think the word Jihad in mainstream media, how would you compare?

I: Oh there, they just use it for religious war, bad Muslims wanting to take control over the world because that is people thing.
R: How do you think documentary describe it?

I: I think it was clever to use the word “A Jihad for Love and like the Swedish word, kämp, and fight for important things, not just to control people.

R: Did you find something from yourself when it comes to your gender and faith?

I: Yes, the people who talk about God is Love and God is in me. So, there can’t be a mistake about who I am or anyone else is. It was really beautiful and I really like those two women living together and the mother.

R: The Turkish couple.

I: That mother was fantastic. She said it is fashion nowadays. (She is laughing) She seems having no problem with her daughters’ girlfriend.

R: What would say about Islam now?

I: Like all religions, they are always people who use religion to control others, to get power. They make laws and they make up things just to get their ways. It is so horrible that it works that way. (She seems confused and scared) How can it be possible to use religion in that way? I mean like five hundred years ago or something in Sweden, common people couldn’t protest against the priest because they couldn’t read the Bible. If anything make me doubt the goodness of the humanity is the way people use religion to get power. It is really horrible.

R: What will you say more about Islam’s being used in the hands of other people?

I: I think it is very well made documentary, I hope a lot of people will see it so then they can see all these people who live with Islam and really try hard to change the world and the people. But of course they are a lot of people who are against both Islam and homosexuality and I don’t think that we can reach them in another hundred years. I hope both homosexuals who are against Islam and think that Islam is hopeless case for them or people who are Muslims and who cant imagine homosexuality being right should watch it. It is not easy for these beautiful people. The other girl who was wondering if she would feel better if she was punished, it is heart-breaking that she would feel that way. She can’t feel that her God would think that she is good in the way she is. I hope she will have strong friends who will commute her. That is the worst part. If you believe
that God you believe in says that you are wrong, how can you feel that, you know like the other said, God is always with me, but she can’t feel like that, she feels so alone.

R: You just said that friends can help her. What else do you think help her or Queer Muslims?

I: I think the most important thing is having a Queer Muslim community to make each other stronger because you always need to feel that there are people like you. If I would come as a Christian Queer, they might not relate. Well, I can relate to people from other religions as a Christian but if you can’t, then you might need others as the same as yourself. The first thing they need is the community of people they can relate to, who are Muslims and Queers and who share their experiences. Like me. I felt lonely as a Christian in LGBT society first. When I found out LGBT society, I felt more alone than I felt within the Church as a transgender which was never a problem to me because I was convinced that my church would not be problem. After I found out LGBT society, I was insecure to tell people that I was Christian because it did not seem to be accepted. After Queer Church started, I was so relieved because I found somewhere it was okey to be Queer and Christian. So you need first little community.

R: What was the impression that made you think that it was not okey being a Christian and Queer?

I: Because in many situations there were LGBT people saying that Church is bad, religion is bad, they are ill people, they only want to oppress us. The same story, I was rejected by church, I was rejected by my Christian parents. Then I thought, opps I better shut up. I better don’t tell them that I am happy with my church and my parents. You need that little community, people like yourself I think to be secure and then you can widen it,

R: How would you compare Islam in the documentary to Islam in the mainstream media?

I: In mainstream media, we mostly read negative things, at least about homosexuality we read, how horrible they are in other countries. They are executing people. Even if they don’t say it straightly to your face, they don’t say that they do it because they are Muslims but in that part of the world, they do that. (She is emphasizing they) So it is actually connected to Islam anyway. On the other hand, the mainstream media at least in Sweden, I think they are quite good at not connecting Islam with lots of bad things. They try to sort of balance, they don’t say that all
Muslims are terrorists. When it is here, they write quite balanced but when it happens somewhere else, all those horrible people over there and they are Muslims. I think they are trying to be politically correct, they don’t write bad things about Muslim people here in Sweden because you are not allowed to, but you can write about things about Muslim countries and what they do to people over there.

R: What did you find about Islam in the documentary?

I: People actually want to discuss and want to see different perspectives. Like that little old lady in South Africa, who said that, we all must learn through life. She was fantastic and that makes you very happy to see there are people everywhere who really wants to learn new perspectives. They know that they have to think for themselves and that is very relieving.

R: How do you think about Islam’s approach to homosexuality now?

I: I do not think that it is Islam. I think governments and people with power just use religion to get power and oppress people. If you have power, you can condemn any number of things. You can condemn being black or being homosexual or being red hair or whatever. As long as you can force the law, you can control people, it doesn’t matter what. You can turn into it is immoral to have red hair or I don’t know it is immoral to grow potatoes. They just want to control people.

R: Did you observe any similarity or difference between Islam and Christianity’s attitude toward homosexuality?

I: Yes. I mean, arggg (she is expressing her anger by sighing) that man, he was so illogical. It was a little over one hour, there was a man who was some sort of religious leader. He was saying the other man to control it.

R: India

I: Yes. He did not make any sense because first he said that it is up to God and that if God forgives you everything is okey. Then he said we only punish people if it seems hopeless. But you just said it is up to God. It reminds me of a Swedish teather play which is based on paintings from Dalarna. I will tell you more about that later. In the play one man asks about the hell. I don’t know if it was an angel or God who told him hell is just people uses to punish other people.
There is no hell. There is no punishment. It is just people use it against others. You must read that. If you actually believe in hell, if you actually believe that God will punish some of us, then we don’t need them to punish here because it could be nothing worse than hell. Then why punishing them here?

R: I wonder your attitudes for Islam now.

I: I think I find it hard to talk about people in groups, it just made me realize more than ever that how people struggle. I am from Church of Sweden and people don’t talk about God in the same way. A lot of people, like that girl wondering if she would feel if she was punished. It is very different relation to God. If you have not experienced the feeling that God is ruling you, I don’t think that you can imagine it. I can see and feel that they feel it but I can’t really imagine what it is like. But I think that is much much much stronger statistically within Islam than within Christianity, at least like the Swedish Christianity.

R: Like the image of punishing God?

I: Yes, sort of controlling God. I am coming from the idea of Christianity and God who wants best for you.

R: As far as I understood, you are referring to the last scene where Imam said that we never learned to love God, we are always thought to fear God.

I: Yes, exactly. I mean we had that thing in Christianity too. Until 100 years ago people feared God much more and it is not the same anymore and I wish that for people in Islam. If you don’t feel that you are not close to God in the personal way, you stay limited in rituals, you don’t talk directly to God and you always had the feeling that God is watching you, that must be very hard.

R: After the documentary what would you say about Queer Muslims?

I: I definitely think that they struggle more for example than Queer Christians. They must be so strong not to give up. I mean give up in any sense. Not committing suicide, not marrying or whatever. Leaving your family behind, going to another country. Especially last year there has been a lot in media and Facebook about the deportation of LGBT people from Sweden to other countries. Last month I think there were two women deported and it is very good that media
reports about it all the time. I really don’t know what is wrong with Swedish laws. I am not so much in politics.

R: The general argument they have is that they can conceal that they are gay.

I: Yes but that is against everything that Sweden stands for officially. You are not supposed to conceal anything when you are here and how can you send people back? I am really happy that media frequently report about it and that is the most amazing thing about Facebook as well because the second something happens someone write about it on Facebook and the world knows and that is so good.

R: What can you tell me more about your feelings after watching the documentary?

I: It reminded me a couple of times in my life even before I realized that I was transgender, also I was realizing how lucky I was in different ways. Maybe ten years ago I was visiting a male friend and I was living as woman with a man and he was living with a woman, and they had children together. We were all friends, we were neighbors. They moved to the other side of Stockholm and then one day I was just visiting him because his girlfriend and their children, they were away for summer. I got there and we had a lovely day together. On my way home I just realized that there are so many countries in the world that would not do that. A woman visiting a man who had a family. No one could criticize me or take me to jail or beat me up or rape me. I could do what I wanted to do. Also after I realized that I was transgender, I realized I was lucky living in Sweden because no one forced me to marry someone when I was too young or no one forced me to live as a woman. That woman talked about she was married when she was sixteenth. There are even people who cannot talk to anyone about their situation. This woman from Kurdistan that I know was the second wife of her husband. She got married when she was 15. Her father was dead so her mother had to marry her to an older man who already had a wife. These two wives, they could not really write and then they came to Sweden. The older wife had four kids but the younger wife, who was in my age, could not become pregnant so her husband beat her up again, again and again. Luckily she met my mother. Once her husband beat her up very bad, she came to my mothers’ house, she did not want to report him to the police because if I do this, his family will kill me. She said that I just want to stay and talk a bit. Then she became a friend with my mother who said my youngest daughter is the same age as you. They became
really good friends. She went to a doctor and there was something very easy to fix and then she became pregnant. She is so strong. (She is crying) She is wonderful. She is fantastic. She told my mother in confidence what he did to her but only to my mother. With me, with my father, with my sister, she didn’t said anything but good about her husband. Hussain does this, Hussain does that.

R: What about Queer Muslims’ understanding to God?

I: I hope they really feel that they can feel that God is love and God is with them. Do you know quakers?

R: Qruiser?

I: No, quakers. Christian group that emigrated from England to America maybe 200 years ago. They were oppressed by the Church of England. There are quakers here in Stockholm. When I was about 20, my mother gave me a book and said this might be something for you. Quakers say that God is inner light in every person. So inner light in every person is God. When they gather for religious sermons, they don’t have a priest. The meetings are supposed to make you search for inner light in the company of others. If someone wants to speak, you are supposed to speak. You should speak because you want to share something which might be important. If someone else speaks, you are supposed to try to take it in to share it with that person. I really like them and my mother always said that if she lived in a city where there were quakers, she would have belonged to them but she was happy in the Church of Sweden too. Over 20 years ago, I was in couple of meetings too, they are fantastic, God is what you carry inside you and it is not like someone is watching over you. I think I got that from my mother.

R: What about Queer Christians? How do you think they are shown in mainstream media?

I: Well, we have this lesbian bishop you know. (she is laughing)

R: I am also laughing.

I: That is kind of good but I think people who are not religious and queer, they are still a bit old fashioned in their subconscious at least. Their first reaction might still be so you are lesbian and Christian. (her tonation here is one of surprise) How does that work? To me this is like saying so
you are a metal music fan and Christian, how does that work? Because people don’t think. If you tell them why would that be a problem, that is between me and God, you know, and then they feel stupid.

R: Do you think Queer Christians are shown in the media?

I: Yes, especially last years when the Church of Sweden and another group tried to show themselves properly during Pride Festival so that people can see that there are connections. In QueerMässan anyone can speak, the priest does only make the rituals. There are a lot of people talking about their struggle, being Christian and realizing that they were gay, transgender, polyamorous or whatever in their childhood, not being sure about what God accepts. I have been so lucky from my family. I have a cousin who is a lesbian. My parents adored her and they liked her most of my cousins. I never heard anything bad about gay people from my family so that’s why I could not believe when I heard that there are people who hate gay people.

