

The HRC Religion and Faith Program is working to create a world where nobody is forced to choose between who they are, whom they love and what they believe. Thanks in part to this work, more and more Muslims aren't simply engaging in dialogue around LGBTQ equality, they're leading the conversation. They do this work not in spite of their Islamic belief or values, but because of them. To learn more, visit [hrc.org/muslim](http://hrc.org/muslim)

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# COMING HOMETO ISLAM AND TO SELF



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# Welcome

Dear Friends,



All across this country and around the world, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people are having important conversations about the role of faith in our lives. I'm proud of the contribution this document makes to that conversation, particularly as it relates to Muslim communities. I especially want to thank the advisory team of leading Muslim scholars and activists who helped shape and hone this work. Their expertise made its wisdom and inclusive message possible.

The Human Rights Campaign's series on *Coming Home: to Faith, to Spirit, to Self* has great personal significance for me. Today, this nation is divided into two distinct Americas—one where legal equality for LGBTQ people is becoming a reality and the other where LGBTQ people still lack access to some of the most basic necessities of life—through legal and cultural barriers. American LGBTQ Muslims face unique challenges within both those spheres. I hope the pages that follow speak to the real challenges facing those working to live openly and fully, as their true and complete selves.

Wherever you are on this journey, we hope this resource helps you on your way.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chad Griffin". The signature is fluid and cursive.

**Chad Griffin**  
*President, Human Rights Campaign*

# Table of Contents

- I. A NEW DAY BRINGS NEW QUESTIONS
- II. A WOMAN'S JOURNEY TO SELF
- III. MOVING OUT OF ISOLATION
- IV. A TRANSGENDER STORY
- V. CHALLENGES IN A POST-9/11 WORLD
- VI. EMBRACING TRADITIONS
- VII. CHOOSING ISLAM
- VIII. ENGINES OF CHANGE
- IX. WORDS OF WISDOM
- X. TAKING STOCK AND TAKING STEPS

A Special Note: This publication is primarily intended to serve as a general guide for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) American Muslims who wish to enrich their faith in Islam.

Some names with no organizational affiliation have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.



**In the Name of God,  
the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful**

## **I. A New Day Brings New Questions**

Life for many LGBTQ people has changed dramatically in recent years. Among other breakthroughs, marriage equality has become a reality. What few people realize is that these historic shifts are occurring not in spite of religious traditions but because faith communities are taking courageous, love-affirming stands—and this includes the voices of progressive Muslims.

In a swiftly changing culture it is often difficult to maintain the religious or cultural traditions that shape our understanding of the world and that feel essential to our identities. This process can be especially difficult for LGBTQ Muslims who are sometimes rejected by their communities or who find conflict between their religious identity and their desires for loving relationships and physical intimacy.

Recognizing that many LGBTQ Muslims will find it necessary to keep their sexuality hidden from their communities, HRC's *Coming Home* series hopes to provide support — and key resources — to *everyone* on the journey toward living fully in their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and in their faith and its traditions.

While living openly within a faith community is not always possible, it is possible to gain a stronger sense of self and to step away from the shame that sometimes comes with the act of “hiding in plain sight.” The rewards of reaching out and exploring these new ideas are enormous. They include the gift of spiritual renewal, the joyful celebration of yourself and, sometimes, the opportunity to transform the hearts and minds of those around you.

These pages will offer insights and suggestions that draw on a wide variety of Muslim voices. It is important to remember, though, that each spiritual journey is different, with its own challenges and rewards. Be mindful of your spiritual, emotional and mental health. Pick the path that best suits your needs and that brings you safely home to become a part of this new day that is dawning.

## **EVERY STORY UNIQUE, EVERY PATH PROFOUND**

There is not one clear and direct path for LGBTQ individuals seeking a rich and meaningful relationship with Islam. There are as many paths to embracing a Muslim identity as there are people intent on doing so. With that in mind, this guide draws on a range of personal stories likely to resonate with people seeking to integrate their sexual orientation, gender identity and Islamic faith. Included are the insights of scholars, LGBTQ Muslims young and old and leaders in the movement toward a more inclusive understanding of the Qur'an and its teachings.

While focused on experiences in the United States, this guide acknowledges the keen influence of the global reach of Islamic societies, with each cultural heritage offering its own challenges and rewards. It also recognizes that Islam is more than a religious practice; it is a cultural identity that offers a worldview that sometimes seems in opposition to the lives and relationships of LGBTQ people.

