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Bilal Qureshi, *Washington Post*

The Pink Line

The World's Queer Frontiers

Mark Gevisser

LONGLISTED FOR THE RATHBONES FOLIO PRIZE

A NEW GLOBAL CULTURE WARS?

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IN MARCH 2009, the year before Tiwonge Chimbalanga was arrested in Malawi, a prominent pastor sent out an invitation to a seminar to expose “the Homosexuals’ Agenda” in a country to the north: Uganda. “Today,” wrote the pastor, Stephen Langa, “the well funded and well organized homosexual machinery is taking one country after another by de-criminalizing homosexual practices in those countries and legalizing gay marriages in some of them. Uganda is now under extreme pressure from the same group to de-criminalize homosexuality.”

Langa’s seminar promised to help Africans “protect themselves” from this juggernaut, and was headlined by three American Evangelical speakers. The first two were Caleb Lee Brundidge and Don Schmierer, the United States’ most notorious conversion-therapy practitioners. The third was Scott Lively, whose 1995 book *The Pink Swastika* alleged that a homosexual plot to take over the world began in Nazi Germany, and that gays worldwide now connived to foment “social chaos and destruction” through gay marriage, divorce, child abuse, and AIDS.

An African cleric named Kapy Kaoma, based in Boston, responded to Langa’s invitation, and traveled to Uganda to attend the seminar. Kaoma was an Anglican priest from Zambia, deeply troubled by what he saw as the American religious right’s exporting of homophobia to his native continent, and the subsequent hate-mongering this engendered. Kaoma had first noticed this in his own church, when American Episcopalians opposed to the ordination of gay priests and to same-sex marriage had made common cause with African Anglicans in the 1990s. Now Kaoma was focused, specifically, on the way American evangelists were trying to influence public policy in African countries, according to a culture wars script they had honed back home.

And so Kaoma—a married heterosexual man with children and the disarmingly solicitous manner of a parish priest—went undercover to Stephen Langa’s anti-gay seminar. In the paper he published after his visit, Kaoma cited Scott Lively’s keynote address, in which the American pastor compared the decriminalization of homosexuality to legalizing bestiality and child molestation. He reported on his conversations with participants who spoke of how they had been awoken by the American speakers to the need, as one put it, to “stand firm to fight homosexuality.” And he confirmed that, while in Uganda, Scott Lively met with the parliamentarian who had authored the country’s proposed anti-homosexuality legislation, which included the death penalty for repeat offenders. Kaoma called his report *Globalizing the Culture Wars*, to capture the way the American religious right was taking its mission abroad, having lost the battle back home.

The term *culture wars* was first used, in the United States, to describe the division over “moral” issues activated by conservatives in the Republican Party in the late 1970s, to mobilize voters and influence policy in an increasingly secular and liberal society. American electoral politics subsequently cleaved along social issues: “blue” Democrats might believe in spending on social welfare and government, but they were increasingly defined by their secular values and social liberalism; “red” Republicans might want small government or fiscal conservatism, but they were increasingly defined by their belief that religious faith should set national values, and by their social conservatism. Beginning with a push-back against *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion, American culture warriors staked battlegrounds over reproductive rights, over sex education and science education, and then, of course, over gay rights. These battles came to a head in the early twenty-first century, over marriage equality.

But by the time Kapya Kaoma was listening to Scott Lively in Kampala, the polls were showing, clearly, the trend among Americans toward supporting same-sex marriage. The religious right had “spent decades demonizing LGBT people and working to keep them in the closet,” wrote the Southern Poverty Law Center in a 2013 report. But this religious right now found itself “on the losing side of a battle that it now seems incapable of winning. As a result, these groups and individuals have increasingly shifted their attention to other nations, where anti-gay attitudes are much stronger and violence against the LGBT community far too common.”

