



Debating religion and LGBTQ+: Question Time 2019 teachers' notes

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Follow-up questions

Qari Asim speaks of the need for religious institutions to maintain the line of tradition while at the same time recognising the changing context of contemporary society. Students could research incidents on this threshold such as the Ashers Baking Company case in Northern Ireland, the B&B owners in Cornwall or the Birmingham parents objecting to sex and relationships education in primary school.

- What are the issues at stake here?
- What answers might be given to the student who asks about a 'fixation' with homosexuality?

Featured panellists' biographies

The Reverend Laura Jørgensen is the Rector of St Botolph without Aldgate, a Church of England parish church at the eastern boundary of the City of London, looking west towards the financial heart of the country, and east to Petticoat Lane and Brick Lane markets. In addition to leading the worshipping community there, she is also active in the local resident and business community, and is a trustee of a number of charities, mainly with an educational focus. She is a co-opted member of the City of London Corporation's Community and Children's Services Committee. St Botolph's is an inclusive church, particularly known for its welcome to LGBT people and Laura is passionate in advocating for change in the church on issues relating to sexuality. Prior to her current role, she was a Minor Canon at St Paul's Cathedral responsible for ensuring the day-to-day services ran smoothly, and for organising larger scale services. Laura has rhyming degrees: Geology, which she read for at Imperial College, and Theology, which she undertook as part of her training for ministry.

Qari Asim MBE is a senior Imam at Makkah Mosque in Leeds and Legal Director at global law firm, DLA Piper. Qari is passionate about fostering relations between communities and is a trustee of Christian Muslim Forum. He is an executive board member of National Council of Imams & Rabbis, deputy chair of Government's Anti-Muslim Hatred/ Islamophobia Working Group and a faith advisor to the Near Neighbours programme. He also acts as a consultant to a number of mosques, institutions, public bodies and agencies, including Mosaic, founded by HRH Prince of Wales, to

inspire young people to realise their talents and potential. He is interested in issues related to government policy, education, business, leadership, youth empowerment, gender equity, environment and social welfare. He is a blogger and columns or comments from him appear in *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *Yorkshire Post* and *Huffington Post*.

Context of the event

The Westminster Abbey Learning Department's largest 16+ event is the annual Question Time, following the format of the popular TV show. Over 250 students took the opportunity to engage with public figures from a variety of backgrounds on issues of their own choosing. For the Abbey, this is an opportunity to discuss the religious perspective on current affairs as on the panel each year are voices from the major UK faiths. Questions from students this year included the role of religion in the public space, the climate crisis, gender inequality and Islamophobia and led to passionate and articulate contributions from the floor, as well as from the distinguished panel.

This year's event was chaired by Samira Ahmed and our panel comprised of:

- Qari Asim MBE - Senior Imam and Inter-Faith Advisor
- The Reverend Laura Jørgensen - Rector of St Botolph without Aldgate, in the City
- Agamemnon Otero MBE - Co-founding director of community energy company Repowering
- The Rt Hon. Lord Willetts FRS - Executive Chair of the Resolution Foundation

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Transcript

Student 1: We're asking whether you think that the church has a heightened responsibility in this day in age to be more inclusive, especially in regards to LGBT rights and to what extent?

Student 2: Why does religion not accept homosexuality when they claim to accept people as they are?

LJ: I think the church absolutely has to put its hands up and say it has not treated LGBT people well in any way. There are so many people have been damaged, there are so many people who have felt hurt and excluded. I have to say at this point that the Church of England official line is that LGBT people are welcome but, for example, clergy are not allowed to be in same sex marriages and there are a lot of issues. So I have to say that I tow the line and I don't do gay blessings in my church but I absolutely argue for change because I think it's appalling the way that the church has treated LGBT people. And if you come to my church, you will find there is a whole range of people there we talk about being an inclusive church, not just in terms of sexuality but also in terms of race or mental health. Everybody is welcome in my church and you will see a whole range of people. I think what we need to do with that from the earliest age is to teach people a model of good and healthy relationships. But I want kids to know all the way through school that they are valued, that they

don't have to settle for relationships which are unhealthy, abusive or damaging, that they need to be sure of themselves and who they are and they need to be in relationships that are going to enhance their lives and the lives of their partners.

QA: Firstly I think God has given dignity to every single human being and as a result we need to respect their rights, we need to value their life. And any form of hatred, abuse, violence against anyone because of their belief, because of their lifestyle, because of their outlook on life, because the way they dress, because the way they feel etc. is absolutely not acceptable and cannot be sanctioned by God. So in terms of LGBT community, they are welcome in mosque, they can pray in mosques, they can do what everyone else does. In terms of how the faith itself is tackling the issue I think it's going to take a while because with every religious institution, you know every era throws up a challenge and the leadership has to deal with that challenge not breaking away with the past but also realising the changing context that we're living in. And it's really important that there is an unbroken chain but at the same time recognition of the context in which we live in.

Student 3: Because homosexuality is seen as one of the biggest thing but then in Leviticus 20, for example, disrespecting your parents is seen as punishable by capital punishment the same as homosexuality. Then why is it that we are put more, I don't how to word it, but why is it that we see homosexuality as seeing as a bigger scene? If even disrespecting your parents is punishable by capital punishment, why is it that homosexuality, like why do we fixate on the idea of homosexuality?

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