Key to this “coming home” process is the growing number of online resources available, including the opportunity to form online communities that connect LGBTQ Muslims from all walks of life and all corners of the world.



## II. A Woman's Journey to Self

Noor grew up in rural Ohio, but her family maintains close ties to relatives in Jordan and Palestine. "My upbringing was religious," she says, "but it was more about the traditions, about the roles for men and women. We went to the mosque but it was more like, 'We are Muslim. We are Arab. These are our ways.'" In high school, Noor went through a "religious phase," studying the sacred Islamic texts. An early clash with her parents came when she insisted that historical Islam was more inclusive, that it showed greater respect for women and for people outside the norm. "I was more religious than the rest of my family," she says, "but I was also a socially progressive person — always a liberal, always a feminist."

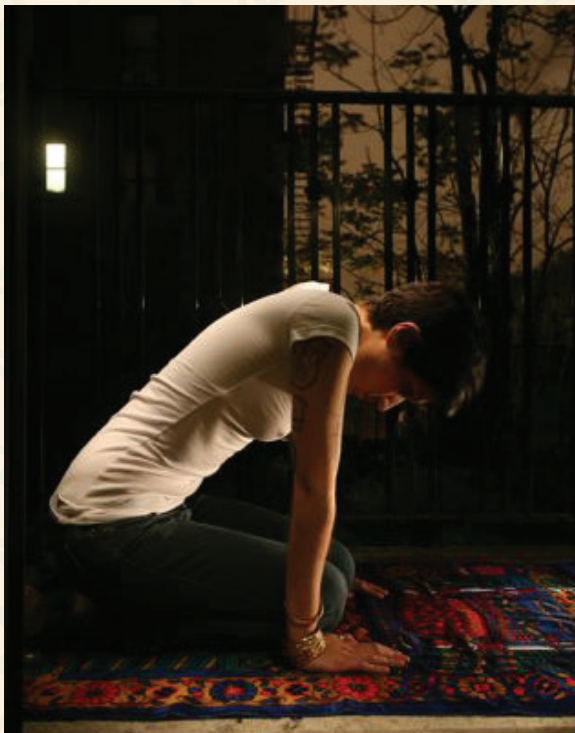
Noor didn't question her sexuality until her college years, when she first met and befriended LGBTQ peers. "No one was out at my high school," she remembers, "and it wasn't really on TV at that point." College was different. "I started looking at my feelings toward women," she said. "I started thinking, 'Oh, there's something here.'"

**The Safra Project in the United Kingdom has been working on issues affecting lesbian, bisexual and transgender Muslim women for over a decade.**

**Learn more at [safraproject.org](http://safraproject.org).**

### FACING THE FAMILY

When Noor married her college boyfriend, both were virgins. "Yeah," she laughs, "so that was awkward." After a year of marriage, she took a cross-country trip with two women friends. "We were on the road for two weeks," she remembers, "and I cried every other day. I'd think, 'I'm Arab. I'm married. I can't be a lesbian.'" Her husband was understanding, and professed his wish to help, but the marriage soon ended. "I finally decided I'm definitely gay," Noor says.



Patrick Mulcahy Photography

The discovery of her sexual orientation mirrored Noor's journey from being religious to agnostic to atheist. That, however, altered few of the challenges that lay ahead. While her father had passed away shortly after her marriage, she still had to consider her mother and siblings. "I took my girlfriend home for Thanksgiving," she says. "I was hoping my mother would figure it out slowly, but after two days she was saying, 'Tell me it isn't true!'" In addition to naming Noor's relationship *haram*, sinful, her mother was concerned about family perceptions in both the United States and Jordan.

"She didn't talk to me for about three months," Noor says of her mother, who insisted her daughter was going through a phase. "I don't want her to get her hopes up, so I bring up my girlfriend whenever we talk. She gets really upset and cries, then it kind of passes and we cycle back." Most of Noor's siblings remain in the dark about their sister's sexual orientation.

#### SOME REACTIONS FROM YOUR PARENTS YOU MAY WANT TO PREPARE FOR:

- They may cry, get angry or feel embarrassed.
- They may feel honored and appreciate that you have entrusted them with an important piece of truth about yourself.
- They may need to grieve the dreams they had for you, before they see the new, more genuine life you are building for yourself.
- They may ask where they "went wrong" or if they did something "to cause this." Assure them that they did nothing wrong.
- Some may call being LGBTQ *haram* or attempt to send you to a counselor or therapist in the baseless hope that they can "change" you.
- Some parents may already know you're LGBTQ — or they might have an inkling. They may have been waiting for you to tell them, and will find your doing so a relief.
- It may take time for a parent to absorb or come to terms with the information. Good or bad, their initial reaction may not reflect their feelings over the long term.