R: If we go back to mainstream media and Queer Christians.

I: Aftonbladet and Expressen, they try to sell papers so they like to write sensational things and that is a big cheap. But still mainstream media in Sweden, they really try to be politically correct.

R: Can you give me an example from sensational reporting if you can remember any?

I: (He is thinking) There have been a couple of stories last year about priests. One is from Sweden and the other is from Finland who turned out to be trans-women. They then sort of created sensation “ah male priest turned out to be a woman and now she keeps on being a priest, wow” Then they started to ask ”can this really work?”, “is this really good?” But it is not that bad. (He is smiling)

R: What can be done for Queer Christians and Queer Muslims?

I: We have to believe that we can influence the religious organizations. If we think that we as Queer Christians and Queer Muslims should work outside the main Church or main mosque, I think that is a pity. We should try to work inside them and try again and again because if we work our own way, we can start our own new churches, mosques, groups and organizations but then we leave these people with their old believes. They will still be big. We can influence.
R: How will it be possible to influence?

I: You have to take it person by person, like the Imam in the South Africa. He sat down with people and talk to them. Then, some of them did not say much, some of them said something negative. And then suddenly that little woman said something fantastic. You talk to them, three of them. Then three of them. We should try to get closer, get into. Then of course we can have our QueerMässan just to feel safe and relaxed. We should try to make our ways into the big organizations and try to influence people there. We should take person to person and show them who we are and our way of life is good and get to know people. But it is hard because if you are afraid, you are afraid.

R: I had not thought about it actually.

I: Yes! I work with autistic children with also people having high and low functions at the same time. The thing you have to learn when you are working with these children is that the fear is the strongest feeling in a person. If you are afraid, you can’t reason, you can’t function. You always have to eliminate fear to get anyway. You can’t talk first, you have to find out what is the source of panicking and fear.

R: If you had a chance to make a documentary about the relationship between your religion and sexuality, what would you say?

I: It is not easy for me. I am queer and transgender. I am neither into man nor woman. I could fall in love with any kind I think. I am not sexual. I think there is so much focus on the sex, that makes people think on sexual act. That must be about feelings, loves and identities. If people just could forget about the sex … Sex it is not important, it is just a consequence. Most people who are in love have sex but this is not a big part. In some countries most homosexual men mostly meet in sexual acts contexts but if they could they would not meet for short sexual meetings , instead they would be in relationships. This is all they can have. But people are like “ooh they just meet for sex”. But that is not the main part. I don’t think so much about sex part, I mostly think about people and feelings.

R: Please let me reformulate the questions. You have God and love that will not be appreciated by the mainstream society.
I: Very hard. I have tried to reason with people and Every person’s belief is as strong as mine and if they strongly believe that it is wrong, it is so hard. I think the only thing we can really do is not reasoning with them but showing them with time this is my life, I live this way. In time, ask them if they can really say that is bad. Can’t you see this is good? I am not harming anyone, I am loving people

R: Can I take the last comments about A Jihad for Love?

I: I want to tell everyone about it. (She smiles)

R: Thank you so much for this interview.

I: It was so nice.

R: On my part too.

**Interview 3 PART 1: Before A Jihad for Love**

R: Can you present yourself shortly?

I: I am a man, 31. I live here in Stockholm and I work as a teacher.

R: Are you single or married?

I: (He is raising his voice happily and is smiling) I am dating

R: How would you position yourself when it comes to your gender?

I: I think I have a rather traditional point of view on this stuff. I am a man, a homosexual man which means I engage myself in romantic relationships with other men.

R: Your place of birth?

I: It is Poland. I live here in Sweden alone, my family lives abroad.

R: When did you come to Sweden?’

I: I was 20 when I came to Sweden.
R: I would like to ask you the view of Christianity on homosexuality? What does Christianity say about homosexuality?

I: There are many Christian groups. My Christianity is the liberal Christianity, open and including Christianity. I came from a country where the majority of Christians, Catholics, would probably not subscribe to the same views. I have no statistics but probably it is like that. Half of modern Christianity would condemn homosexuality, labeling it as a sin or something bas at least. You know the pseudo-liberal opinion that God hate the sin, not the sinners. With this many Christians call themselves open-minded about homosexuals but this is lie. If there is a loving God without any condition then God must have not had this view. This is my view. Historically, Christianity has been rather against homosexuality.

R: Did you say that God would not promote this idea?

I: It is hard to know what God promotes or not. As far as I believe, God loves everyone. This restriction is made by humanity not by God.

R: Can you relate to the view of those people?

I: I think I can try to understand them that their starting point is to help homosexuals because they see homosexuality as a kind of sickness, something that can be cured. By saying hate the sin, not the sinner; they can try to sound someone who can cure you from homosexuality. They are trying to say that there is nothing with you, we can help you, we can cure you, we can bring you to the other right part of Christianity. Their starting point is wrong. They start from the assumption that homosexuality is wrong, it is against the natural law, or it is against the social norms, it is something that needs to be repaired as a sickness or disease. This is definitely not my view. If someone loves somebody and if it does not cause any injury, if people don’t hurt anyone, let them be.

R: How does it feel when you hear their starting point?

I: I never met people like that face to face. I have never been told personally that I should go and kill myself or go to a therapy but when I hear opinions like that I get very sad. I don’t get angry or furious or anything. I definitely get sad because there is a power and balance when people say that our love is better because our love is one from a male to a female or from a female to a male,
your love is worse because it involves same sex. Again back to what I said previously, does it really matter whom you love? If you love this person, if you don’t hurt anyone, if two adult people agree to love each other or to have sex each other and if it this doesn’t disturb anyone and let them be. ‘

R: What happened to your faith when you found out that you were a homosexual man?

I: The question is wrong. (He is laughing) I found that I was a faith after I found that I was homosexual. I was not a believing person when I found that I was homosexual.

R : Can we talk about how come?

I: Yes, I come from a country where most people are religious but my family and my friends were rather atheist and agnostic. I even participated in religious classes both in primary and secondary school without being engaged because I didn’t believe the words that were said there. It was not like here in Sweden that you have religious science. There was no talking about philosophy and ethics just memorizing stuff from Catholicism. I had no connection to the Church. A couple of years ago, I discovered that something was happening with me, a growing interest in spirituality and religiosity. Now, I found the Church back with a more reflected spirituality. In my childhood and in my teenage years, my grandma and grandpa wanted me to go the Church and I did it because my friends participated the religious school so I did it but it was not because I really believed in anything. As an adult, I rediscovered.

R: How do you keep your homosexuality and your faith that you newly found?

I: Absolutely no problem for me. (He is smiling). I found a church here in Sweden that where the majority at least does not seem to bother about whom I love and whom I sleep with. The Church does not try to tell me that it is wrong what I do. Of course making this journey from a Catholic society to a free person in a liberal country, a very secular country like Sweden thought me that there is no single Christianity as a monolith but it is a buffet and you chose. You have your personal relation to The Bible as the source of God and then you chose which group you want to belong to according to your belief simply. It is not said anywhere in the Bible that there is any single form of Christianity holding monopoly for explaining the proper Christianity.

R: Have you ever come out to Christian community?
I: No, no, no.

R: Do you know other Queer Christians here in Sweden?

I: Yes

R: How did you get to know them?

I: Mostly through internet or personal contact.

R: On the internet, what kind of communication are you in?

I: There is one big Swedish community, qruiser, qx where some of my acquaintances come from. If you are on qruiser, it is never about religion or topics like that, it is much more superficial. When you start chatting people, you discover that they may have same views or similar views as yours, that how you come to meet them. It is not always about sex. A lot of people use internet to have sexual acts but you can also get friendship and just a good conversation.

R: What about religion?

I: I am not shy about my religion. It is a part of my life. If someone asks my plans for weekend, I am saying well I am going out on Saturday then to the church on Sunday. That’s how the religious part of the conversation starts so I am not afraid about it.

R: How would you describe the relationship between your faith and homosexuality?

I: I don’t see them as two separate things. I would never say that the one disturbs the other. When I sit at the Church, I never think that it would be much better if I was not gay. When I am partying with my friends, I never say to myself that I can’t look at naked men because I am Christian. This is not Christianity is about. This is not homosexuality is about. For me there is no tension between sitting on church pew and looking at naked men dancing.

R: What about their co-existence then?

I: There is for instance Queer Mässan. I think there is definitely a place for homosexual people in the Christian Church just because they are as the same as the other believers. There is no difference. Sexual preference should not be a criteria for who is allowed to participate in
religion. Since they are both parts of my identity, I demand my family, my friends, my partners accept two sides of me. There are many sides of me. I am not only a homosexual, a Christian. I am also a teacher, I like cooking. There are so many aspects of one person.

R: What about queer people who do not believe in any kind of religion of Abrahamic tradition?

I: I have friends who are not religious but who accept me as I am and they are queer as well. Of course sometimes they can mock me (he is laughing). They can get ridiculous and they can make jokes but I am pretty confident about my religion. If someone starts to make jokes about religion, it is about that person but not about me.

R: I wondered now about the jokes.

I: I can’t remember anything special but especially they are about my Catholic background. Non-religious people in Catholic countries mock the Christian religion all the time. I think on Facebook, this morning I saw some humoristic drawings, two priests looking at the Gay Parade, their conversation starts: “Oh my God what are they doing, they are sinners, especially this one” and then the other says “which one?”, he answers: “the cute one over there”. (He is laughing) I am not bothered. I am not that kind of serious person that those kind of jokes would disturb me.

R: Can you compare your relationship with Queer Christians to non-religious Queer Community?

I: I don’t want to force anyone to see me as a believer person in the first hand. If they will go to hell (he pauses) I do not believe in a hell. They can do whatever they want to do. If God wants to bring anyone to himself or herself, he or she will do it because he or she is Almighty. There are also many different approaches to God and spirituality. Even if some people might look non-religious, I don’t know what is happening in them. Maybe they will discover the same thing as I did. One day they will get up and feel like going to Church. For me there is absolutely no problem to have contact with non-religious queer people because I don’t feel the urge to be the missionary to turn them to Jesus.

R: You don’t experience anything else than jokes.
I: It is about my close friends. My friends are highly educated and open minded. It would be very strange if someone from those came and said “I think you are sick not because you are homosexual but because you believe in God”. Then I will answer: “You are sick because you are homosexual” and that will be fair. (He is laughing) So I never experienced anything like that.

R: Now we are going to talk a little bit about Islam. How do you perceive Islam?

I: Since I work with immigrants, lots of them come from Islamic countries. I have a very good opinion about them. Especially we don’t have any terrorist. (He is laughing) We don’t have any other woman-haters or wife-beaters or so on. Of course their mentality are different but American evangelicals can also have very different mentality than other Christians in Europe. There is this Islam image from media, from TV, from newspapers. These are my two sources of knowledge about Islam, my everyday experience is based on these two sources.

R: How are Muslim represented in the media?

