

Homosexuality immoral, but not criminal: Religious leaders

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DELHI/MUMBAI: In the first flurry of reactions, religious leaders appeared to be slamming the de-criminalization of gay sex. But while most conservative scholars and clerics remain opposed to homosexuality as an article of faith, many say that they aren't advocating making it a criminal act as Section 377 of IPC did.

Writer and philosopher Deepak Chopra told TOI from his home in New York, "A new morality must evolve that is based on a true understanding of human nature, that is also consistent with its biology. Homosexuality has been part of the human condition for as long as human beings have existed. The Delhi High Court should be congratulated for making a decision that finally catches up with our times."

Then, while Delhi Catholic Archdiocese has described homosexuality as "unnatural", it says it has nothing against its de-criminalization. Spokesperson of Delhi Catholic Archdiocese, Father Dominic Emmanuel, told TOI, "Homosexuality is a sin — as opposed to a crime. But we believe that those who indulge in it should be treated with respect and compassion."

In a newspaper article, Father Dominic was even more forthright. "It needs to be made clear that the Christian community does not (repeat it does not) treat people with homosexual tendencies as criminals. Nor does it believe that they can be regarded on par with criminals. Therefore, the church has no serious objection to the repealing of Section 377."

"The Vatican's stand on this is quite clear: Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided," wrote Father Dominic.

Similarly, some Muslim clerics and scholars, too, favour de-criminalization of homosexuality, saying that while Islam does not permit homosexuality, this doesn't mean it should be equated with criminality.

"The Quran condemns homosexuality, but doesn't prescribe any punishment for it. It's a sin, not a crime. Sin is between Allah and the sinner, but crime concerns the entire society. So, sexual minorities should be left to their conscience. They are answerable to Allah for their act and should not be treated as criminals," said Islamic scholar Asghar Ali Engineer.

Maulana Abu Zafar Hassan Nadvi, a cleric, too accepts that since the Quran is silent on the punishment for homosexuality, it should be treated as an irreligious, immoral act. "Every non-religious act is not liable to be punished. Just as we don't pronounce death for atheists, homosexuals should be left alone until they get reformed," said Maulana Nadvi.

Some clerics maintain that since Indian state is secular, it should not press for laws guided by religions. "Why should we expect that what applies in Saudi Arabia or Iran must also apply in India in regard to punishment for homosexuality? As a religious person, I condemn homosexuality. But I don't have the right to declare homosexuals criminals," said Maulana Zaheer Abbas Rizvi, a Shia scholar and member of the All India Ulema Council.

Said Deepak Chopra, "What is religion? And what is morality? Religion is nothing more than cultural mythology...A religion that gets frozen and is not consistent with our current understanding of evolution, biology or cosmogenesis ceases to serve people and becomes a self-righteous, immoral force in society. Hence all religions have become quarrelsome, divisive and idiotic."

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