#### AN INDEPENDENCE OF THOUGHT

"The pressure to conform is so much worse for women," Noor explains. "Men are seen as independent but women — your ideas, your perspective, who you are — are seen as something to be molded. Being gay is assumed to be the result of your environment — of corrupt America — so you're supposed to push it away, or hide it, or give it up."

As a result, lesbian women often keep under the radar. "They might date," Noor says, "but they don't come out to their parents, they don't push back." She admits that her financial independence makes her struggle a bit easier. "I come at this a little bit privileged," she says. "I try to go to parties and events just to make people see that there are Arab lesbians, to make it more normal."

Asked for advice from women in similar circumstances, Noor returns to her early study of scripture. "A lot of Islam is muddled up with culture," she points out. "Clerics make statements that are not reflective of the Prophet. Look at the text from a historic perspective, rather than accepting what an imam or a sheikh at a mosque might be saying." She subscribes, always, to an independence of thought. "Use your own judgment," she says. "Don't let your views of your religion or yourself be dictated by your parents or anyone else."

**Remember that your parents grew up in a time when some of the stereotypes about LGBTQ people were more prevalent than they are today. Also parents may initially reject their children out of a misguided belief that they are keeping them safe from something they do not understand.**

### III. Moving Out of Isolation

Friends Sahib, 23, and Hafiz, 35, grew up deeply involved in their religious tradition. Both families were immersed in Islamic culture, observing *salat* and Eid celebrations, and studying the Qur'an at weekly classes. Sahib explains, "It's not just a religion, it's a way of living your life. There are the *jum'uah* prayers, the hajj, the percentage of your income that is donated, the fasting."

Hafiz realized he was gay when he was 9 and, like many LGBTQ Muslims, struggled to reconcile his sexuality with the Islamic traditions he grew up with. "It was like oil and water, and it still feels like that," he says. "But I figure maybe Allah knows something I don't. We come from very judgmental cultures but, in the end, the only person who can judge who goes to heaven or hell is God."

#### LGBTQI LECTURE SERIES

A 14-episode lecture series, by Muslims for Progressive Values, that seeks to dismantle the religious justification for homophobia in Muslim communities with medical, social and religious history. It also includes self-empowerment and mental health tips for LGBTQI Muslims. To learn more, go to YouTube and type "LGBTQI Lecture Series."

Both families were closely tied to their countries of origin, and some cultural norms ran counter to those experienced in the United States. "Most of my family lived in Jordan and Kuwait, but got their green cards and now they all live in a single neighborhood in Texas," Sahib explains. "It's 'Everybody Loves Raymond,' Arab style," he jokes. "It can also be overwhelming."

#### ACROSS GENERATIONS

The differing attitudes across generations have shaped the choices these young men have made. "We come from a tribal society," Hafiz explains. "Arab society revolves around the accomplishments of college, marriage, kids." He worries that his parents will never come to terms with him being gay. "There's a trickle down effect," he says.

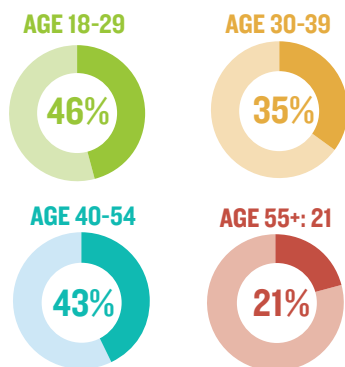
LGBTQ Muslims who want to respect and honor their family and cultural traditions may need to explain how LGBTQ people fulfill the many traditional roles valued in Islam. "I've taken it slow," Sahib says. "I introduced them to 'Modern Family' and my mom loves it. It's important for them to see that LGBTQ people are teachers, doctors, lawyers — just a part of society. It's crucial to slowly introduce them to the truth of the whole community before coming out."

**While Muslim Americans sometimes hold more conservative views than the general public about LGBTQ people, views are changing. In 2007, only 27 percent agreed with the statement "homosexuality should be accepted." By 2011, that support had grown to 39 percent of Muslim Americans.<sup>1</sup>**

Explore more in "Islamic Texts: A Source for Acceptance of Queen Individuals into Mainstream Muslim Society," by Imam Muhsin Hendricks.