I: Especially what happened 10 years ago, 11 years ago in New York, there is some kind of propaganda against Islam in majority of media and I think this is very unfair. There is Islam and Islam, there are people and people. Even if one percent of Muslims are terrorists there is still 99 who are not. This is a disadvantage for them of course. They all reinforce many kinds of fears and xenophobia between religions.

R: How are Muslims in your personal experience?

I: They are first of all anyone else, they are human beings. They look different because they come from another part of world. I work for instance with a lot of people from Iraq. If you look at them, you can’t tell if they are Muslims or Christians. They look the same, they behave the same. The eyes that I meet everyday are very honest and very nice.

R: What about media’s representation of Islam and Muslim?

I: Mostly you can read about Muslims when something bad happens. If there is a terror attack, it is turned into a meeting between Muslims and Christians. Here in Sweden, Islam is related to hedermord. What do you call it?

R: Honour murders, killings I think.
I: You know what I mean. Exactly. That also promotes a lot of discussion about Muslims in Western society. Cultural shocks and clashes and stuff like that.

R: What about Swedish mainstream media?

I: In Sweden, media tries to not to take part and not to demonize Muslims as much as another part of the world. I must say that maybe it is my naïve belief that Sweden is kind of better than the rest of the world. When I read polish newspapers and Swedish newspapers on the internet, I got the idea that some explanations of things happening around the world tend to be less tolerant in Poland than here in Sweden.

R: Is there any point in your life when your attitude towards Islam changed?

I: Before the terror attacks in 9/11, I had definitely no relation to Islam because I had lived for 20 years in a country where Islam is not present. There was little Muslim community far from the place where I live. After the attacks I had this everyday experience of Islam here in Sweden and I think this helped me not to see every Muslim as terrorist. After 9/11 the representation of Islam was definitely very negative.

R: What about Queer Muslims? Do you have any personal experience?

I: I don’t know any. I read once or twice during the pride here in Sweden. There was a queer Muslim association.

R: In the media?

I: Yes in the media,

R: In the queer media?

I: Yes.

R: How were they shown?

I: Positively. Someone who was trying to bring the possibility of being a Muslim and queer together. As far as I remember it was about fighting for rights within the Muslim community here in Sweden.
R: What about Queer Muslims in mainstream media?

I: I did not see anything. (He is thinking) No, I don’t remember any.

R: What do you expect Queer Muslim experiences to be?

I: Probably this is a prejudice that is coming from media, I would expect them to have more difficult to out themselves in their Muslim community than Queer Christians and this is based on media representation of Islam. I am very influenced by media. I believe that Islam as a religion is less tolerant than Christianity and some Christian groups. Again, I experienced nothing in my daily life so this is only speculation.

R: Have you ever watch a documentary about Queer Muslims?

I: No

R: If I told you that we are going to see a documentary about Queer Muslim experiences in mostly Middle Eastern societies, what would motivate you to see the documentary?

I: Curiosity. It is interesting. Just to learn something new. To compare it to what I just said. To switch my opinions or I would get my opinions confirmed. Definitely I would like to watch the documentary.

**Interview 3 PART 2: After A Jihad for Love**

R: What did you think about the documentary?

I: It was very interesting, very moving, al lot of feelings. It is not a documentary full of facts.

R: Why did you find interesting?

I: First of all because it revealed aspects of a culture that are not easy to see. First of all, it is a culture far away from here, it is a distant culture. Then we are talking about things that are forbidden in that culture. They are secrets. I think that documentary opened for a discussion whether or not homosexuality is absent in Muslim community. By simply stated that it is forbidden, you don’t get rid of it.

R: Did you identify with any character in some ways?
I: Well, for example those young Iranian boys. I told you that I don’t have any Muslim friends but in my work, at the school, I saw some gays from their appearance reveal that they are homosexuals. I knew that they are from Muslim countries; I could recognize them in these guys rather than myself. The good receiving the two Turkish lesbian couple got from one of them’s mother is similar to every time I present my partner to my parents. But again the situation of lesbian women in Turkey, their statement, accent for disconnecting religion from state makes the situation of minorities like homosexual people better. The situation of gay Imam in South Africa is similar. He lives in a country where religion is not connected to the state or laws. On the other hand, we got examples from Egypt and from Iran where the law is based on religion. The persecution of homosexuals there was much more severe.

R: Was there anything unexpected ?

I: Yes, those Muslims from Pakistan, they were talking about the homosexual love of two religious figures.

R: Sufi mystics

I: Yes, yes. (Surprisingly he is reacting). I knew about Sufism and dervishes, I had some idea about the case of Iran before the revolution but I had absolutely no idea about this, sufí and Hindu merge.

R: What did you think when you heard about it?

I: Wow great news! Men were being bathed in rose leaves. Was it their shrine?

R: It was their coffins.

I: Apparently they are Muslims but this was a very different way right?

R: They were sufí mystics.

I: But can they be Muslims?

R: Yes, Sufism is a branch within Islam. Sufism is also very between Islam and Christianity.

I: It is very mystic too.
R: In Turkey, for instance you are not allowed to practice Sufism as an official religion because the official Islam sanctioned by Turkish Republic is Sunni Islam. How did you feel when the documentary ended?

I: I would like to learn what happened to people. Especially those two Iranian guys who didn’t get their permission to leave Turkey for Canada. I would like to learn what happened with South African Imam because the community seemed to be very open-minded and they kind of approved him but I would like to know what would happen in two or three years later. Will they still be that enthusiastic or will they go back? Sometimes, you are very enthusiastic with new ideas but then you reevaluate them and it is not so difficult to come back to old habits. What happened to all those people living in Egypt or in France? Those two girls and the guy from Egypt because that part of the story did not end in the documentary. We partially saw what happened. But maybe the filmmakers did not know how their stories ended.

R: They filmed this documentary under censor so it is not for them to film it.

How would you explain the word of Jihad now?

I: Well, the Imam said Jihad means struggle, especially the struggle with your self, not necessarily religious war. Then, there was the sentence that Islam is a religion of peace. I knew that. So the conjunction of them is that Jihad can be a peaceful struggle as well but it depends how you interpret and reason about it. You might reason independently or you might reason in the way you are taught to think. Jihad is a struggle, definitely it is a struggle. They have to fight, they have to struggle for their own sake. In some countries, it is easier for them, in another country it is more difficult. It is struggle when you discover that you are different from other boys and girls and this is not one which is taught to you. It is not the one which you see the majority of people do. In addition to that, you have to struggle against to your belief in loving God and against people who tell you that even the love of God is limited.

R: How would you compare the representation of Jihad in the documentary to mainstream media’s representation?

I: Here, Jihad is a very personal, private level to free themselves, to be free from the oppressions, or from the troubles they have with laws or with the fact that the religion does not accept
homosexuality. In the mainstream media, Jihad is only a fight between religions, a fight for spreading Islam around the world. The Jihad in the documentary and Jihad in the mainstream media are two different Jihads. I understand why the documentary got this title. It is a fight for those people in the documentary.

R: We talked about your experiences about Islam coming from mainstream media. After having seen the documentary how would you compare them to Islam you see in the documentary?

I: I would say that Muslims are exactly the same way as Christians. This personal view was confirmed with the documentary. I saw people who were not accepted by their communities, by their societies but they were definitely accepted by their mothers. All those homosexual guys from Iran and Egypt, they turned to their mothers and their mother never pushed them away. They were crying on the phone together. Of course we don’t know how much they knew, but if you came to the stage that you have to leave the country, their homosexuality must be known. They were sentenced to prison yet still they talked to their mothers. Their mothers accepted them for whom they are.

Going back to your question, I got a perfect confirmation of my thought that what you hear on the official level is always only part of the truth. What happens on the personal level may differ a lot from the official practice.

R: What would you say about Islam’s attitude towards homosexuality after your viewing experience?

I: This open-mindedness of the Islamic community and the South African Imam were not probably representative for the whole Muslim community in South Africa. It was only one congregation, it was not whole country. People in India and Pakistan seemed to be more open-minded. In Egypt and Iran, the countries which are strictly Muslim, the law was based on religion.

R: What kind of differences and similarities did you observe between Islam’s attitude to homosexuality and Christianity’s attitude towards homosexuality?

I: A lot of similarities. All that talking about unnatural desire and sin, that man and woman are created for each other. They lose the problem of homosexuality by simply telling young people
to go and get marry or to go to psychologist is something that Christianity has still been through depending on which kind of Christianity we are talking about. The liberal Christian Church in western world, they have been through that. There are some churches that are getting more and more liberal. There are many other churches that have to go through this process. The little reformed churches in Poland, they are at the moment trying to open up to be more accepting and trying not to condemn people for their sexual preferences. Then you have those churches that are more conservative but sooner or later they will have to face this process as well. They are looking for freedom in those countries like Canada not because they were Christian but because they were secular.

R: What kind of similarities and differences did you observe between Queer Christian understandings of God and your understanding of God?

I: It was the lesbian woman who points out that Islam allows you to love someone as long as you don’t harm someone. A Muslim lesbian in France said that on the day of judgment, she will face God and tell him that she simply loved a woman but she has not harm anyone. So this is also how I feel and think about God. It is in the deep nature of both religions. Both Islam and Christianity are ontologically very similar when it comes to God being the father of every creation. God is the creator of everything and this means that there is a reflection of God in everything and divine aspect of everything. This means that if I am queer, God also must be a little bit queer right? Because I am from God’s image, this must be a feature of God as well and it is good. I am not doing anything harmful anyone. Those guys from Iran also believed that they were created from the image of God too. I also definitely believed that I am created from the image of God. That is what my religion says too. Together with Judaism, they are very close to each other. They are much closer than the other religions are. I remember reading somewhere that one scholar of religion described Islam as the first Protestantism.

R: What kind of ideas about Queer Muslims did you gain from the documentary?

I: As I thought they exist. They have very similar problems with Queer Christians about the struggle against the idea that homosexuality is something bad. In addition to that, they have to struggle against the state which does not protect them. They sentence them, they make them migrate.
R: What can be done for Queer Muslims and Queer Christians?

I: Definitely, one thing Imam said: start thinking independently. Independent thinking and then chose the path that is best for you without harming other people. That is my advice mostly to religious people who feel to oblige to condemn other people. It is fine that you have beliefs but don’t try to make the other people believe in the things you believe. Other people may have a different relationship to God. It is not so sure that yours is correct relation. My second advice directed to queer Christians and Muslims is that absolutely possible to be both religious and queer. You don’t need to give up your hope.

R: What kind of initiative can be taken by Queer Christians and Queer Muslims?