This project might have found advocates on the lunatic fringe, like Scott Lively, but it had very establishment roots. It was empowered by the White House itself, during the tenure of the Evangelical George W. Bush, and specifically the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. PEPFAR prioritized “faith-based” HIV programming, including the preaching of abstinence over the distribution of condoms. What David Kuo, the key architect of Bush’s Evangelical policies, said about American domestic policy applied to global AIDS policy, too: “We knew government couldn’t

feed Jesus to people,” wrote Kuo later, “but if we could get money to private religious groups—virtually all of whom were Christian—we could show them to the dining room.” American Christian organizations obtained PEPFAR grants and established surrogates in Africa and elsewhere, many of whom worked off the American culture wars script. With their American funding, they gained significant institutional power, and came to influence national politics in countries like Uganda and Malawi.

At the same time, a group of American politicians and clerics known as “the Family” became involved in helping set social policy in several countries: their existence was first exposed by the journalist Jeff Sharlet, who labeled them “America’s secret theocrats.” They saw the opportunity in Uganda, where their point person was David Bahati, a Wharton-educated legislator who would author the country’s anti-homosexuality bill. “We are *going* to get the bill through, now or later,” said Bahati to Sharlet when they met in Kampala in 2009. “And when we do, we will close the door to homosexuality, and open society to something larger.” That, wrote Sharlet, “was the crux of the matter for Bahati. To him, homosexuality is only a symptom of what he learned from the Family to be a greater plague: government by people, not by God.”

The African continent was fertile ground for such dogma, since “government by people” had not turned out so well in much of it. Like Islamists, Christian evangelists had a social mission *and* the funds to provide services—such as health and education—that failing states were increasingly unable to deliver. They were also syncretic and ecumenical, taking on indigenous modes of devotion and integrating them into worship. And perhaps most important, they promised a path to prosperity through devotion, and could be joyous and exuberant oases in a very difficult world. There were some powerful converts, including Uganda’s first lady, Janet Museveni, a devotee of the Saddleback Church’s Rick Warren. Warren would say on a 2008 visit to Uganda that “homosexuality is not a natural way of life and thus not a human right.”

It would take four years for David Bahati’s Anti-Homosexuality Act

to be passed in December 2013 and then to be struck down, seven months later, by the country's Constitutional Court for procedural reasons. In the intermediate time, a wave of violent homophobia swept Uganda: a prominent activist was killed, many others were outed by a sensationalist media, and many fled into exile. The United States applied sanctions against the country, and Scott Lively stood trial in his hometown in Massachusetts for "crimes against humanity." When the judge finally ruled in 2017 that he could not take the case because it was outside his jurisdiction, he nonetheless said he believed the American pastor had violated international law by having aided "a vicious and frightening campaign of repression against LGBTI persons in Uganda."

These global culture wars played out elsewhere, too. In Belize, a tiny former British colony on the Caribbean coast, an activist named Caleb Orozco went to court in 2013 to get the country's law against buggery (the British legal word for sodomy) declared unconstitutional. Orozco's major opponent was one Scott Stirm, an in-country Texan missionary whose funding and legal support came from two large right-wing American Christian organizations. Orozco eventually won his case in 2016, represented in court by Lord Peter Goldsmith, the former U.K. attorney general, and supported by international human rights organizations.

As in Uganda, both sides claimed they were victims of a proxy war, alleging undue interference by outside players with their own global agendas. The Southern Poverty Law Center accused the American Christian organizations of "fanning the flames of anti-gay hatred" with "vicious propaganda, born and bred by American ideologues"; Stirm hit back that his American supporters were only assisting Belizeans against "the homosexual global attack on morality & family values." The following year, after past and present U.S. ambassadors to Belize called on the country to repeal the law, Stirm's Belize Association of Evangelical Churches retorted that "no nation, large or small, has the right to manipulate, coerce, or interfere in the processes of another nation."

In the end, of course, the Belize Supreme Court decided the matter

according to its own constitution, and ruled in Caleb Orozco's favor. He became something of a local hero, and was given several assignments not related to LGBT rights by the government. Belize moved on.

