Dino Suhonic is a prominent voice in contemporary Dutch activism, against anti-Muslim racism and anti-LGBT discrimination. He is the founder of MARUF, an organization that promotes the emancipation of queer Muslims, and has been regularly interviewed by Dutch media. In this conversation with Pooyan Tamimi Arab, who is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Utrecht University, Suhonic is asked to respond to the problem of selective indignation. How can solidarity do justice to a great variety of concerns, and not include some to the detriment of others? Living nearby each other, and meeting at Tamimi Arab’s house close to the Homomonument, this conversation in September 2017 is one between an activist and an academic, as well as between neighbours.

PTA: An eternally recurring challenge of solidarity is that disempowered groups, who should ideally work together, may show little interest to each other’s concerns. For example, Iranian-Dutch citizens like myself felt a lack of solidarity when Kambiz Roustayi, a refugee denied permanent residency, set himself on fire on Dam Square in Amsterdam and died in 2011. Or, a case that you have spoken about, when citizens came together at the Homomonument in solidarity with the victims of the Orlando shooting, in 2016. You have called the fact that some did not show up ‘selective indignation’ (selectieve verontwaardiging), that people may go to an anti-racist protest against Black Pete, but not to a commemoration of victims of violence against LGBT. For academics too, dealing with these concerns in a fair and balanced way is crucial.

DS: I just attended a conference about Islamophobia and intersectionality; what if Islamophobia happens
together with other forms of exclusion? One of the raised arguments was that in such instances, it is self-evident that members of different disempowered groups must work together. I then cursed in that church (*toen heb ik gevoekt in die kerk*), saying that there are people in the room to whom I am connected by Islamophobia [as Muslims who are the targets of Islamophobia], but with whom I would never consider cooperating. Following the principle of fighting against one form of exclusion and oppression does not entail working with persons who perpetuate other forms of discrimination. One may object against this stance from a strategic perspective, raising the eternal question of how to build alliances, and with whom; for me, as the ‘Queer Muslim of the Netherlands’, I have to constantly navigate between what is right and necessary here and now, and greater principles that cannot be so easily overridden.

After the Orlando shooting, for example, it quickly became apparent that the fact that these were Latinx people – a term to denote persons that are of Latino and other mixed ethnic backgrounds – did not matter. In that moment, their queerness was their whiteness. Anti-racism activists did not discuss the question of their murder in relation to their ethnic background. LGBT activists, similarly, interpreted the attacks solely as an attack on ‘the’ LGBT community, producing a fake sense of unity, that we are one community and should stand up for each other’s rights. In fact, the victims’ family and loved ones, and survivors too, said that we should also point at the fact that this community is excluded based on being Latino or non-white. The fact that a nightclub party for specifically Latinx people is required, shows that there is a need for places where people can be both, members of ethnic minorities and LGBT.

So, I do understand the prominence of ‘intersectionality’. It is a chique, fashionable word, but it does also often represent a painful situation wherein one is forced to choose allies.

**PTA:** How do you see, looking back at your own activism, the development of the concept of solidarity in your thinking?

**DS:** I distinguish between active and passive solidarity. There are sometimes persons who very actively support my work, for example Muslim feminists. Solidarity from that corner is helpful; we share common grounds. In that sense, solidarity is almost ‘natural’, because you need each other in certain areas of concern. That doesn’t automatically mean that we should fight against ‘the patriarchal heterosexual man’ together, but it is a fact that systems of oppression that impact women and LGBT can be pressured together.