I: Again from Swedish point of view, I will say they have to start associations together. They have to form unions and so on. This is allowed in Sweden and in many Western societies but not in many Middle Eastern countries. It is hard to say what Iranian gays can do because they can’t even come out in Iran. They cant come out to each other which is making the situation harder for them. It is forbidden. They wont solve this problem on their own, they have to get other people, non-queer people on their side. As soon as the non-queer people get rid of their prejudices and ignorance, the unwillingness to other people’s otherness will be lessened. A religion, especially un-reflected kind of religion can be a barrier there, it can be a limit. It is hard to tell what Queer Muslims can do because they have so little space to take any action; they are limited by their governments and by their people’s ignorance.

If the state showed them that they are accepted, then it would be much more easier on the individual level for those people to accept that being queer is okey but if only it is not a state religion. A state religion created the situation where both the state and religion forbid homosexuality. This means that the situation is hopeless because you have nowhere to escape. Also, there is probably no country that then state laws forbid homosexuality but religion accepts. That situation does not exist, I don’t think so. But if you have a religion condemning something and a religion which does not condemn, then at least you can escape from religion.

R: Is there something more you want to say about the documentary?
I: This documentary showed me that I live in a very privileged society when I compare myself to the most of the societies in the world. I leave in a state which does not condemn homosexuality. I can more or less open about my homosexuality and feel secure about my country. I can even go to a church that won't throw me out or sentence me death because I am homosexual. It is an enormous privilege. After seeing this documentary I am even more thankful to that. It also shows that people sometimes have to go hell to get the point where I am today. That is very sad and I wish I could do something. It doesn’t mean that I can’t do something. I can. It is just I can’t reflect on what I could do as a single person. I think that this is a documentary that opens your eyes for the problem, for the fact that Islam is heterogeneous, the understandings are changing from country to country. How much power it gets in society can be different in South Africa and Turkey where the states are not religious. This documentary also opens your eyes to all the struggle homosexual people go through accepting themselves for whom they are, fighting for being accepted by the world around them and, how they do it, and what they have to go through. You can learn from this documentary because sometimes you don’t reflect about that, you just leave your home in the morning, you are at work and you talk to your colleagues about your boyfriend, it is something very natural, you meet with your boyfriend in the afternoon, and then you chat with your gay friends on Facebook but you don’t really think that there are places in the world where this is totally unthinkable. You can’t be an open gay, you don’t have access to gay media. Tomorrow, at 11 o’clock, I will be in my church, it is okay. I am with the priest who is by the way woman. It would be totally incredible if I talk to a lot of Muslim people and told them I am gay Christian and am going to Church and there is a woman priest. Documentaries like this one, they help you hold on and think what we have and the other people don’t have.

R: How would you compare the Imam’s attitude towards the story of Sodom and Gomorah to your experiences with Swedish priests?

I: I don’t know any minister of the church who explains this story in a traditional way. I don’t know the story in Quran.

R: The same.

I: One of the modern ways to interpret it is that the story was a condemnation of rape. I don’t know maybe this Imam was simply inspired by these Christian thoughts. I have no idea but it
sounds similar to the queer interpretation of the Biblical story that it is not about homosexuality but it is about corruption, molestation and inhospitality.

R: This Imam has a organization in South Africa, it is called Inner Circle. You can read the literature online.

I: Hmm.

R: If you could do your own documentary about the homosexuality and religion, what would you like to say to the rest of the world?

I: It is always impossible to give an objective view in a documentary because the views of filmmakers always influence how you portray the reality. If I was doing a documentary, I would like to show it is okey to be gay and to be a believer at the same time to give help people who can’t see this. I would like to do a documentary about liberal Jewish movement, liberal Christian Church about groups like you mention, like Inner Circle. It would be a very subjective and a very narrow picture of the whole because I as I said before most of the Christianity is not as open-minded as the Church of Sweden. What we just saw from the Islamic communities, they are so inclusive as in Turkey or in South Africa. As far as I now Judaism is not open-minded to homosexuality.

R: Thank you so much for the interview.

I: Thank you. (He is smiling)

**Interview 4 PART 1: Before A Jihad for Love**

R: Can you present yourself shortly?

I: I am 34 and I was born here in Stockholm, in the southern part of Stockholm. I live here in Stockholm. I am a Lutheran Christian. I am a woman. I am bisexual and I would consider myself as queer.

R: Your marital status?

I: I am married to man and I have one kid.

R: Would you like to say something about your occupation.
I: I am a minister in the Church of Sweden, in the Lutheran denomination.

R: What is the view of Christianity on homosexuality?

I: In general I would say it differs between denominations. In general we say that the Catholic Church as a whole is against it. On personal level, there are many people who are against it. There are also of course some priests that are against it. Orthodox Church is again against it. Lutheran Church that I belong to have a big divide: Evangelical Lutherans are strongly against it. On the other hand the middle of the way Lutherans divides themselves into different nations. The most liberal attitudes are probably found in the middle-of-the-way Lutherans.

R: Can you relate to the bad ideas about homosexuality in some Christian denominations?

I: No, not at all. I am getting sad because it is totally against my theology. I think they misunderstand a lot of things and most of them are really bad at interpreting the Bible. So they can certain parts of the Bible and they don’t think how these can be used in relation to other parts.

R: Can you talk about your theology when it comes to homosexuality and Christianity?

I: Some people would consider as liberal theologian, I don’t know maybe. I would consider myself as queer theologian. I have read a lot about the Old Testament Theology. For me it is important to read the Bible and relate it to the time it was written and relate it to the time we live now. The old text must be put in the context where they were first being used. I find it very hard to find any place in the Bible that is strictly against homosexuality because the places where people use against homosexuality are mostly related to the cultic usage that Christians don’t have. For instance, the places in the Old Testament where most people use against homosexuality, parts that men should not sleep with men but men should sleep with women. There are also a lot of places where you should not cut your beard, you should not wear some cloths of fabric. These are the rituals for very specific contexts. The Old Testament was very obsessed about the child birth, the most important thing in society is to procreate and of course homosexuals did not fit into that norm. There are also instances in the Old Testament where you can use that there are other instances. Those instances are skipped over when people wanted to be very strong about it. Like David and Jonathan, their love for each other were stronger than
any man’s love for any woman. When that parts come, people tend to react “No, that’s not how you are supposed to read it” bla bla.

R: When did you feel that you were bisexual?

I: No big deal.

R: What happened to your faith when you discovered that you were bisexual?

I: Not much really. I was grown up in a context where it was not a big deal.

R: Can you tell me more about the place of sacred in your sexuality? How would you describe your understanding of Christianity and your being queer?

I: If you meet people at work, you are different. You are another person at home. I mean it is the same person but it is an overlap. For me the most important part when it comes to queer aspect is that people should be welcomed, people should be strong in the Church. When it comes to queer side of the situation, the important thing is always rereading the text and reinterpreting the situation. You should always see the minority that you leave behind like Jesus would. You know weird people.

R: Have you ever come out to Christian community?

I: I guess I am fairly known in the Church. Most people know I guess. I think I never had a bad attitude because of that. Mostly if they don’t like, this is because of my opinions. I think I have a hard time in general society. I think it is for some reason a bit easier for women. It is more accepted to be queer women than queer men because everything has to do with gender roles that men should be manly men.

R: How do you get to know other Queer Christians and build your relations with them?

I: Mostly, we get to know each other through networks such as the queer church. People tend to group without noticing, they understand that the other people have the same opinions and start talking to each other. We have a queer church every second Tuesday but of course we socialize on Facebook too.

R: When you socialize on Facebook, what kind of activities are you involved?
I: I think it is a mixture of sending each other interesting links and things coming up. Some sharing about the faith, we discuss together about different aspects of our faith and sometimes if you are down you can also ask for some prayer or something. It is like a combination of support and a general level of socializing typical on Facebook.

R: How is your relation to media, when it comes to your use of media for religion?

I: I have been using it for a very long time now. I was guiding a online forum where people were asking questions about Christianity. I am the first generation who started to use computers and internet to socialize about religion. For the people who came after me, it is very usual but for the old people it is very difficult. I find many people and I can download many different Biblical resources. You can also find communities to hang out with.

R: Have you ever talk to a non-religious queer person about your faith and sexuality?

I: Yes. I am very open about whom I am and I am not a missionary type. I hang out in a queer context where people are not religious and if they ask me I am open about it. I am not making propaganda unless they ask me.

R: How are their reactions?

I: I would say it is more difficult to come out as a Christian than coming out as a queer because in Sweden Christianity or religion in general has not had a very natural place in people’s lives since 1950’s. We are the most secularized country in Europe. People can accept very strange views from other people when it comes to politics and sexuality but if you tell them you are a Christian then they automatically assume a lot of things about you. Like if you say that you are a Muslim, they automatically see you in a certain way.

R: What do they assume?

I: If they don’t know that I am a queer person, they automatically assume that I am against queers. If they know that I am queer, then they are like “how can you be a queer and Christian?” They think there are some implosions in my head. Interestingly people have a very poor knowledge on the Bible seem to think that they know what is in the Bible. Most people say but it is against the Bible. Then I say “have you ever read the Bible and do you know what it says
in the Bible?”. Sometimes most fanatical people about the Bible can be people that don’t really believe in it. Most people want to believe that the reality is structured and if someone comes and breaks up with the picture, they get really nervous. Because they learned in this way. The Swedish convention about religion is that religion is old fashioned and it is going to disappear eventually, religion is not liberal and enlightened, religion cannot develop. If you tell them you are a queer and Christian, they get very confused.

R: Against this background, how would you describe your understanding of religion in contemporary society?

I: I think that most people that are religious tend to see religion as strict and structured. But as Muslim or Christian practitioner, you always relate to religion in different ways. Some people relate to it in a very strict way, other people relate to it in a very constructive way. For me, it is very clear that religion can be very a positive force in society. I lived in country where everybody is religious, they don’t ask you if you are religious but which religion you have. Especially in Africa, there are bad and good aspects of religion. People sometimes tend to see religion that we belong together and we have to work together. In secularized countries like here in Sweden, we tend to get religion very individualized by separating society from religion.

R: Again it will be very general question, how do you perceive Islam?

I: I perceive Islam mostly as religion because I think there is a huge difference between considering yourself as a religious Muslim and a cultural Muslim. We don’t get much positive images from media; we don’t get much Islam as a whole. It is up to you to find out that Muslim people are like the other people. I think it is very positive that we are getting more and more people as a natural part of Swedish society because I think it is positive for the Swedish society as a whole and also it is important to see that religion can be natural force in people’s life. I am afraid that I am not a very good Quran reader but I read Muslim theology and there are some parts that I totally love.

R: Can you talk about it a little bit?

I: Mostly I think the Muslim community and Islam has a very proud history. It was a very enlightened culture for a very long time. They had a very literal culture. With literacy and music,
it was a very important culture. Later in some parts, I think, it is stagnated. There was a huge stagnation. A lot of Muslim countries are fighting with that stagnation right now. I think Islam and Christianity were like two racing horses when it comes to development. For a long time, Islamic society was much more culturally developed than Christianity. Right now, we don’t know it is going to be slow.

R: How would you describe the relationship between Islam and Christianity?