Talking to siblings can be a good place to start the coming out process, but challenges still remain. When Sahib came out to his 15-year-old sister, she was understanding but also struggled with the idea, and worried that she would never be an aunt to his children. But when Hafiz texted the news to his brothers, the eldest responded, "I knew this all along — I love you," and the youngest replied, "It's not like I live under a rock."

Acceptance of LGBTQ people has risen among Muslim youth. Today, almost half (46%) of Muslim Americans age 18-29 say that "homosexuality should be accepted."<sup>1</sup>



### CONSTRUCTING A WEB OF SUPPORT

Sahib and Hafiz felt isolated in their struggle until they began to meet others like them. "I went to a liberal arts college," Sahib explains. "I started to meet gay people from all different backgrounds, but still no gay Muslims. In fact, I grew up being told there is no such thing as a gay Muslim. When I finally met another gay Muslim, after graduation, it completely blew my mind. Everything I thought was true was false, and I didn't know how to go back."

Both men emphasize the importance of supportive friends. "Find your network," Hafiz says. "When you go through a trial you need a support group, even if it's just one or two friends. What kept me going was just one gay friend that I could trust. I would have been on my own without him. He showed me what to watch out for."

Sahib offered some advice for the folks who provide that support. "It's important to be direct," he says. "It's also important to explain that there are options. Growing up, I always associated homosexuality with specific ideas of gay culture. It's important to know you can be gay and have a lot of different choices on how you live that out."

Like many LGBTQ Muslims, Sahib's initial understanding of American gay culture involved bars, online dating sites and other aspects of gay life prominent in the media. But life in the United States now offers LGBTQ people a full array of choices, including religious observance, political activism, parenting, marriage, career-building and other opportunities for a fulfilled and purposeful life. The freedom to fully participate in every aspect of society is sometimes limited by local attitudes and even laws, but LGBTQ people are becoming increasingly integrated into communities and spaces that once excluded them.

## IV. A Transgender Story

For Maya Jafer, who was assigned male at birth, the decision to transition to living authentically as a woman constituted both walking away and coming home. Raised as a boy in a strict Muslim family in southern India, Maya struggled for decades to understand her transgender identity. The femininity that she expressed naturally as a child had been punished severely.

### TRANSGENDER PEOPLE IN HADITH

*Mukhannathūn* is the classical Arabic term for people who would now identify as transgender women. The term literally means "effeminate ones" or "men who resemble women" and appears in several hadith. Outside of the religious text, they are strongly associated with music and entertainment.

"My father exposed me to the very strict, punitive aspects of Islam," she explains. "I grew up with a lot of fear and hatred toward my father, and I hated religion because of him. My mother, though, when he was not around, taught me the loving, accepting aspects of Islam."

Upon learning the word "gay," Maya assumed that it described her, until she traveled to the United States to earn a doctorate degree. "I learned that I'm trans," she says. "I couldn't know this before, because I wasn't exposed to the idea."

After years of struggle, Maya worked with a therapist at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center who urged her to join a group of transgender people. "That was the turning point," she says. "All of my blocks — losing family, being marginalized, losing work — became less important than my need to be true to myself. I thought, 'I just have to have faith in my God and all will be well!' The moment I made that decision was the moment my depression lifted."

### FINDING A COMMUNITY

Deciding to live openly is a personal process, but it's not something you have to face alone. Consider joining online support communities, such as Transgender Muslim Support Network at [trans-muslims.tumblr.com](https://trans-muslims.tumblr.com).

## “ONLY GOD CAN JUDGE ME”

Throughout the transition process, Maya maintained her Muslim identity, though she does not observe the five pillars of Islam. “I hated Islam because of my father’s influence,” she says. “But I still loved my God because of my mother. She taught me that God is forgiving and loving, that anything you ask for with sincerity you will get when it’s meant to be. I asked Him to be with me, right or wrong, to protect me. It kept me afloat.”

Maya’s father has died and her mother suffers from dementia, so it was her siblings who learned of her transition. “They told me I would go to hell,” that I’m not a Muslim,” she remembers. That God hates me.” While deeply painful, her family’s rejection eventually led to renewed strength. “No one gets to dictate my relationship with God,” she explained. “In Islam it is only God who can judge. Only Allah can judge me.”