THE SAME BROAD set of American Christian actors were busy in another part of the world where a Pink Line was being drawn against the alleged cultural imperialism of Western liberals. Here the imperial "aggressor" was the European Union, accused of meddling in the affairs of the countries of the former Soviet bloc. The fact that there was a demographic crisis in these countries—populations were plummeting—meant that they were fertile ground for the "pro-family" culture wars agenda: the fight against abortion, contraception, and homosexual families. As early as 1995, American religious conservatives came to Moscow to hatch the World Congress of Families (WCF) with their Russian counterparts. By 2015, the WCF was "one of the most influential American organizations involved in the export of hate," according to the leading U.S. LGBT rights organization, the Human Rights Campaign.

The "family values fervor" that swept through Russia at the time can be traced to two 2010 WCF encounters, according to the *Mother Jones* journalist Hannah Levintova: a Sanctity of Motherhood conference in Moscow, at which the WCF's Larry Jacobs was a keynote speaker; and the presence of a Russian Orthodox Church emissary, a former nightclub owner named Alexey Komov, at a WCF meeting in Colorado the same year. Later, Vladimir Putin and Hungary's Viktor Orbán took up "family values," but the notion was seeded in Eastern Europe through this relationship between American Evangelical and Russian Orthodox Christians.

Alexey Komov was by no means the only or even the most powerful advocate for Russia's "gay propaganda" legislation, but he was the primary link between Russian and American conservatives. The WCF helped him set up a Russian group called FamilyPolicy.Ru, which provided Russian

lawmakers with data and strategy from the American experience. This was a script originally written in the United States, starting with Anita Bryant's 1977 Save Our Children campaign in Florida, which sought to expunge all references to homosexuality from curricula, and which resulted in several "no promo homo" laws across the country. In 2017, seven American states still had these laws on the books, which long predated the Russian ones, as did Margaret Thatcher's notorious Section 28 amendment, which forbade local authorities from "promoting" homosexuality in schools. The Thatcher amendment was only repealed in 2003.

After Russia passed its federal gay propaganda law in 2013, its author Yelena Mizulina successfully introduced a law banning the adoption of Russian children by foreign homosexual couples. To make her case, Mizulina used the controversial research of the University of Texas sociologist Mark Regnerus, which claimed very negative outcomes for children of homosexual parents, including increased vulnerability to abuse. Homosexual parents would teach their children to be gay just as alcoholics would be more likely to have children who drank, Mizulina told a State Duma meeting. This was the kind of "social experiment that the West is conducting on its own children," and Russia had had enough of such experimentation, "where the family was destroyed."

If American right-wing Christians were sharing a culture wars playbook with their Russian brethren, the Russians believed they were educating the Americans, in turn, about what Alexey Komov called "the dangers of this new totalitarianism," on the basis of their prior experience of communism. Komov told *Mother Jones* in 2014 that there were "influential lobbies" seeking "to promote an aggressive social transformation campaign using LGBT activists as the means. We see it as the continuation of the same radical revolutionary agenda that cost so many lives in the Soviet Union, when they destroyed churches. This political correctness is used . . . to oppress religious freedoms and to destroy the family."

This idea ignited a new ecumenical movement of Orthodox, Catholic, and Evangelical opponents to the new red under the bed, "gender ide-

ology," in which marriage equality and an acceptance of transgenderism were examples of the gravest threat yet to humanity since communism: a denial of God-given nature. The movement ranged from Latin America (where it was embraced by Jair Bolsonaro) through Donald Trump's United States and back to former communist countries themselves: not only Russia, but Hungary and Poland too. The archbishop of Krakow, Marek Jędraszewski, encapsulated this new ideology in an August 2019 homily when he said that while Poland was "no longer affected by the red plague," there was a "new one that wants to control our souls, hearts and minds . . . not Marxist, Bolshevik, but born of the same spirit, neo-Marxist. Not red, but rainbow."

In the Law and Justice Party's electoral campaign, its leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, praised the archbishop for his stand: "[We must] live in freedom," he said, "and not be subject to all that is happening to the west of our borders . . . where freedom is being eliminated." A poll taken at the time showed that 31 percent of Polish men under thirty-nine saw "LGBT" and "gender ideology" to be the greatest threat to their country, more than Russia or the climate crisis.