I: For a while there was a big collaboration then with the Crusades, Christian people behaved like assholes. They have been separated for a while. Now, they start to meet again. In some instances they are alike but there are also different in many aspects. This difference is not only about religious but it is about cultural developments like the Enlightenment, politics, free speech. I think Islam took one turn and Christianity turned another. Now they are going to meet again, we will see what happens.

R: What would you say about the representation of Islam in Swedish media?

I: It is poor and I think they make a lot of attempts to make a proper representation of people but it is like the representation of Christians. Sometimes they are picking a Christian or a Muslim person and show them to everybody and tell people that “they are people too” (She is saying jokingly sarcastically) Most of the time, they just spend a lot of time to feeding the questions that are not really interesting for most of the Muslim people. Hijab for instance. They are making a big fuss about it. Generally in the wake of June 22, in Norway, people got ashamed. I was looking at BBC that day; we have BBC News at home. They said that it was possibly a Muslim suicide bomber and then they realized that it was a White Norwegian guy. This gave people to discuss what it is the picture. Before that they were very one-sided, they were mostly discussing about poor oppressed women.

R: Do you have personal experiences with Muslims?

I: I don’t think that I have Muslim friends here in Sweden right now. No. I used to have; I used to live in Jerusalem. I have friends coming from Muslim contexts and countries. I don’t have any Muslim fried as believer and practitioner.

R: What kind of sources can you talk about, sources where you learn about Islam?
I: There are different forums for dialogue between faiths, I am interested in them. There are sometimes conferences about theology of religion. Books of course.

R: Is there any point in your life where your attitude towards Islam and Muslims changed?

I: I started to like Islam more when I used to live in Jerusalem actually. I had studied a lot Jewish theology and I liked it but when I came to Jerusalem, I had many bad experiences about Jewish people. Muslim people I have met were very nice. I had a better understanding about Islam and Muslims in Jerusalem. Maybe that is like compared to the Jewish people (She is laughing) The Muslim people that I have met in Jerusalem are very interested in discussing theology and in reforming Islam towards like a more open and liberal society. Maybe I have met with good people. A lot of Jewish people I have met there, they were not interested in dialogue.

R: Do you have any Queer Muslim friend?

I: Yes, I know some people who are queer and cultural Muslims.

R: What do you expect Queer Muslim experiences to be?

I: I think it is harder to find a social context for Queer Muslims. In that sense, the Swedish secularized society, it is easier to find a context like queer mass. I think it is harder for queer Muslims to group together in Sweden. My experience with some of the people who came to Sweden is that maybe they were very liberal in their home countries but when they got to Sweden, they got an identity crisis and sometimes they started to be very Muslim. Maybe they were not wearing hijab in their home country, but here in Sweden they start to use it as an important identity criterion. Like Swedes who go abroad, they get very Swedish and start to go to the Church. People going abroad start to ask themselves what parts of my cultural heritage I want to keep. But also here in Sweden we live the second and the third generations of Muslims. Over time, it will be easier for people to spread out.

R: What kind of relationships might Queer Muslims have with their families?

I: I think it depends on the individual family. Like the families of Queer Christians, they might get sad or happy.

R: Have you ever seen a documentary about Queer Muslims?
I: No I haven’t

R: If I say that we are going to see a queer-Muslim documentary, what reasons would motivate you to see the documentary?

I: Because it is interesting, I would watched it if it was on TV.

R: Okey then now we can see the documentary.

**Interview 4 PART 2: After A Jihad for Love**

R: What did you think about the documentary?

I: It was very good because it portrayed different people and sexes from so many different Muslim countries in the world. It was showing their different problems. For instance, the Imam in the beginning, he has no problem living in South Africa per se, he is from the only LGBT-friendly country in Africa. They have very good laws. He was having problems because he was a front figure but people living in Iran or in Egypt have another problem. The guy living in India also did not have a problem with living in the society but he had a problem with his own belief. He was questioning himself whereas the people from Egypt or Iran, they were persecuted. These problems can be common denominator for different queers, not only Muslim queers but queer Christians. For some reason these people fight and the struggle is going on in themselves. For others the problem is community, for others the problem is country. It was a very diverse picture.

R: Was there anything you find unexpected in the documentary?

I: Except the penguin biting the little girls’ finger (she is laughing) Not really, it was really nice to Sufism and dervishes again. I really appreciate that. Oh (she is remembering) there was one thing, that figure. Was it in Pakistan, no? Madho Lal and his lover, I did not know about that. He was very revealed religious figure, I didn’t know about him but there are different roots in different parts of the world.

R: How did you feel when the documentary ended?

I: I think the end is very positive. I really liked what the Imam Hendricks said about Ijtihad. I also really liked the reception of him in the meeting, it was positive. He is talking about homosexuality to Islam social workers. There were several of them very open to discuss it.
R: Did you feel close to any character in the documentary?

I: To Imam. We have the same occupation, we have to be official figures and we have to discuss with people. The other people, their problems were in a such a different nature.

R: After having watched the documentary, how would you explain the word of Jihad?

I: Not different from before. I knew it before. Jihad for is a very important concept but I think most of the people tend to think that Jihad is a religious war. I know that it is a struggle. For me the title of the movie was really so good. It was very adequate.

R: Why do you think people tend to think Jihad as a religious war?

I: There was big issues between Western society and Arab society or Muslim society. A lot of Westerners when they hear this concept get the idea of religious war. It can be a religious war of course but it is only one of the several aspects.

R: How would you compare Jihad in the documentary to Jihad in mainstream media?

I: Nowadays, most people are aware that Jihad is not the thing people thought it was but it is also a popular word among right-wing people in Sweden. The Muslims are fighting a Jihad in our schools and our societies. It is not a word the common media would use because it is now transformed into a word crazy right-wing people start to talk about Muslims. When I was growing up in the 1980’s, it was used in a context where you want to kill a westerner in media.

R: After having seen the documentary what would you say about Islam and Muslim community?

I: Islam is very diverse like Christian community. The problems they face were different depending on which country they were living in. For instance, it is not easy for a Christian to be gay in Russia. It is fairly easy to be gay in Sweden. They have the same differences. It is probably easier to gay in South Africa where community and state are protecting you but not in Egypt where maybe you have a problem with your congregation.

R: How do you think one can compare the representation of Islam in this documentary to the way it is represented in mainstream media?
I: This is more diverse. Mostly in mainstream media, when you document Islam, you document a problem. Like Christianity, at least the mainstream media in Sweden anyway. When you talk about it, you usually talk about problems, they are not interested in portraying everyday life. They are more interested if there is a problem with it. They sometimes use it in comparison to something else, for instance Christianity versus secularism. They don’t show it by itself.

R: What would you about your experiences about Islam’s attitude to homosexuality? When you compare your previous experience to the documentary?

I: The only experience that I had with this topic was that when they started to discuss whether they were going to make marriage open to same-sex couples in Sweden. There was a debate with a Swedish Imam. He is a convert by the way. The imams were talking about the Quran and the hadiths and that they are not very open to interpretation. Then, he had an interpretation but he wouldn’t recognize it as an interpretation. Sometimes I still laugh, because you don’t consider your opinion as an interpretation. You consider other people’s views as interpretation. (She is laughing) You just interpret it, I am speaking the truth as it is but no one carries it as it is. Because you are a human, you start interpreting the moment you read it. He would never say you will die because of this or that. He is Swedish and a convert, he wants Sweden has Swedish laws but he still says that this or that is haram.

He was the first official figure that I have ever met. Apart from that, I don’t know.

R: What about the sources which condemn homosexuality as sin in Christianity? Are they similar?

I: This is the funny thing because we have exactly the same problem with Sodom and Gomorah. They are not really clear about what they are condemning but people who are against the homosexuality tend to see it as a commitment to homosexuality whereas I think that it is commitment to the lack of homosexuality and against violence. They were raping and killing people. That’s the problem. In Christianity, either the part saying that you should not sleep with men or this Sodom and Gomorah part is problem. There is also a part in the New Testament where Paul’s talks about cultic prostitution. It was sometimes a homosexual cultic prostitution. These are very general and if you are against homosexuality, if you are against homosexuality, you can always interpret these things being against homosexuality. These are the three big parts
and my interpretation but the important fact for many Christians is that Jesus did not say any shit about it. If you discuss homosexuality in Christianity, you discuss either the Old Testament or Paul’s in the New Testament. In the documentary, I observe a lot of discussions about this is the way this part should be read. On the other hand I know that they are having a tradition but they also are having a tradition of interpreting. In Paris for instance they were discussing and asking to each other “based on what is homosexuality a sin”. The lesbian woman in Paris was a problem and acting with her heart. In Christianity too, people don’t act with their head but with their heart. In discussing everything people already decide what they feel and what they think. This is making hard for them to find a new place.

R: Have you ever met with Queer Muslim news in media? If you have met with a Queer Muslim news in which context were they presented?

I: Mostly, they are discussed in interfaith dialogue context. There is a Swedish magazine called Kom Ut and another magazine called Ottar, I think they are both from RFSL. I think both of them have articles about to be gay and Muslim.

R: What about mainstream media in Sweden?

I: I don’t think that they talk about Queer Muslims. If you are supposed to have a queer person in mainstream media you will have a queer person who is as normal as possible. Look at this person, they have a job, they like sports, they are not dangerous as you think. If they put a queer Muslim, they would be like “ogh he/she is a Muslim”.

R: What about Queer Christians?

I: That would be weird too. I have been in the magazines because I am a queer Christian and very open about queer rights and Christianity. It is always an exception. Look at this weird person with these views. There might be of course an positive news too. But the general picture about Christians is still Christians are against everything. They just want to put you up as an exception. When I became a minister, the mainstream media wanted to interview me because they thought it was fun the young girl with nail polish became a minister. I am used to be portrayed as weird and it bothers me. In a way, I understand that they wouldn’t interview me if
they did not find me interesting but on the other hand I think it is very sad that we still care about those silly things. It is like freak show media.

R: What can be done for Queer Christians and Queer Muslims?

I: The important thing is the religious dialogue in Sweden. In Sweden if you want a religious dialogue, you take an Imam and a priest and then it is finished. But I think the true religious dialogue is coming from different people like practitioners, normal people with normal jobs. To get different aspects of Muslim community is the one we have to try to remember. In Swedish society when you try to invite people to represent something, you have to understand that that person can hardly be enough to represent the whole community. If you take a person, that person suddenly has to represent all the Muslims. This is a way of saying “at least we took a Muslim”.

(She is laughing) In Sweden, we have to be careful to include different aspects of what it means to be a Muslim, what it means to be a Christian, what it means to be a queer. There is very narrow minded portrayal of queers too. It is not about Eurovision Song Contest, they are just different people. You have to understand that when you let someone to talk, that person is not talking for the entire community.

R: You were talking about creating a religious dialogue between Queer Christians and Queer Muslims, how can we achieve this? What kind of tools can we use?