**Maya’s advice to others is clear. “Know that Allah loves you no matter what. No one else gets to dictate your relationship. If you want to be a little spiritual, be that. If you want to be religious and spiritual, do that. Be true to yourself. Be joyous. Live a full life.”**



## V. Challenges in a Post-9/11 World

One challenge unique to LGBTQ Muslims is the continuing presence of anti-Muslim bigotry across the United States and within the LGBTQ community itself. Having faced homophobic attitudes at home and at the mosque, LGBTQ Muslims often face similar frustrations created by stereotypes and prejudices about Muslims, which have increased significantly since 9/11. The result is that LGBTQ Muslims often feel unwelcome in LGBTQ communities that they hope will embrace them.

Many non-Muslims also fail to recognize that Islam provides a cultural identity as well as a religious one. Even LGBTQ advocates often don’t understand the real dangers of coming out within the Muslim community. As in other communities, those dangers can range from physical violence to familial rejection or isolation.

Sahib explained, “My birth name is Osama, and I was born on Sept. 11th, so you can imagine the bullying I experienced in high school and middle school. When I went to college, I had my name legally changed.”

### TAKE ACTION

If you experience a hate crime or an incident of violence, call your local law enforcement agency. Learn how to take action to end hate online at [muslimadvocates.org](http://muslimadvocates.org).

Hafiz addressed these issues by seeking out a nationwide community of LGBTQ Muslims and participating in an annual three-day retreat hosted by the Muslim Alliance for Sexual and Gender Diversity (MASGD). “There were Muslims of every breed,” he recalls. “I felt like the hardcore fundamentalist because others were so left. We would pray together. Sometimes a woman would lead. It was Islam through a different prism; inclusive and welcoming. I ran into a kid I’d grown up with. I hadn’t seen him in seven years, and there he was. It was a connection to my past, but in an entirely new setting.”

You are not alone. To learn more, visit [lgbtmuslimretreat.com](http://lgbtmuslimretreat.com).

The retreat helped Hafiz fuse his gay and Muslim identities. “It brought me a little closer to where I was before coming out,” he says. “Some of us get together and hold iftars at Ramadan. I know a gay couple raising a child, whom I met at the retreat, and I went to the wedding of a friend I met there.”



## VI. Sacred Texts as Challenge and Reward

Muslim religious practices found at the LGBTQ Muslim Retreat and other similar organizations are based on progressive interpretations of the Qur'an and hadith (the teachings of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ that were gathered following his death). While many traditional Muslim scholars believe that the tradition of *ijtihad* – the scholarly interpretation of sacred texts – ended somewhere between the tenth and fourteenth century, progressive Muslims believe the spirit of inquiry is ongoing.

Hussein Rashid, a Muslim scholar and professor of religion at Hofstra University, stresses that scholarly interpretation is most effective when paired with real-world experience. “The combination of knowing scripture and knowing people is the key,” he says. “So the coming out process becomes central to progress.” As with many aspects of this complicated issue, cultural background plays a key role. “Some people are raised to read the Qur'an on their own,” Rashid points out, “and to interpret it. Others are not. There is a need for role models in this work – not to mentor but simply to show that it's possible.”

### A FRESH, SCHOLARLY STUDY OF THE QUR'AN

**Most Muslim Americans – 57 percent – say there is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of Islam.<sup>1</sup>**

Author Scott Kugle is at the forefront of the progressive interpretation of sacred Muslim texts, with a particular emphasis on sexuality. His books, such as the scholarly *Homosexuality in Islam* and the more personal *Living Out Islam*, lay the groundwork for a reading of the Qur'an that focuses on its inclusive and accepting passages. Other discussions of gender are taking place in Muslim spaces, as in the work of Amanullah De Soudy and his recent book, *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities*.

Islam's diversity of thought and practice is reflected in the myriad approaches to the Qur'an and its interpretation. One approach begins with the idea that the Qur'an itself treats diversity as a blessing to humanity. Kugle opens *Homosexuality in Islam* with this verse:

**O people, We created you all from a male and female And made you into different communities and different tribes So that you should come to know one another Acknowledging that the most noble among you is the one most aware of God. – Qur'an 49:13**

With this text as his foundation, Kugle argues that humanity's differences are its strength, and that no group should be raised above another. He explains, “Progressive Muslims extend [the verses] implied meaning beyond its explicit wording, to condemn also male sexism, gender injustice and social stigmatizing of homosexuals.”

For a quick read, learn more about sexual diversity in Islam at [mpvusa.org/sexuality-diversity](http://mpvusa.org/sexuality-diversity).

Kugle and other scholars agree that such passages far outweigh the Qur'an's only direct reference to homosexual acts, which is conflated with the act of rape depicted in the story of Prophet Lut ﷺ.