Solidarity of those who share overlapping identities is very important, for example within the Dutch LGBT community. It is very important. Because, in the case of the Netherlands, the white LGBT head out from a certain historical place, which can build, which has built, certain social structures of empowerment. Their solidarity towards us queer Muslims is therefore highly significant, because if you are given a place in those structures, it is much easier to sound a voice and to increase one’s visibility, with concrete results such as being able to attract more funding for activism. That would fall under what I call an active form of solidarity.
Passive forms of solidarity exist when someone says ‘I am not interested in this topic, but do support you nevertheless’. One feels that there is someone, in the background, fighting with you. That brings me back to the question, ‘who supports you?’ When my public activism began in 2012, we organized a meeting about gender-based violence in Islam. It’s a very interesting topic, but we failed to realize the implications of receiving support at the time. For example, one of the few political parties in Amsterdam interested in supporting us at the time was conservative or right wing. Being thrilled about receiving support from someone, anyone, we did not realize the frames that we would be pushed into. I remember vividly how political parties on both sides of the spectrum fought over the appropriation of our activities. I didn’t realize, at all, just how valuable my identity, or my position, was to existing political frames. I was just happy that there were people who wanted to cooperate, who were not afraid of reaching out to me and to tackle the sensitive topic of being a queer Muslim.

Now, five years later, my perspective is more sceptical. I now think I should consider and reconsider at least three times before agreeing to participate in contested events or political settings, because I now realize that – whatever my intentions are as a queer Muslim activist – my activities are presently framed as a battle between ‘homophobic Muslims’ and the ‘gay friendly West’. The fact is that especially right wing political parties in the Netherlands support me to prove that the Muslim community is intolerant towards gays, and to use that to say ‘see, they are not Western, they don’t belong’.

PTA: Do you feel supported by other political parties on the left?

DS: I am convinced that the [Muslims versus Gays] frame is pervasive and has infected all political parties in the Netherlands. ‘Homonationalism’ has become mainstreamed in the public sphere, making it impossible to speak without being part of that media discourse.\(^2\) I may be too conscious about solidarity and alliances, resulting in a position – and I see this among other activists as well – that is immobilized by those frames of xenophobia, Islamophobia and homosexuality, which set boundaries of ‘you the Other’ and ‘us the Good’. We are immobilized by these frames to speak about the problems we face within our community. I constantly face the thought, ‘let’s not talk about homosexuality, because that could be construed [in a racist way]’. So, you are constantly pushed into a corner of silence, taking no action to tackle problems within your own community. Because, no one denies that there is a problem, in our own families, with our own friends.

I find this an objectionable phase in our activism, because being silent means simply that, not acting, and thus not achieving any progress. Of course, no statement is also a statement, but I do wonder who is really with me, who supports me, truly? If I observe my surroundings critically, then no one in my proximity, potential allies who could show solidarity with us, is really in a place that can satisfy me. I’m talking about Muslims and non-Muslims here. For example, some Muslim feminists or progressive Muslims say ‘Yes, you have a right to be here, but gay marriage, relationships, really expressing all that, I don’t know, that doesn’t fit in my or our vision’. In other words, we continuously face
preconditions, or better said limitations, to that solidarity coming from others. And sometimes in surprising ways, for example in a discussion we had in Cape Town about combatting (bestrijden) polygamy within the Muslim community, which is of course a real problem. But that discussion went so far that participating Muslim feminists then decided on what constitutes an ideal relationship. They not only assumed a heteronormative paradigm (denkkader), of man and woman, but also monogamy blessed by their favored imam, and that all of this should be an ‘Islamic marriage’. That is where we – queer Muslims – thought: ‘wait a second, you are reproducing something that we oppose, namely marriage as an institution that is used to say that we are not okay, that men must marry women, and that the only good relation is the one that is authorized by an imam’. Some of the queer Muslims, on the other hand, felt that if anyone wants to cruise and have three hundred partners in a month, then they should have that freedom. So, one notices constant limitations to solidarity.

I am not saying that everyone should accept us as we are, that they have to, but that there is a kind of pattern in the extent to which others can support us. So, I am not pleased with liberal Muslims who say that anyone should determine how he or she wants to live for themselves, but in one way or another uses that same power dynamic to impose a specific vision of Islam on us, queer Muslims. The liberal Ibn Rushd-Goethe Mosque in Berlin, for example, makes it clear that not all are welcome, in particular people wearing a burqa or niqab. Or other people, who have the opposite view that everyone must wear the hijab. Or, if your opinion is slightly different from the idea that Islam and human rights should be identical, and are not welcome because of that. I find that attitude very problematic, to set preconditions to hospitality from any corner. That also goes for non-Muslims, for example socialists who invite me to speak about anti-Muslim racism – I am only ‘sexy’ to them if I can demonstrate that the Dutch right discriminates me.