MEANWHILE, ON THE other side of the Pink Line:

In October 2012, I sat in the medieval gilt-and-velvet chamber of the House of Lords listening to a historic first-ever debate on LGBT issues in the British Parliament: the Conservative peer Lord Lexden had used his privileges "to ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the treatment of homosexual men and women in the developing world." There was consensus from all—to the left and to the right of the Speaker's scepter—that the United Kingdom should advance and protect the rights of homosexuals globally.

The Labour Party's Lord Chris Smith—formerly Britain's first openly gay cabinet minister under Tony Blair—lauded the progress made in his country over the previous fifteen years "in securing the rights and liberties

of lesbians and gay men." But it was "particularly shaming" that this was not true in much of the rest of the Commonwealth, where homosexuality remained illegal in forty-two of the seventy-eight member-states—including Malawi, Uganda, and Belize. The "bitter irony" was that these laws "have been inherited from us. I believe that that gives us a special responsibility to do whatever we can to help to change things."

When Britain's Buggery Act—which originally carried the death penalty for homosexual acts—was first passed in 1533, it was staked along a Tudor Pink Line. It was introduced by Henry VIII as a pretext for raids on the Catholic Church, whose monasteries were seen as hotbeds of homosexual activity—and also harbored the gold the Protestant king craved. "The desire of the king for the wealth of the Church had turned sin into a crime," writes Peter Ackroyd. The death penalty was dropped in 1861, but in 1885 the law was amended to criminalize any sexual contact—or intention of sexual contact—between men as "gross indecency." It was this provision that saw Oscar Wilde jailed, and thousands of other men, too, until homosexual acts between two consenting adults in private were finally decriminalized in the United Kingdom in 1967, long after everywhere else in Western Europe.

The same Victorian era that expanded buggery into "gross indecency" also extended sodomy as a crime to the British colonies, through Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay's Indian Penal Code of 1860, which provided the basis for most of the laws across the empire. Clause 377 proscribed "carnal knowledge against the order of nature," and arose out of two very particular colonial preoccupations, the legal scholar Alok Gupta has written: the fear of "moral infection" from the natives, and the mission of "moral reform" among these new subjects.

Britain shed most of its empire before it decriminalized homosexuality in 1967, and this meant that homosexual acts remained illegal in almost all the newly independent countries of the Commonwealth—although this was seldom enforced before LGBT rights began to be asserted in the twenty-first century. In his speech at Westminster, Chris

Smith was right about the irony here: some in these countries used this colonial legislation to back up their claims that homosexuality was unacceptable, and that the demand for its decriminalization was a neocolonial slight on their sovereignty.

Still, the notion that Britain had a "special responsibility" to advocate for the decriminalization of laws it had introduced to the world suggested a new civilizing mission, or at least a new ideological project for the liberal West. A year previously, in October 2011, the British prime minister David Cameron mooted that British aid to countries be conditional on their decriminalization of homosexuality. The response was rage: in a typical comment, the Tanzanian foreign minister fumed that "we are not ready to allow any rich nation to give us aid based on unacceptable conditions simply because we are poor." African activists reported that there was a significant uptick in homophobic violence following Cameron's statement, and almost all the continent's LGBT organizations and leaders signed a letter condemning an approach that could only make life more difficult for queer Africans—who were, of course, the beneficiaries of aid alongside the rest of their compatriots, and who would, as happened in Malawi, be further scapegoated if aid was withdrawn on their account.

The Ugandan story perhaps best expresses the effect of the threat of such international pressure, and the bind in which Western countries (and some African leaders) found themselves. In a 2010 meeting with the American ambassador, the Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni actually condemned David Bahati's anti-homosexuality bill, calling its harsh penalties "unacceptable" and saying it would be shelved. A leaked U.S. State Department memo offers a key clue to why Museveni changed his mind four years later and signed the bill into law: "The President twice referred to a recent local political cartoon depicting him on this issue as a puppet of Secretary Clinton [and other Western leaders], and asked international donors to stand down to give him room to deal with the anti-homosexuality legislation his own way."