“It does not address homosexuality as a sexual orientation or homoerotic relationships as expressions of emotional commitment and care,” Kugle writes in *Living Out Islam*. Since such relationships are not addressed in the Qur'an, he argues that “principles must be drawn from the Qur'an to guide one's behavior . . . just as principles are drawn out to apply to any host of new situations that Muslims now confront.”

**FACT: Terms such as homosexuality, bisexuality and heterosexuality did not exist until the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and do not appear in the Qur'an.**

Rachel Heath, spiritual life coordinator at the University of Chicago, finds Kugle's work of immediate, practical value. "It's literally a lifesaver," she says. "It's a scholarly reading of a sacred text that, for many people, legitimizes their existence and their sexuality. It offers a baseline of 'you're okay.' It's an interpretation that can deflect suicide." She recognizes, though, that embracing such an interpretation can be extraordinarily difficult for those approaching it for the first time.

## VII. Embracing Traditions

While alternatives have become available, many LGBTQ Muslims continue to embrace the traditional communities that have shaped their lives since birth.

Hassan, a physician of Pakistani origin living in Florida, recalls, "When I was reconciling being gay and Muslim, I wasn't drawn to the progressive end of the spectrum." Islam, he says, is not incompatible with an LGBTQ identity. "Even if you are gay or lesbian, you are not less loved by God, and you are not inherently unwelcome in the mosque."



Hassan adds, "Islam does not inherently devalue gay or lesbian people," he says. "God's love is based on how strong your faith is, not on your orientation." He questions the assumption that LGBTQ Muslims cannot attend a traditional mosque. "I used to think, 'I'm gay, I can't go there,' but that's ridiculous." He adds that many mosques, especially in urban areas, are diverse in class, race and ethnicity. Difference, in fact, is the norm.

Professor De Sondy, author of *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities*, explains that the general public holds an inaccurate perception of Islam, one that allows for little nuance or complexity. “The most important thing,” he says, “is to recognize that one size does not fit all. People take many different paths to their own piety.”

Regarding LGBTQ Muslims in mosques, he explains, “There’s often a don’t ask, don’t tell approach. It can be harmful to feel that you are being silently pushed away but it also works for a lot of people who may not want to make that open expression.” Many mosques and Muslim organizations are struggling with how to respond to changes in cultural attitudes. “They’re not quite sure how to proceed,” De Sondy says. “They can’t accept [homosexuality] within the fold of Islam but they are not dismissing those individuals who are LGBT.”

Hassan notes that few who attend the mosque successfully follow all of the Qur’an’s teachings. “The guy who has committed adultery or had a drink doesn’t avoid the mosque,” he points out. “Everyone sins. That doesn’t mean you’re excommunicated from the entire structure.” For Hassan, being grounded in traditional Islam has great value. “I’m not going to change religions just because I find it doesn’t jive with my identity,” he says. “I might choose to break the rules or look for other interpretations but I need to know what the rule actually is first.”

De Sondy worries that the voices of LGBTQ people who choose a more traditional form of Islam are seldom heard. “We want neat, clean ideas,” he says of modern society. “But sexuality is not a neat idea; it is not easily contained. We need to appreciate its nuance and subtlety.”

## VII. Choosing Islam

The Muslim community in the United States is extremely diverse, encompassing many sects and cultural backgrounds — and is gaining a growing number of converts. Rosanna, 30, grew up in a liberal Protestant home and identified as a lesbian at an early age. A deeply spiritual young woman, she studied Buddhism and yoga, and read widely about different world religions. “I met a Sufi community,” she remembers, “and felt instantly at home with them. I converted to Islam and started practicing while I was in college.”

Rosanna embraced her chosen religion. “It came with a new world vision,” she explains, “a new idea of human health and human society that was quite different from the liberal ideas I’d been raised with. One of those differences, though, was in sexuality. When I converted, I became part of a community, and a religious and cultural system, in which same-sex relations weren’t part of the picture.”

At first, Rosanna chose to avoid relationships altogether, or tried to form them with men, often at the urging of well-meaning friends. “After many years I fell in love with a woman,” she says. “With that, I started a very difficult path of trying to figure out how I could reconcile my faith and my practice with being in love with the person I’d chosen.”

At the heart of Rosanna’s dilemma was the question of whether she could be both a Muslim and a lesbian. “I’d been told it was ‘either/or,’” she says, explaining the common opinion that one must choose between being Muslim and identifying as LGBTQ. While struggling with this question, Rosanna continued her religious practice, and continued her loving relationship. “Slowly,” she says, “through love and through lived experience, it became ‘both/and.’ I learned that I can be both a Muslim and a lesbian.”