PTA: We may consider solidarity as the glue that binds us to one another, to transcend selective indignation. But, one more time, what exactly is selective indignation, and what does it matter to your queerness and your being Islamic?

DS: Well, I’m certainly not advocating that everyone must react to everything or be in a constant state of indignation. This question often spirals into a discussion about posting a Facebook status after each attack in Lahore or Kabul, if you already did so after attacks in Paris and Brussels. Looking back at Orlando, in my case I found it striking that anti-racist activists, who continuously speak about solidarity, then fail to see that one exclusion is not less or worse than another. What I do notice, and this bothers me very much, is the notion that ‘gays’ are protected in the Netherlands, in the United States, or simply in ‘the West’. As if one were to say, ‘you gays have your rights, you are normalized, but we Muslims face ethnic profiling’, which means that my being queer excludes me from being Muslim. Selective indignation results in my queerness slightly erasing my Muslimness. That is similar to non-Muslims thinking that being gay necessarily implies being a progressive, liberated, Muslim – but you are not really a Muslim, you just call yourself that, you are a so-called
cultural Muslim. I find it very interesting to watch how one identity's coming out makes the other disappear. It is almost impossible to be both.

After Orlando, I was so mad at everyone: at the gay community who only focused on the LGBT identity of the victims, and at Muslims who responded by saying 'killing is disallowed, violence is prohibited', but then do nothing to change that which enables violence against LGBT. Think of the statement released by Muslim scholars after the shootings, Muslims who consider themselves 'progressive' just because they condemned violence against LGBT. But if you actually read that statement, it only states that violence or murder is prohibited. They conjure a well-known verse, 'And fight in the way of God against those who fight against you, but do not transgress. Truly God loves not the transgressors' (Qur’an 2: 190), but they do so, as is the case with selective indignation, by a kind of guarding themselves against any forthcoming criticisms. As if to say, 'I did this, so no one can accuse me of being against you or anyone'. But the statement then invokes the idea of 'Abrahamic morality', which of course immediately disturbs queer Muslims and queer people of faith, because that is a phrase that is employed to justify the traditional values of patriarchal systems. One shivers reading such a statement, because it does not speak about opportunities to improve the position of LGBT in religious society. They could only see the victims as LGBT's, i.e. as outsiders to Islam, outside of the Muslim community without any consideration of the fact that there are persons who are both LGBT and Muslim.

PTA: In my own field research in the Netherlands, I came across persons who indeed support 'progressive' initiatives, for example interreligious meetings and public events, but fail to connect their understanding of their rights with those of others, especially LGBT. For example, Daan Beekers and I published on the Fatih Mosque in Amsterdam, which is housed in a former church building and has long sought to renovate its entrance to be more visible as a mosque. Mosque representatives often seemed worried about their 'coming out', being insecure about being accepted if they revealed too much of themselves in the city center, close to the Western Church, the Homomonument and the Anne Frank House. Although they too dreamed of becoming an iconic sight, the festivities of the Gay Pride were, at the same time, described by the most important mosque representative as 'sexual aggression'. The mosque also refused to participate in interreligious events that included explicit support for LGBT – literally, not wanting to hold hands with LGBT representatives in public in the same way that is considered possible for reaching out to fellow Jewish or Christian activists. How do you think that I, as an academic, should deal with such an issue in my writings? For instance, would you indeed take up a strong statement about 'sexual aggression' in your analysis of the mosque's visibility, a topic that I happened to encounter in the field? I am asking because it does happen, certainly in the anthropology of Islam, that researchers are worried about damaging the image of Muslims.