I (She is smiling) we are doing that now. I am going to a seminar in Malmö a month. It is called HBTTeologi and I am going to meet with this Imam and we are going to talk about how can we be religious people and queer to strengthen both parts of ourselves and to get different aspects. Since I am going to meet with this Imam, I was actually very happy to see him.

R: If you had chance to make a documentary about the religion and being queer, what would you want to say to the world?

I: Oh my God, I really don’t know. (She is smiling) I would like to let them talk about their lives, struggles and their positive things. I think we also tend to talk about struggles all the time, there are also many other positive things about being religious and queer. Of course we have to focus on negative parts because there are a lot of people who are persecuted but we should also talk
about how we are created in this way and be proud of. How to talk about a queer pride, I would also like to focus on that.

R: What are the positive things about being homosexual and religious?

I: For me, it is nice to be part of a concept, a tradition. It is a big link bringing people together, developing together. God made me queer. Being different is not necessarily bad. You see the picture from different perspectives.

R: How would you relate to this documentary and Queer Muslims experiences to your own identity, to your own story?

I: Like Imam Hendricks, I would consider how to be positive example for people. It was very important the people executed by their countries did not see the religion as a problem but they see the culture as a problem. It is not Mohammed oppressing them, it is people oppressing them and they didn’t leave their identities. Sometimes secularists tend to think that the problem is religion and if we could cut that of, everything would be fine. I don’t think so. I don’t think you can cut religion off from your life like this for a religious person. To stay as a whole person and to be happy, you have to be able to integrate being queer and religious.

R: Thank you so much for this interview.

I: Thank you.

Interview 5 PART 1: Before A Jihad for Love

R: Can you present yourself shortly?

I: I am 20 years old, inter-gender person. I am from Stockholm, I was born here. I have been dancing a lot. I have been studying gender studies. Now I don’t know what to do actually but I am searching for it. I have a partner and now I am working at a café. I am sitting in a board, deciding things with other Christians. We are more than 10 people deciding for our Christian organization, we are planning camps for youth.

R: Can you tell me about the organization?

I: It is not so anonymous. The young people of Swedish Church.
R: What does Christianity say about homosexuality?

I: I would say there is not one voice. My view is that homosexuality is a part of life, a way of expressing your love, and feelings. It is an important part of your personality. It is a really important part. There are then other parts of Christianity, mostly other churches than Lutheran churches in Sweden, which think that it is a sin. Before a lot of years, it was a sin but now I think the Church is changing opinion. I think the Christian God was always open for it.

R: Do you relate those views saying that homosexuality is a sin?

I: The churches are not united in Sweden or in another part of the world. The Swedish Church is a very broad Church. Same-sex marriages are okey and we have a homosexual bishop for instance. We have a lot of homosexual priests but in other churches in Sweden it is really a taboo.

R: How does it feel when you hear those views?

I: It feels like I am a Queer Christian who believe different and I get really angry and sad that we haven’t come longer but I also like that there are voices and we don’t need to be that united about everything. I also think about people belonging to these churches, people who can’t be Christian because of their homosexuality and this is really sad. Homosexual people do not want to belong to the Church because they don’t believe that it is a sin. It is really sad because I don’t share that point of view on God. It is making me feel like a loss. It is a process. First I am sad about all these things, then I am angry and finally I am saying that we are different. When I hear these views, I want to be more clear about what I think and what is the part I like about my church and to promote to the people who are not Christians so that they can see that they can be included.

R: What did you feel when you found out that you were an inter-gender person? I am asking this question in relation to your faith?

I: I felt very free. I have problems with persons but not with faith. It is hard to explain to people in the Church who have this really typical gender point of view. In terms of God, I am more peaceful with myself than I was before, when I did not know who I was. I think a lot of thing is depending on seeing a church like a queer mass in Stockholm and other inter-gender people.
Seeing other Christians who don’t have a problem with it is also a part of this peace. I have been in the Church for so long. I have been going out for a while. I was very insecure about what the Church is clear about because there were so many voices. What I could hear was that they couldn’t decide. Even it came to accepting same-sex marriages, it came a little bit to the queer point of view. Then I heard of queer mass. When I was studying gender and start to think about my own gender, I found Queer mass. It helped.

R: Can you please your understanding of God in relation to your view on homosexuality or homosexual love?

I: I think my relationship to God has not changed that much. I just opened up my mind for other people and points of view and for other gender that I am more peace with myself. I actually feel more accepted by God since I understood who I am. I also met these people who accept me in the Church. I had a problem with the name of God because I want God have a over-all name. I was fighting to get that, I could fight with God because he wanted this male name but then I understood that it was people who put that name to God. I find it very thrilling and exciting to talk about it with God. (She is laughing)

R: What is the place of sacred and you faith in your understanding of your gender?

I: My gender is a part of me and God is a part of me. They are together.

R: Have you ever came out to non-queer Christian community?

I: Yes. I would not say that I came out. I don’t like that expression.

R: Share?

I: Yes, I shared it when I thought that it was important. For instance when people used the wrong pronoun. Young people want to talk about it and know what it is. Sometimes they want to understand sometimes they don’t. I also some people who said that they don’t understand. They wanted to talk about something else. They don’t want to say the correct pronoun but I feel happy that I put my point of view. I feel to be badly treated because they don’t want to call me as a hen.

R: How are their reactions?
I: They don’t get angry but they don’t want to hear more. Some of them get interested, most of them say the wrong pronoun again but after a while they change.

R: How did you get to know other Queer Christians?

I: When I did a confirmation, my priest, she was bisexual and really queer person. She wanted to talk to me. She said “I see you are different”. She asked me if I would like to go to the Pride where the Church was too. I said “yes, I could do that”. I didn’t know this before. I searched things in the internet too, I think. Fromm the Pride, I learned that how queer mass was growing up. Then, I also saw there that there was Regnbågnmass in Stockholm. I am not a fun of how they have the mass but I like why they have it. From the priest and internet.

R: You said internet. For what else do you use internet when it comes to religion?

I: I can search for seminars. The good thing about Facebook is that I see a lot of people liking things that I also might be interested, things like a seminar of a Jewish rabbi who like to talk about Queer stuff. I can see what it is going on in my church. I can follow planning for masses. Now I am planning a camp with some friends in this board for young Christians so we are doing on the Internet because it is really fast.

Sometimes I read prayers because Swedish Church has this page of prayers which is very nice.

Sometimes when I have to pray something obviously very queer. The Church is not the same way it need to be 40 years ago, they are more open to the queer people now.

R: What about your religion to other religions?

I: I feel like I fit in the Christianity so I did not search so much for the other religions. I have been studying other Abrahamic religions in school but I guess I didn’t have so much time for it. I accept the other religion prayers as brothers and sisters. I can more relate to the Jewish people since I have been hearing Rabbi talking about queer things. I like the tradition of discussing and criticizing and influencing the Christian queer theology.

R: Have you ever shared your experiences derived from your sexuality and faith with non-religious queer person?
I: Some of them are like “you are so strong being a Christian in the church of Sweden and being a queer”. I am like “it is not that bad”. There are some who don’t understand but they don’t get angry. A lot of them are getting interested. Agnostic people can be interested and say like “oh the Church can be good”. I am friend with a lot of people who are religious friendly and they are not haters. I don’t have so many friend that say “oh you can’t be religious”. They are like “okey you can do”

R: Can we shortly talk about your perception of Islam?

I: Islam can be expressed very differently. I think it is a really broad religion. It can be broad like Christianity. We have Catholics, Pentacoastals, Orthodox. We have homophobes and really queer people and polyamorous. I think these can also be in Muslim world too. I just have not experienced so much. In my imagination, Islam is more strict than Christianity. I think Christianity is having more queer expressions in it. I have met with one Muslim homosexual person who had it hard with non-Muslims, that person did not have any problem with the family. I think media is creating this imagination in me that Islam is more strict and homophobic. I think that part of Islam is not homophobic. I don’t think that Sufism is that strict.

R: You say that the idea that Islam is more strict is coming from media. I would like to ask you if there was any point in your life when your attitudes towards Islam changed.

I: I don’t like to have a point of view before I meet with so many people. I met with the Christian people coming from the middle class in music class. I was like the most Christian people there. I really didn’t meet with Muslim people. I just thought all the time that “oh Islam can’t be that strict”. Again, a lot of people think that Christianity is so strict but it is not. When I was in gymnasium, I had a really good teacher who talked a lot about Islam. He was not talking about rules so much. This opened my mind a bit and proves that Islam is not that strict. When I saw a video about Sufism tradition in gymnasium, I thought that it was not so strict.

R: What kind of Muslim and Islam portray you see in the mainstream media?

I Women are invisible. Before it was really hectic “oh Muslims are coming here and they dress women in a lot of clothes and they are not feminists.” But now, they are not talking about if it
can be feminist or queer. All I see now is Jews, Christians and Muslims work together in a lot of parts of Sweden.

R: What kind of relationships can Queer Muslims have with their families?

I: If they are orthodox Muslims, they might have problems. I heard a story like “one guy, he is gay and Muslim, he won’t talk to his family, no one will find out and then he will marry to a girl”. It could be really hard if you have orthodox Muslim family. I also heard that if your parents were Sufists, or just one of them is Muslim, it could not be a problem.

R: Have you ever seen a Queer Muslim documentary?

I: No

R: What would motivate you to see a queer Muslim documentary?

I: I would like to learn about Islam. It will help me to understand more about Muslim people and it could also give other views on God which is interesting. Maybe it will build on my picture of God.

R: If I told you that the name of the documentary we are going to see is A Jihad for Love, how would you describe the word of Jihad?

I: I have no idea and I forgot what Jihad is. I can’t actually say so much. It is maybe about a group of Muslim or rules. I don’t know. (She is laughing) I would like you to explain for me.

R: When we see the documentary, hopefully I will not need to explain to you.

I: She is laughing.

R: Let’s see the documentary.

**Interview 5 PART 2: After A Jihad for Love**

R: What did you think about the documentary?

I: It was really good. First I thought that ohh it is a picture of strict Islam where gay Muslims are not treated well and are not feeling well but then I could see the other parts of Islam. The families were open-minded. There were Sufists and there was a change. I got the feelings that the
gay community is getting broader because the movie is having first the story of corruption within Islam. First we were in the countries where being gay was forbidden then we went to back to South Africa which is gay-friendly. I got the feeling that Muslims are getting more friendly.

R: Was there anything you found unexpected?

I: It was so broad. I saw different homosexual people who were treated differently. I thought the same things happening in Christianity. First, they were saying that “no we can’t talk about it” but then they started to talk about it.

R: How did you feel when the documentary ended?

I: I feel glad that I now know more about Queer Muslim people. I feel more like brothers or sisters with Queer Muslim community because we have the same fight.

R: What did you think about the fight of Queer Muslim and the future of Islam?

I: I think Islam has been experiencing the same process that Christianity is experiencing. Of course there will be always orthodox people but this gives me hope that more Muslim people who are not that orthodox will open up. People of other religions will understand that Islam is not only orthodox.