### IN YOUR OWN TIME

For Rosanna, that journey started as a solitary one. “I didn’t seek out other LGBTQ Muslims,” she says, “or read Scott Kugle. I already had all these voices in my head. I had my liberal upbringing, saying it’s all good. I also had my Muslim community telling me that being with this woman meant I was turning from the path of purification. I didn’t want yet another set of people telling me what I should do with my life. I had to figure it out for myself, and it took me a year and a half.”

That time brought new and rich understandings. “Love does amazing things,” Rosanna says, “and love provides arguments that trump all others. That period of just living into love was a period of strengthening for me.”

Rosanna stresses the unique challenges of coming out as an LGBTQ Muslim. “There’s this idea that you should come out and be authentic and that it’s all very empowering. That’s just not the case in every community. You have to be strong in yourself first. And that’s on God’s time. Everyone’s family is different. Everyone’s religious community is different. I was very lucky to have people telling me that it’s okay, that I don’t have to come out now, or in the future. There’s no deadline. And finding that personal strength, there’s no timeline for that either.”

### COMING OUT OR COMING IN?

One way to think about the pressure to “come out” is to think about inviting someone in or letting someone “come in” into your life, a term conceptualized by Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett, an Australian scholar and therapist of Lebanese Muslim ancestry.

The term explores a different framework to experiencing authenticity and liberation by way of hospitable sharing. By “coming in” or inviting someone in, you are given a choice to disclose to those with whom you feel safe and at a time that’s ready for you.

Explore more in “Azima ila Hayati—An Invitation in to My Life: Narrative Conversations about Sexual Identity.”

## VIII. Engines of Change

LGBTQ Muslims who attend colleges and universities often discover campuses to be an ideal setting for the process of reconciling faith with identity. Undergraduates are often already in the process of exploring their identities in an environment that is typically more inclusive than their homes or communities. In addition, chaplains are likely to be trained in creating communities that are safe and welcoming, and doing so in a culturally and racially diverse setting.

At the University of Chicago, Rachel Heath, a spiritual life coordinator, has learned firsthand the power of gathering a small community of people facing similar challenges. “We have an amazing opportunity,” Heath says. “For students, it’s a time of critical inquiry. They’re asking questions about themselves and about the world. It’s a special time in their lives, and we try to provide resources that simply weren’t available until recently.”

Heath’s students also benefit from vast new resources beyond the college campus. “Thank goodness for the Internet,” she says. “There are books now that can be ordered or checked out. There are virtual resources that are available online. That doesn’t lessen the need for community in someone’s particular location, but for people without community it can be a huge help to contact Imam Daayiee (see page 25) or read Scott Kugle’s book. There’s more knowledge, more understanding and less self-hate.”

### ACADEMIC INQUIRY

Project Nur is a student-led initiative advocating for social justice by empowering responsible leaders to cultivate an environment of acceptance and mutual respect between Muslims and all communities. Get involved at [aicongress.org/project-nur](http://aicongress.org/project-nur).

### PRAYER-FIRST COMMUNITIES

Heath’s office has been taking small but significant steps. “Right now, we provide space and support for a group of students who meet every Friday for prayers,” she explains. “They’re still figuring out what to call themselves. For now it’s just Egalitarian Jumu’ah Prayers. What’s key is that we’ve set up a structure so that students can come together to pray and feel safe.”

"Even those not participating in a campus community might benefit from the university model," says Hussein Rashid. "The focus could shift," he explains, "so that it's prayer first, as opposed to using the pulpit to dictate behavior. Mosques could be centers of change, like the universities."

Progress, Rashid acknowledges, must come from two directions. "Individuals must find their way back," he says, "and the mosque must become a place where the focus is on welcoming everyone who comes through the doors." He recognizes, though, that such progress is slow to come. "Being okay with your religiosity sometimes means being okay with walking away."

### MPV AND UNITY MOSQUES

While many LGBTQ Muslims hope to integrate their lives with mainstream Muslim communities, there are an increasing number of alternatives. Ani Zonneveld, a Malaysian Muslim, straight ally and founder of Unity Mosques and Muslims for

Progressive Values (MPV), is intent on fostering a Muslim community that offers both a welcoming environment and a deeply religious experience. Based in Los Angeles — but with a widening influence that includes Unity Mosques in Atlanta, Chicago, Columbus, New York and Washington, D.C. — MPV provides an alternative that many have embraced.