DS: First, I think that not wanting to participate in an interreligious event, not wanting to stand next to someone, is worse than (kwalijsker) not wanting to be involved in the Gay Pride. Because in the first instance, that is the complete dehumanization of someone you
don't even know, but who is part of your circles with the same intention of supposedly building bridges. In my struggles – whether I agree with a mosque board or not, with their ideology, statues, thoughts – I would always defend their rights should they in any way face danger, be discriminated, feel insecure about their visibility. Regardless of what I think of that specific group, I should stand for their rights in the sense of ‘You do have the right to do things as you wish’. The same goes for the case of women’s rights, for example to wear an Islamic veil, disregarding any personal opinion on Muslim sartorial practices.

Yet, it is an eternal dilemma, not just for researchers but also for us [queer Muslim activists], but from a different angle. It is relevant to show that the group claiming to be oppressed, claiming to be disempowered to be themselves, can also limit the rights of another group based on what they consider to be their religious commitments. The most bizarre thing I ever heard was that I am myself Islamophobia, because I violate Islamic teachings by attempting to convince other Muslims to accept gays. That’s one of the weirdest things I ever heard. So, it’s not just based on that idea of ‘sexual aggression’, mentioned by the mosque representative, in the sense of not being used to those kinds of sexual expressions because that is not considered normal in our cultures. It is also an active way of oppressing another group who they think does not belong. Being gay, then, is seen as a whole different category, not as part of ‘our culture’ or ‘our religion and freedoms’, but as a choice. They never, however, see themselves as choosing to be Muslim, to be religious, to go to a mosque. Instead, for many, being Muslim is simply a fact. ‘I was born this way’ – the Islamic version of Lady Gaga. In contrast, being LGBT is seen as a choice. You can simply choose not to publically express yourself.

I do therefore support completely coming out. Simultaneously, when I am with other Muslims, the argument that religious conviction trumps LGBT rights is not convincing. In a conversation with fellow Muslims, who may be homophobic, such an argument cannot be taken seriously. Because I can see through such myths, that being anti- LGBT should be protected by religious freedom, or that it is part of one’s religion to be homophobic. Look, when we talk about ‘sexual aggression’, then we are talking about something that would influence someone, a Muslim, to such a strong extent that he cannot be himself. It is almost as if his being Muslim is threatened by the Gay Pride. And that can never be a valid argument.

PTA: After reading the interviews you gave in the Dutch media, my impression was that you refer to a great variety of national and transnational situations to think about solidarity. It seems to me, also based on our conversation today, that your view is basically that everything matters. Is that the only way to do justice to all those different people and their experiences? To refuse to say ‘this project needs to wait, because there is another, more important, goal of emancipation that needs attention first’? On the other hand, you also discuss balancing strategies and principals, yet it seems that this balancing is only justifiable if it does not jeopardize another group’s emancipation.

DS: That’s what we did with our organization maruf. We have freed queer Muslims from class, race, ethnicity, religion, and so on. We only look at one side and criti-
cally discuss only one aspect of their identity. But I cannot prioritize anything, say that something is more important than another. There is no priority list. What I do talk about, and that is typical for the Dutch context, is that we are discussing Islam and homosexuality for 25 years now, starting before 9/11. Sadly, the conversation has always been 'let's talk about homosexuality in the Muslim community because there is a problem, and because of that problem Muslims are not part of this society'; that has been a conversation from outside, but queer Muslims are increasingly speaking out for themselves, being active, and are real pioneers in that sense.

PTA: Do you see yourself as building on those past decades of Dutch gay emancipation?

