

concerning contagion — and in this way the HIV/AIDS pandemic has been used as a tool to prevent, slow or reverse progress toward LGBT equality in many parts of the world. Throughout the early years of the disease, coming out as gay and serving as an activist meant the difference between life and death. In a hypothetical world free of the virus, it is possible that many places only just now teetering toward tolerance or acceptance would have done so a generation ago.

Western Europe versus the Middle East

Western Europe and the Middle East are homes to mature nations that have experienced several cycles of expansion and recession. The United States by comparison (at only 231 years old) has not yet existed for as long as a dynasty in these nations — the Valois family alone ruled France for over 260 years. We are, developmentally speaking, cultural teenagers and this is a main source of tension throughout the world regarding our intrusive relations with older countries.

If Europe and Asia have recovered from wars, epidemics and invasions, why does Western Europe foster so much more tolerance for LGBT people than the Middle East and other Islamic nations? It isn't because Christianity is more accepting of LGBT people than Islam.

Europe experienced the fall of Rome, the Crusades, several bouts of Black Plague, multiple

inquisitions, varied religious wars, industrialization and Colonialism. The Middle East missed out on some of that, but not most; however, historically, Europe has a much wider influence in the development of world events because of Colonialism and the wealth it brought Europe.

The Middle East suffered economically when Europe came to power, became entrenched in religious fundamentalism and is now largely suffering the effects of being trapped in a sort of medieval mindset. The Middle East is decades (and in some places centuries) behind Western Europe, in terms of the modern cultural development that results in a separation of church and state. Why? There are three reasons: The Inquisition, the Reformation and the Holocaust.

Many Western Europeans are weary of religious zealotry and are suspicious of anything resembling fundamentalism or theocracy. As nations they have seen untold millions of people murdered horribly over the centuries in the name of religious beliefs. Add that to the living memory of World War II and you have a situation where people are willing to re-examine their beliefs and, as a result, are more likely to tolerate difference. By contrast, the president of Iran publicly calls into question the reality of the Holocaust and the existence of LGBT people in Iran. How could tolerance for LGBT people be realistically expected in that context?

Equality and legislation around the world

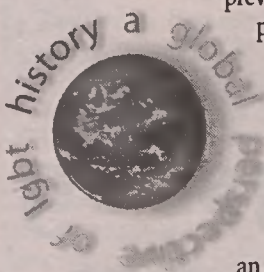
With these developments in Western Europe and the Middle East in mind, it is interesting to look at where LGBT rights have developed and where they have lagged. Not surprisingly, Western

Europe offers the most consistent high levels of LGBT tolerance in the world, as does Canada. Oceania is an open place by comparison and the Americas are catching up (although parts of the Caribbean and Latin America are particularly hostile). Some parts of Asia are coming along, but Africa in general and the Middle East in particular are deadly for LGBT people. One might be shocked, however, to learn that gay marriage and protection from discrimination are built into South Africa's constitution — whether it is enforced or not is another question.

The areas most dangerous to LGBT people are those suffering poverty, enduring ultra-conservative political regimes or being governed by law codes based on monotheistic religious doctrines. However, human rights abuses do not go unnoticed, and economic repercussions can be motivating. Capitalism may very well buy the egalitarianism that common sense and a humanitarian spirit can't afford.

As technology shrinks the world and the cultural lines separating ideas and customs become more blurred, LGBT communities around the world will gradually come to places of greater esteem and parity. The boulder of inevitability has been rolling with increasing momentum for nearly 40 years — within our lifetimes we can expect that our rights and families will be afforded, on a far broader scale, the respect and dignity they deserve. There is still work to do, but the goal is in sight. ▀

— Jack Kirven holds an M.F.A. from UCLA, and his research there focused on issues concerning LGBT culture, history, identity, art, performance, political activism and the politics of gender expression and sexual identity.



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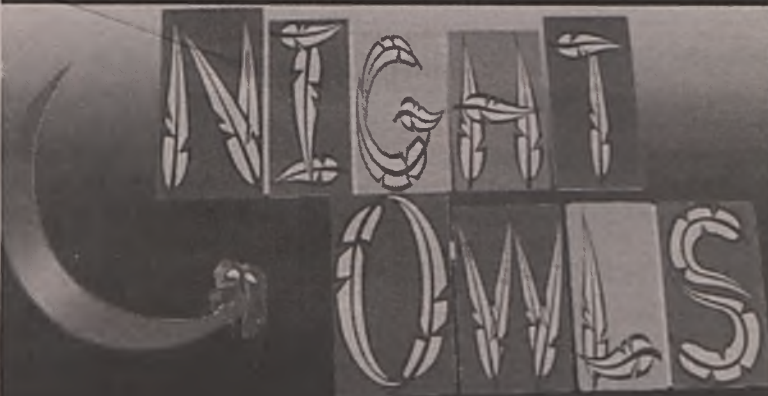
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