R: Did you feel particularly close to any character in the documentary?

I: The lesbian women who did not know if they would go with their sexuality or not , this was a part of me long time ago.

R: How would you explain the word of Jihad after seeing the documentary?

I: Jihad is not a war with a gun but it is a war with a heart. I can also relate it a lot to the Bible; we don’t fight against flesh and meat but to the spirit. I can also relate Jihad to the homophobia. We don’t fight against people; we fight against the homophobia, the ghosts inside people’s heads. Jihad is a war against homophobia, we can interpret like this or Jihad can be said to be a war against unjust thinking and doing.

R: What will you say about the representation of Jihad in the mainstream media?
I: I can’t recall anything. I can only say that it is like Christian Cross Wars.

R: Crusades?

I: Yes, Crusades. In mainstream media, I only heard about Jihad as a war with weapons.

R: What is your idea about Islam as religion, after seeing the documentary?

I: I think that Islam is a lot like Christianity. The idea of love and having God first in your life. I can more relate to Sufism. Islam is really broad and it is getting broader every time I see something more. Searching for love and God is the same as in Christianity.

R: What is about Islam’s attitude for homosexuality?

I: There are different views. Sufism is more open-minded.

R: What do you think about Muslims now? How would you compare the representation of Muslim in the documentary to their representation by the mainstream media?

I: This is more humane. Media say that Islam is about law but Islam is about your personal relationship with God. Media say that every Muslim think and do the same as Quran say.

R: Have you ever come across with Queer Muslims or Queer Christians in any media?

I: Not really Queer Muslims. The magazine of Christians in Sweden and some gay magazines talk about Swedish gay bishop and same-sex married Christians?

R: How is media’ attitude for Queer Christians?’

I: They think that they are changing Christianity to something better.

R: What can be done for Queer Muslims and Queer Christians?

I: We have to have films like this. Media have to portray Muslims as people not as warriors. They have a relationship to God. The same for Queer Christians but it is not that needed anymore in Sweden because we have Christian Queer people in media like Swedish lesbian bishop in Stockholm. We have to portray more people like these.
**Interview 6 PART 1: Before A Jihad for Love**

R: I am coming from Stockholm University, Journalism, Media and Communication department. All the information that you are going to provide will be kept confidential for your security. I want to ask you again, do you want to make this interview.

I: Yes, I do.

R: Can you present yourself shortly?

I: I was born and raised here in Stockholm and I lived here most of my life. I am an educated social worker and I work with elderly people. I was grown up in a Christian family which is not maybe so common in Sweden because Swedish people are not religious. Going to church on a regular basis was not so popular, they were teasing sometimes because of this. It was a little bit though then but children tease with each other for many things. I am 41 years old but I think that I am 22. I am single and I have been for many years. I am not looking for somebody now because I am very busy with the work and activities in the church and so on. I am also engaged in a Christian organization. Even though we have come far here in Sweden, especially in Stockholm, about LGBT people’s rights, there are still things to work with. Even though we have come so far, many countries have not come so far. Sometimes I think that both here in Sweden and in Northern Europe we are so privileged. It is easier to be LGTT Christian and so on. This gives us a responsibility to help to the other people. We can help other people with knowledge, time, courage and perhaps we can also help them financially as well too.

R: What kind of activities are you having at the Church?

I: I am going to the Church regularly to make services but I am also sitting in a board. Going to the church is not only for religious reasons. It is also for meeting friends, it is a base for social activity and meeting people. To me church is a part of life. Sometimes it is depending on your life situation. I don’t think that you should be so narrow minded and fixated about church being in a certain way.

R: Can you tell me about what you think about the view of Christianity on homosexuality?

I: For me it is not a problem because God is love. God is loving one each other and homosexuality is a gift from God. You should be able to express it the way you want it. Of
course, you should use this gift responsibly, you should not fuck around. It does not really matter if you like someone who is same-sex or different sex because love is love and you should enjoy it.

R: We did not talk about how you define your gender?

I: I would position myself as a woman. It goes differently in time. Sometimes I feel more lesbian and other times more bisexual. When it comes to sexuality the way you identify yourself depends on time. It is changing. Thirty years ago with the gay rights discussion, people started to name themselves as gay in order to pursue the right for their rights. Today, for me it is not important to define myself as this or that.

R: What does Christianity say about homosexuality?

I: There are few places in the Bible which mention homosexuality in a bad way, therefore many people think that it is bad to be a homosexual. I think in general Christianity is not so sex-friendly. Paul says somewhere that people should not get married and dedicate all their energy to God. In general Christianity is not so positive to homosexuality. Perhaps it started to change a little bit for the last 30 years. In some churches in some parts of the world, it has started to change.

R: What about Sweden?

I: Today churches are more positive to homosexuality than they were 30 years ago. The Church of Sweden, which is the biggest Church, is in general very open-minded. When it comes to other Churches, some of them are modern, some of them are more traditional and Evangelical and they are negative to homosexuality.

R: Can you relate those views?

I: No because Paul was speaking from the situation he was in. The values he had in his time and his letters written to different churches should be interpreted according to our time. What did people have as values around things like homosexuality? We can’t take his sayings but we should apply them to today. We have to see them from the context it was written in. If you knew the context they were written then you could interpret them in our time. How should I relate to
this text in this time, today? Many things in the Bible that we could not do in the past, we do them today. Today women can be preachers in the churches; we don’t stone people because they have done something wrong.

R: What did you feel when you found out that you were bisexual?

I: To me it was not a big thing when I discovered about myself because I think it has been in my mind for a long time. When I really started to understand that I like girls as well, it was not a big thing. I did not want to admit it to myself but then I finally had to do it because I fell in love with a woman. Nothing happened between her and me because she was already in a relationship. I didn’t know that she was having a girlfriend when I met her. Besides, she was older than me. The big thing was to come out to parents, sisters, brothers and friends. They all took it quite well. It was tougher before I told them. When I told them it was okey.

R: What happened to your faith when you discovered that you were bisexual?

I: I have been very active in the church up to the age of 20-25. Then I didn’t discover myself bisexual but I felt that I needed a break from Church in order to discover the other parts of myself. Then in some years later I had to explain myself that I was bisexual. I distanced myself from my faith. I was questioning if I could reconnect to it. For me it was important to find a social place where I can be accepted as gay and Christian and I found this Christian organization and the Church that I am active in now.

R: Is it possible for me to learn the name of the organization you are active in?

I: Yes, sure. EKHO. Stockholm part has a website and Facebook page but I don’t know if Gothenburg does have too.

R: How did you find out about this group?

I: 8 or 10 years ago I heard that they were having meetings. In Stockholm they still have meetings.

R: How is your relationship to Christianity as a bisexual woman?
I: I have met people who are accepting me and homosexuality so it was not hard for me. It has never been a real problem for me. I know some people might struggle with that because they might not have a social base or they might not have talked about it so much. My family has always been accepting and supporting.

R: Do you tell people that you are queer and Christian?

I: I chose when to tell people. The first time I came to a new social environment that is not the first thing that I tell people. You check out how open-minded people are. You can feel quite fast if they are open-minded or not. I don’t chose to deepen my relationship with people who are not open-minded because I want to be able to come out and be my whole self. In the longer term it is important for me to be surrounded by people who accept my whole self. I heard people in the church saying that it is okey to be a member of the church but they don’t want people to get married in the church. The ministers can be in the same-sex marriages but gay members of the church can’t get marry in the church. I heard that attitude and (she is sighing), it makes me sad. One way, they say that they accept you but you are a part-time member. You can be this, you can do this but you can’t be this and you can’t do this. I want to a member of the Church and want to get married. The church is my home anyway, why can’t I just get marry there? Some churches do not accept gay people who want to be minister. Maybe those people are gifted by God; maybe they are so good at preaching. They say that they can’t accept them. This is so narrow-minded. I think they have to stand up and fight. Some people have been fighting for many years, some people still want to change it and some people can’t get it anymore. I can’t blame some people who want leave. They want to leave because they think that it is too tough. On the other hand we have to fight with this attitude because we want to change it. This is just against human rights, you have to be equal with everybody else.

R: Have you ever met with other Queer Christians?

I: Over the years, I met with Queer Christians. In this queer church, I get to know some queer people there. During my years in this EKHO group, I met queer Christians.

R: What about media?
I: I don’t think that they write so much about Queer Christians in the media. There was maybe a little bit about it during the Pride. They interviewed me in one of the morning magazines. They were checking out how Christian organizations were getting money from the state. In order to get money from the state, they should fulfill certain criteria. They were checking how they were fulfilling the criteria. In one of the groups, I think it was Salvation, they say something negative about homosexuality. Then this morning paper took that part up and turn into something else. Queer Christian issue occasionally pops up in the media.

R: What would you say about their representation in the Swedish mainstream media?

I: I think the interview with me turned out quit well but sometimes media have take this issue up more problematic than it is. Many people think that I am gay and Christian and it does not work for me. Many people think that these people have to chose to be gay or Christian. I think that media is making problematic because it will sell. Because if you don’t have a problem with it, it won’t sell copies. They also chose making it one-sided.

R: Have you ever talked to a non-religious queer person about your faith and sexuality?

I: I always say that it is easier to be gay than being a Christian in Sweden. Talking about Christianity in queer community is not always easy because they immediately think what the church was doing to the gay people. In one way, I can understand people thinking like that because the church has been doing much queer people over years. On the other hand the things are changing. History is a part we have to deal with. In general I don’t talk to much about my religion with people because in general Swedish people don’t like talking about religion. People don’t like to talk about deeper religious beliefs because maybe they feel uncomfortable. Many people don’t believe and don’t like to talk about it. Sweden is not a very religious country and if you are religious people look at you as if you are narrow minded religious person. People have some particular ideas about how a Christian should be. If you come up and say that “I am Christian and queer”, then they say “then you are not a Christian”. This is really sad because then you don’t talk about so much about your faith. You can have a interesting discussion about your faith. It makes me sad because I like to talk about those questions. It is not so much about religion but it is about the life in deeper sense.
R: I don’t expect you to tell me everything you know about Islam. In general how do you perceive Islam?

I: I am not an expert of Islam but I think Islam is basically the same as Christianity because their base is the same. I have some Muslim friends at work. We talk a little bit about Islam. We do believe in God in different ways but in general two religions are basically the same. Of course, the Muslim world is big and people perceive it very differently but I think Muslims interpret religion in a more traditional way than Christians. They say that the Quran is the word of God and we should follow it strictly than most of the Christians would do.

R: How is your relationship with your colleagues?

I: My colleagues are all colleagues. They are having headscarf or hijab, how do you call it? Not so much over the face but the head is covered.

R: Turban?