DS: Certainly, but I think that it is also sometimes necessary to discuss things behind closed doors, not in the spotlights, because that can be more effective than unleashing that whole discussion into the public sphere. Why? Because there is always someone watching who forms a judgment, and I don't need judgment from a white Dutchman who then says 'see, this one belongs to us, this is a good one, and look, this is a sign that they [queer Muslims] are not truly accepted [by Muslims in the Netherlands]'. The point of my work is not to enable such judging; with whom am I actually in conversation? I do speak with imagined communities such as 'The Muslim Community', but I have never met this community. I do know my family, my neighbors, my friends, persons who visit the mosque I used to visit. They are direct actors in my story. My conversation about homosexuality with Muslims has a different proceeding style and intention than when someone who is not gay, nor Muslim, leads the dialogue. That makes sense, because I speak about different topics with other Muslims. For example, to imagine what it would be like if your son is gay. Or theological discussions, I can see right through those. There is very little knowledge about Islamic texts and homosexuality, making it impossible to have a good discussion, because 'homosexuality' was never even mentioned in Islamic texts as homosexuality until the 1960s (though other terms were applied to homosexual intercourse prior to the 19th century, including ‘zina’ and ‘fahisha’). The point is that when we shut down that discussion, what remains is a group of boys and girls, and non-binaries, who end up in the streets, who are expelled from their families, who are tied to radiators to get a taste of hell-fire.5

I then do try to link such particular instances to what happens on a grander, structural scale. What has enabled that father, what factors have made him capable, to tie his son to a radiator? I can simply say, 'Oh he has been influenced by some imam in Egypt, or wherever, who said that you have to do that to punish your son'. But also, how does he get the right and authority to do that here in the Netherlands? What is it that enables such behavior with his child? That's just an individual case, but not unrelated to mainstreaming anti-gay hatred, legalizing that hatred, by a community that says 'we are certainly not going to listen to what those Westerners have to say, we are going to fix this problem in our own way'.

And still, the majority of people that come to us, to our organization MARUF, they say 'you know what, I really have a problem if I wear a veil. I find that more
disturbing than my being lesbian or bisexual'. If a boy tells me 'I just can't get invited to a job interview, fuck your being gay', this is a serious problem of and for solidarity. At the same time, we encounter black, Muslim, transwomen who say 'fuck the discussion about racism and homophobia, I'm constantly harassed because of my appearance, by the Muslim community, by black people, by everyone who doesn't accept me'. In such a complex situation, I'm not the one who is going to tell them 'hey wait a minute, consider those racist frames'.

PTA: So, solidarity is, in the end, the capability to value all those people's concerns.

DS: Yes, without prioritizing them. If you experience that your position is one of being discriminated based on sexual orientation, then that is your struggle. I can follow that, give you whatever tools or resources I have, to deal with that, to spell things out, to fight or whatever. Simultaneously, I cannot deny the experience of someone who says 'You know, my being gay, no one sees it, I don't need to come out of the closet. I have secret encounters, in saunas, in parks. I don't need a relation with another man'. Now, when hearing something like that, I can get mad, demand that person's liberation, that he should stand up for his rights, come out, and be happy. But it is his choice in that moment. And I can judge him, thinking that he is oppressed and fears coming out, but if you really believe that people can decide for themselves how they want to regulate their visibility, then that should be respected too.

PTA: But we see how people are torn from the inside. It is too easy to say that we can simply accept different styles of visibility management. For example, when a woman arranges a fake marriage so that she can legitimately – in the eyes of members of her Moroccan-Dutch community – leave her parents' house, only to divorce immediately since now her family is no longer held responsible for any 'mistakes' on her part.

DS: Yes, I did encounter such cases, for example gays and lesbians marrying each other and performing to keep up appearances. I can judge that, thinking that I did take the step to become visible, to confront my own family, to lose many of my friends and relatives. But it's problematic if I expect that my model, how I did it, is how others should live their lives and to refuse them support if they do not live up to my ideal. That is what does happen in the Netherlands, for example if a homosexual doesn't come out or marries a woman. Regardless of how we feel about that, his story should count, be part of our narratives as well.

Looking back at my own coming out, giving an interview to a national newspaper (De Volkskrant), would I do it in that way again? Coming out in such a violent way? Because one has internalized an image that as a homosexual, you must come out, you must be visible, and even have to become an activist, because you have to do something with the position of being a queer Muslim.

PTA: I now want to turn to the question of effectivity. In what ways do you experience tension between means and ends in your activism? And, what is the practical limit, what would you really refuse to do?
DS: I was, for instance, invited to a conference in Rotterdam, which was co-organized by [the Islamophobic political party] Leefbaar Rotterdam. That’s something I don’t want to be a part of.