In the years following this meeting, the sponsors of the Ugandan bill promoted it to murderous effect, David Cameron made his comments on conditional aid, Hillary Clinton made her “gay rights are human rights” speech at the United Nations, and the Obama administration declared the promotion of LGBT rights a foreign policy priority. The U.S., Britain, and other countries threatened sanctions if Uganda passed the anti-homosexuality bill into law. By 2014, Museveni’s attitudes had hardened, and—faced with his first serious political opposition in twenty-three years in power—he felt he could not afford further allegations of being a neocolonial stooge. The West’s concerted opposition to the bill, he said upon signing it into law, was “an attempt at social imperialism, to impose social values.”

By signing it, he was performing a gesture of anti-colonial self-determination against such “imperialism,” no matter that the ideas powering the bill had come from the West, too.

THE POLICIES THAT Hillary Clinton announced at the United Nations in December 2011 had an almost immediate effect. American embassies provided much-needed sanctuary and relief funding for persecuted locals, and the U.S. opened its doors to LGBT refugees as never before: even well into the Trump era, after 2016, American missions remained vital refuges for persecuted queer activists in Africa and Asia. But inevitably, this human rights policy became entwined (or at the very least associated) with America’s military agenda. In July 2011, even before the Clinton speech, the U.S. embassy in Pakistan decided to host an LGBT Pride event at its Islamabad compound—just two months after Osama bin Laden had been assassinated nearby in an American airstrike on Pakistani sovereign territory. Anti-American locals were quick to capitalize on the connection: “We condemn the American conspiracy to encourage bisexuality in our country,” said Mohammad Hussain Mehnati, a leading establishment

cleric, at a rally to protest the event. “They have destroyed us physically, imposed the so-called war on terrorism on us and now they have unleashed cultural terrorism on us.”

In 2010, President Obama had passed the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Repeal Act, allowing openly gay men and lesbians to serve in the U.S. Armed Forces. By 2013, there was even a Kandahar LGBT Pride event at the U.S. military base in the beleaguered Afghan city, and a Department of Defense promotional video about it. One of the gay American soldiers interviewed said: “I think it’s very important that we are here representing the United States of America, and we hope that when we leave here, we have left all positive qualities, and what America is like, and that we are an equal country, which treats all our citizens equally.”

Some LGBT activists began to critique the way that homosexuals had become part of the establishment in countries like the U.S. by gaining the rights to marry and serve in the military—and part of a civilizing mission. One of the implications was that gay people were being enlisted to justify nationalism and racism, as had happened in the new right-wing politics of Western Europe exemplified by Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands. This was termed “homonationalism” by the scholar Jasbir Puar. Israel was cited as a prime example, accused of “pinkwashing” its human rights abuses against Palestinians by embracing LGBT rights to brand itself as an oasis of liberal freedom. Indeed, the Israel Defense Forces had welcomed openly LGBT conscripts long before Obama repealed the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy.

Some activists and scholars questioned the value of a Western identity-based approach to the extension of sexual freedom in parts of the world without the liberal Western tradition that spawned the contemporary LGBT movement, societies that had their own histories and customs for accommodating difference. The most eloquent, if extreme, proponent of this view was the Palestinian academic Joseph Massad, a professor at Columbia University.

In 2002, Massad published a provocative and influential essay in which he argued that Western human rights activists and tourists alike had disrupted age-old modes of homosexual activity in the Arab world by foisting the “gay” label onto them. This, he maintained, had forced an unspoken but widely accepted practice into the light of day, and demanded that a set of rights be attached to them. Massad pointed the finger at Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, as well as specifically LGBT-focused groups such as the New York-based International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission; he called this nexus “the Gay International.” Their advocacy provoked unnecessary cultural conflict, he wrote, and a new awareness of homosexuality that actually shut down space rather than opened it up, by forcing the fluid sexuality of Arab men into the “Western binary” of “gay” or “straight.” Suddenly the customs that provided cover for homosexual activity, such as holding hands in public or washing one another in a *hammam*, became suspect.