I: Yes, turban. Maybe they call it differently in different countries. They are not from Sweden. One is from Iraq and the other is from Algeria. They are very modern women as well because I did not expect they would be modern and educated women. We talked about Islam a lot. They say that “I am a Muslim and woman and I like wearing headscarf, it is important to me yet I am modern woman, I work, I have a car, I have a job, I have a husband and family“. They don’t seem to have a problem living in modern life and being religious. It makes me glad that there could be modern people in Islam. Why shouldn’t Muslim women be modern in the same way as we are? They just don’t eat pork but everything else and wear headscarf. It is just a piece of cloth. All people like to wear and eat what they want to wear and eat. Some people don’t eat meat at all and nobody cares about that. These are just minor things.

R: Are there other sources you learn about Islam except for your colleagues?

I: When I was growing up, there were not much immigrants and Muslims in Sweden. I had two female friends from Turkey in my high school. They were both born and raised here so I don’t think that they were so religious. It is really hard to discuss religion when you are 16 or 18. You don’t talk about religion so much, you talk about other things. Occasionally I learn about Muslim and see them in the media.
In general it is quite negative. Media always take the easy way, they show poor Islamic women. They portray Islamic people in a certain way. Then some people think that they are so strict, old fashioned and terrorists. This is not always true. I try to see more nuances. There are more perspectives to Islam.

R: Do you have a queer Muslim friend?

I: Not that I know.

R: What do you expect queer Muslims experiences to be?

I: I think it might be quite though to be a queer and Muslim because it seems to be that Islam is more narrow-minded and Muslim people are more narrow-minded. I don’t know if this has to do with the religion, the tradition in the countries these people come from and the family values in those countries. I think it is tougher in Muslim countries. In Christianity hopefully we are getting better in this question. Not all of the Christian world but at least part of it.

R: Have you ever watched a documentary about Queer Muslims?

I: I think I saw a documentary in some couple years ago in the Pride. I was surprised over the Turkish lesbian couple in Turkey. I don’t remember so much. It may be not so much tough everywhere. It seems to me that some brave people are trying to do something.

R: The documentary that we are going to see might be the same documentary that you saw. It is called a Jihad for Love. Would you like to see the documentary again?

I: If it is the same, I would like to see it again because it was so interesting. I would like to get insight about how is it to be queer Muslim and to get interesting perspectives. This question interests me, I am interested in religion and maybe I can do something. I am interested in religion on a general level. As a bisexual Christian I would like to see what is going on about religion in other parts of the world.

R: Okey then we see the documentary. Thank you so much.

I: You are welcome.
Interview 6 PART 2: After A Jihad for Love

R: What did you think?

I: I did like it because it gave me some perspective about being gay and Muslim. It also gave me some nuances in Muslim society. The two lesbian women in Turkey were quite open whereas guys from Iran have to leave their home country. Islam is not always black, it is more colorful than that. South African Imam started to talk about homosexuality and Islam. He interpreted the Quran differently than the traditional way. It makes me glad because something is happening there as well. Hopefully, it will be more accepted there as well.

R: Was there anything you found unexpected?

I: This lesbian couple in Turkey was so open-minded. They could leave openly. They could kiss and hold hand at the streets. They were visiting her mother. It made me surprised, I never thought that it would exist. I thought the Muslim world is so close so to speak. This male dancer from Egypt, I did not know that only women could do belly-dancing. I didn’t expect that either. The Imam was really trying to make a change for Muslim world about being as gay and Muslim. At least he tried to start a discussion with people about homosexuality.

R: How did you feel when the documentary ended?

I: Both sad and uplifted. I felt uplifted because it gave me a positive picture of Muslim community. I felt sad because some people had to leave their countries, like the two Iranian guys. They first went to Turkey and then to Canada just because they just wanted to leave the way they want. (Here her tone of voice is helpless, she shows her surprise ) That makes me sad.

R: What did you think when the documentary ended?

I: It gave me a positive picture about Muslims. Normally I get only one picture of Islam and Muslims now I can see that there is more diversity in how Muslims live see and interpret their religion.

R: How would you relate to the Queer Muslims in the documentary?

I: Maybe I see the documentary in another way because in a way I can relate to these people because I am in the very position with them as a bisexual woman having a faith. In one way I can
relate to how they think about religion and how they talk about their faith. If you are living in a heterosexual context, people don’t reflect so much religious issues as much because you are living the norm and you are the norm. Therefore, you don’t tend to reflect on religion as much as the people who are outside the norm.

R: Did you feel particularly close to any character?

I: For some reason, I felt more for the young boy from Egypt. I don’t know why but for some reason I felt extra for him.

R: How would you describe your relation to Queer Muslim experiences?

I: In one way I can relate to them. The young boy in India asked to the religious authority about homosexuality and he said it is forbidden. Then the boy asked why it is forbidden. The religious authority told him not to ask anything more. He said “don’t ask it is just forbidden”. The boy got so frustrated over that and I could relate to it. When I talk to people, they just say the same. It does not matter what you tell to them. They have their opinion and they don’t want to change their opinion. In one way, I ask myself why I should continue doing this. Should I just keep trying or should I just leave?

R: How would you compare your understanding of Jihad now?

I: My interpretation of Jihad changed a bit. I always thought that Jihad is about conquering and making everybody Muslim. What I have been thought what Jihad is that Jihad is a holy war to make everybody Muslim. They interpret it as challenging yourself and working on yourself. I learned that Jihad could be more than one thing.

R: How would you describe the way Jihad is represented in mainstream media?

I: In Western mainstream media, Jihad is represented in a more extreme way. Young extremists going to bomb themselves for Allah or to bomb themselves for political reasons. More in a political way. As far as I understood, religion and politics are not so separated in Muslim world as it is here. They tend to go together more. They use many people for religious and political reasons. In mainstream media, Jihad is more aggressive and more political. The young people bombing themselves because they don’t like America.
R: What would you say about Islam now?

I: I am getting more diverse picture of it, I got another understanding of Islam. It can be much more than the way media tend to show.

R: What is new for you?

I: I think that when you see Islam in the media, it tends to be strict, political and narrow-minded. Here Islam is more than rules and it is also about love for God. Christianity has been much about the rules as well but I think partially we have passed that.

R: How would you evaluate now Islam and Muslims?

I: There are people who want to change Islam and the way people think about it. I think this is a good start. I also think that there are a lot of things that we as westerners don’t see because we think that we are the only one having ways of thinking about history, culture, religion and tradition. Muslims also have different ways of thinking about these things. It is hard to understand without knowing these things. So, if you want to change, you have to do it on your own. We can’t come from the West and then say people that they have to do this and that. The West has this tendency to do this. Maybe we do it because we think that we know better. I think people have to start to think for themselves but we don’t want that.

R: How do you see Islam’s attitude now?

I: After seeing this one, I would say how Muslims see homosexuality is much more diverse. I thought they were going to say “no, it is very wrong”. Some communities are more open-minded and positive.

R: What attitudes did you observe Islam’s attitude homosexuality and Christianity’s attitude to homosexuality?

I: Quran and Bible are certain texts. They don’t talk about homosexuality because back then the word did not exist. You can interpret these texts depending on how you want to interpret. You can always put the Bible over the head of people and say this is written in the Bible. You can also interpret it. I am sure you can do the same with the Quran. You have to read these texts
thinking about the time they were written and the attitudes at the time. We have to interpret them in this way and ask how we can relate them today.

R: Did you observe some differences between Islam’s attitude homosexuality and Christianity’s attitude to homosexuality?

I: No. There are few Bible verses that are interpreted to be against the homosexuality, in the Quran as it also showed in the documentary there was the story of Sodom and Gomorah. It was the only text, I thought there would be more places about that. As far as I understand, in general Christianity is more negative to homosexuality than what Islam is.

R: How do you perceive Muslim and Queer Muslims now after the documentary?

I: I think see them in a more positive way. Queer Muslims actually do exist. You don’t talk about being Queer Muslim.

R: Can we talk about the representation of Queer Muslims in mainstream media?

I: I never saw them in mainstream media. In Swedish mainstream media I have not noticed anyone talking about being Muslim and Queer.

R: We talked a little about Swedish media attitude when they represent Queer Christians. You said that media are making it problematic.

I: Yes, they make it a little bit problematic. Media is more positive about being gay today than it was 15 or 20 years ago. Now in films and interviews, gays are more present. Now there is more common having gay people in popular culture and media. Both well-know political actors and comedians make it less sensational being gay in the media. In Sweden being Christian is a little bit difficult because people are not religious. It is more difficult to be Christian than being a gay. I always say in this country it is easier to be gay than being Christian.

R: How does it feel?

I: It makes me a little bit frustrating how people see and think about it. Am I weird because I am a Christian and I believe in God? This is a part of me that I don’t want to talk so much about. Sometimes I am thinking “should I leave my faith and just be a part of the rest of society”.

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R: What would you say about Queer Muslim experiences about their homosexuality and faith?

I: Religion is a natural and important part of their lives which made me jealous. Religion was taken for granted and they were proud of their religion. I don’t feel this and this is not because I am not proud of religion but because if I talk about my religion so much people will look at me as if I am crazy.

R: What can be done for Queer Christians and Queer Muslims?

I: It is about working with attitudes in both queer community and Muslim and Christian communities. You can interpret the text in many different ways. You should be allowed to interpret them in many different ways even though there will always be a mainstream way of interpreting the text. My ideal dream is having a wild discussion about religion with believers or non-believers and in the end of the day still going home praying or even having a nice meal with them. Then you can have a feeling of community. You can love and respect each other though you can different opinions about everything.

As a queer Christian, sometimes I am thinking that it could be better if I had a queer Christian community. It could nice because you are all the same, you know. You know how it feels to be queer and Christian. It could be nice to see you own kind every now and then as well as being a part of the big Christian community. It could be also nice for Queer Muslim to find strength and to share with Muslim community. Being a part of a group can be very strengthening. Queer Christian and Queer Muslim can learn from each other. As I said, Christianity and Islam are very much alike. It also depends what part of the world you come from. Perhaps we can find similarities but we might have some cultural barriers too. For the second generation of Muslim immigrant community, feeling Muslim and Swedish can be easier. Maybe with them it can be easier to communicate because somehow you are born and raised in the same culture. We go to the same schools, we speak the same language and we see the same children show.

R: What would like to say about the documentary from Queer Christian perspective?

I: I could see people who were in the same situation with me. They were queer and religious, I could relate to their struggle with the religion. On the other hand, they are experiencing another cultural context. In one way it is easier to be gay in Sweden but in another way it is difficult
because there are people who think differently. In Muslim world, how they see the marriage is for instance different than here. The ways to see God are pretty much the same in Christianity. They both love and fear God and I think this is a double dilemma. It does exist partially Sweden as well.

R: What would you like to say about Queer Christians in Sweden if you had a chance to have your own documentary?

I: You can combine being queer and Christian. This would be optimal. God created you in a certain way and God gave you the opportunity to love somebody with a same sex for perhaps a reason. Accept yourself and be proud. Live your life to the fullest.