PTA: What about the ability to vote for conservative or right-wing parties as a homosexual? Isn’t that a kind of emancipation, that one’s sexual preferences, race, or class do not necessarily determine political preference? So, if you’re gay, you don’t have to choose the left side of the political spectrum.

DS: I do certainly agree, but the gay movement (homobeweging) has origins in the left, especially till the 1990s when it was part of left oriented anarchism. Those activists demonstrated in the streets of Amsterdam for refugees, for migrants’ rights to dual citizenship, do you understand?

PTA: Still, one could suggest that an expansion of emancipation is required to transcend, at least partially, the left-right divide vis-à-vis LGBT rights.

DS: I agree that something like gay marriage is a kind of crown jewel of liberal society, but then it is odd to witness groups calling themselves ‘gayservatives’, being proud of that, because those people suggest that ‘we’ LGBT already have it all. A movement that started with a black transwoman [Marsha P. Johnson] has in the end served the white cis-gay Republican, in the United States and in the Netherlands. The idea seems to be that whatever political doctrine we support, left or right, we should not forget that we are ‘accepted’ citizens, that we somehow arrived at the stage of being considered normal, even though that was not the case until very recently. Thus, gayservatives ignore the experiences of people who are at the bottom of that group’s ladder.

PTA: It is therefore the lack of solidarity for minorities and minorities within minorities, of gayservatives, or a party such as Leefbaar Rotterdam, that explains why you wouldn’t work with them.

DS: If you stand with a demonstration against refugees, next to banners saying ‘refugees not welcome’, then I’m not going to stand with you at the Gay Pride. Also participating with a boat is the Ministry of Security and Justice, for instance, which includes the Immigration and Naturalisation Service that deports gays who can’t prove their homosexuality to Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and other countries where those people’s lives are at risk. Those are not differences of taste, or minor mistakes, but serious ideological differences. Why should I feel solidarity with such an organization based on my preference for penises?

Although I question the state’s imposed frames, I do take the step to cooperate with the government’s years long policy of making speech about homosexuality public, a policy that I see as part and parcel of substantiating Islamophobia. Yet, one has to do something to get further. I’m still not sure whether that really is progress or regress. That’s a risk one takes as a gay Muslim activist.

PTA: Does that make you an anti-perfectionist activist? Is that a label you’d feel comfortable with?
ds: That’s the soundtrack of my life! No, I do strive towards everything running smoothly, but my final goal is not perfection, things don’t have to be fantastic. I’m not sure what it is that I want, other than that I do know and always return to the core of my work: to prevent the creation of new Dino’s, because I was badly damaged throughout my life. My activism is, in the end, a coping mechanism. Every activist would be lying if he said he worked to save the world. My first two years in the field were primarily to accept myself as I am. So, I tell you that ‘I am a queer Muslim, I am a queer Muslim’, but doubt whether that’s what I want, or actually oppose that thought: ‘That’s not something I can be. I can’t accept being both. Let’s take out Islam, because that is so much easier’. And this coping mechanism also strengthens one’s ego: I would have always remained an unimportant teacher at a high school without my activism. I’m conscious of the fact that what I do has brought me to places that I could not have accessed without coming out as a queer Muslim activist. The system that I criticize has also helped me, in a way. Therefore, the better my position, the more I feel responsible to act.

Notes

1 See for example: Anti-homobeïlid is politiek voordelig, Joop.nl, June 6, 2017; Queer moslims zijn in Nederland nog een verborgen groep, Vice.com, December 22, 2016; Het debat na de schietpartij in Orlando. Zo moeilijk is het om niet te discrimineren, DeCorrespondent.nl, June 19, 2016; Het Roze Plafond. ‘Ik heb geluk gehad, maar veel queer moslims belanden niet eens bij een sollicitatiegesprek’, Gay.nl, August 11, 2017.
5 Subhonic’s work for the organization maruf acquainted him with a young man who was mistreated in this way.