Certainly, I found several examples of this dynamic in my travels, from the way holding hands did indeed become suspect in Nigeria after the new 2014 law criminalized any “public show of same sex amorous relationship,” to the disappearance of the *goor-jigeen*—an age-old transgender community in Senegal—after the moral panic of 2008. But while Massad’s reading is helpful in understanding this complex dynamic, it retreats into a kind of willful nostalgia: like Macky Sall, who expatriated the call for LGBT rights in Senegal (“you are asking this from us”) or Cardinal Robert Sarah, who believed that the poor were being “bought,” or the Ukrainian president Leonid Kravchuk, who in 1999 blamed “foreign movies” for homosexuality in his country, Massad imagined natives thoroughly insulated from global influences before the Gay Internationalists came along, and unable to think—and dream—for themselves.

SOMETIMES, DURING THE YEARS I was researching this book, I closed my eyes and saw a Red army thundering across the African savanna—or the

plains of Eastern Europe—led by Vladimir Putin waving a “traditional values” flag, with phalanxes ranged behind him of American right-wing evangelists, Catholic anti-“gender theory” warriors, imams and priests and nativists, and authoritarian leaders fearing democracy. Coming to confront them from the west was a Blue army behind Barack Obama, commanding international human rights organizations, Western development agencies, the international AIDS agencies, globalizing multinational corporations, and LGBT activists. I was in the Blue army, of course.

The image was misguided. It must have been formed, somewhere in my brain, by overexposure to the ideas of Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations*, so prevalent around the turn of the millennium but critiqued for their geographic determinism and a monolithic sketching of the world into an increasingly democratic “west” versus a “rest” destined for dictatorship.

The world was more complicated.

In *Globalizing the Culture Wars*, Kopya Kaoma writes about how African clerics became “proxies in a distinctly U.S. conflict,” following the great battle in the American Episcopalian Church over the ordination of the openly gay priest Gene Robinson as bishop of New Hampshire in 2003. Kaoma reviews the way American dissidents funded African Anglicans and provided them with anti-gay doctrine, and he cites a researcher who concluded that “what has long been portrayed as the authentic voice of African Anglicanism is, manifestly, not African, and perhaps never has been.”

But you could look at it another way.

The Nigerian bishop Peter Akinola commanded a flock of seventeen million, the biggest by far in the Anglican Communion, and at the 1998 Lambeth Conference he led the campaign against the ordination of gay priests and the blessing of same-sex unions, achieving the stunning victory of 526 votes to 70. The Africans had the numbers and they had the doctrine, and it became a matter of pride for them that they were holding the line, no longer the savages but now actually the bulwark against a new barbarian at the gate. Taking up the cudgels against homosexuality

“offered African clergy a way to symbolize the inexorable reality that power was shifting within the [Anglican] Communion towards the more populous African constituencies,” the political scientist Rahul Rao writes. Even if the African churches had become beneficiaries of their American brethren (or perhaps because of it), there was a redemptive energy to the African defense of biblical proscriptions against homosexuality. Whatever people in the West might think, it was, for them, an *African* position.

ONCE, IN WASHINGTON, D.C., in 2013, I heard Kapya Kaoma give a lecture about the impact of the American religious right. He insisted that homophobia was a Western import to his native Africa, brought first by Victorian missionaries in the nineteenth century and then by American evangelists in the twenty-first.

He was challenged by another African present, the Cameroonian activist Joel Nana, who led a continent-wide coalition of LGBT organizations dealing with men’s health. Nana, of course, was in the Blue army. He spoke not only of the indigenous homophobia in African society but of his own personal growth and development while working for the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. He wanted to know if he was any more or less “authentic” than the bilious Pastor Martin Sempa, the leading Ugandan homophobe in the Red army, trained in Texas and a beneficiary of much of the American religious right’s largesse, or Pastor Stephen Langa, trained in Canada, the man who brought Scott Lively to Uganda.

Nana worried that if you treated homophobia solely as a Western export, you were viewing Africans once more as the passive receptacles of Western ideas—which was exactly the way the evangelists viewed Africans when they accused them of being corrupted, or bought, by an international gay agenda. “If we truly believe that Africans are human, we should also be able to understand that they can make their own deci-

sions,” he later said to me. “These decisions may be influenced by the need to protect or to violate rights, for real or perceived personal or collective good, but they remain African decisions. They are owned and defended. Denying them the agency that allows them to do that is similar to stripping them of their humanity.”