"At the traditional mosque, there's a 'don't ask, don't tell' mentality," Zonneveld says. "Everyone has secrets that they put away when they come through the door. For LGBTQ people, that experience can be very traumatic." In contrast, Unity Mosques feature services that are often led by women and LGBTQ Muslims. Their message is one of inclusion, that all people are part of God's creation.

"We get emails from LGBTQ Muslims who are suicidal because they're traumatized by the disrespect, the scorn that they hear," Zonneveld explains. "They ask, 'How can I continue to exist? How could God create me, just to go through all this pain?' For the devout Muslims, surrounded by rhetoric that rejects their very essence, the question becomes more than one of self-worth. It becomes, 'Why do I exist? Should I exist?'" The answer found at Unity Mosques is a resounding "yes."

### A SOURCE OF RENEWED STRENGTH

"With a renewed sense of spirituality," Zonneveld says, "you come out of this struggle stronger. One member of our community lived with depression his whole life. His parents told him he was a mistake. He was exposed to deeply abusive language. He was in a dark place until he found MPV, where he was accepted for who he is. He was told, 'You are God's creation.'"

When asked how to reconcile that acceptance with the Qur'an's statement against homosexual acts, Zonneveld is clear. "God is the creator," she declares. "Do you think God would have made you such a pariah? Of course not. God's soul is in you."

Zonneveld advises against remaining in the traditional mosque setting and trying to affect change from within. "Find a new community," she says. "Let go of the trauma that you have carried with you for such a long time. There is a loving community waiting for you."



### WELCOMING AND AFFIRMING MASJIDS

For a list of inclusive masjids in the United States and Canada, go to [mpvusa.org/mpv-unity-mosque](https://mpvusa.org/mpv-unity-mosque).

## IX. Words of Wisdom

"There is no 'one size fits all' in Islam," says Daayiee Abdullah, an openly gay imam, lawyer, counselor and the leader of the Washington, D.C., Unity Mosque. "How you approach this issue depends on your home life, the culture you come from, your age, when your parents arrived in the United States, your level of education and your parents' level of education."

Even the idea that younger generations are more open to change is not set in stone. "Very often the grandchildren are more conservative, especially if they live in a more isolated community," point out Imam Daayiee. "They're trying to return to a culture that they feel their parents lost touch with."

Such numerous variables create endless combinations of challenge and triumph, joy and sorrow. Imam Daayiee, though, remains hopeful that an accepting Islam is within reach. For him, the widening acceptance of same-sex marriage has a profound effect on the Muslim experience. "These legislative achievements," he says, "are an illustration of acceptance. They're the *experience* of acceptance."

### MUSLIM ATTITUDES ON MARRIAGE EQUALITY

According to the nonpartisan Public Religion Research Institute survey released in 2015, more than two in five Muslim Americans, or 42 percent, are in support of marriage equality for same-sex couples.

At the forefront of such achievements are champions like U.S. Representative Keith Ellison, D-Minn., who is Muslim. Ellison's efforts for LGBTQ equality are inspired by his faith. "Freedom is essential and core to my understanding of myself as a Muslim," he says. "By that, I mean the freedom to be true to yourself, to who you are. The rich diversity of human experience that is celebrated in the Qur'an should be embraced, not rejected. That's why I'm in favor of civil rights for all of us, in all of our differences and complexity. I favor equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people not in spite of my faith but because of it," the congressman adds.

### AMERICAN MUSLIMS ON THE FRONTLINES

U.S. Reps. Keith Ellison, D-Minn., and André Carson, D-Ind., both Muslims, are members of the Congressional LGBT Equality Caucus, and both advocate for LGBTQ rights, including marriage equality.



## X. Taking Stock and Taking Steps

For most Muslims, being openly LGBTQ at their mosque will create significant challenges. The same might be true at home. Patience and careful consideration are necessary before taking such a momentous step. However, it may be possible to be open with certain individuals when it is not yet possible to be open with the broader community.

Consider whether there is a family member to whom you can talk will be understanding and eager to love the entirety of who you are. Similarly, consider if there is someone at your mosque with whom you could speak confidentially, without having to face the challenge of confronting the entire community.

There are also meaningful steps that can be taken in private toward a growing sense of community and a decreasing sense of isolation. Consider pursuing the following on your own, using the resources listed at the end of this guide to get started:

- 🕒 Explore recent scholarly works on Islam and LGBTQ issues
- 🕒 Read personal memoirs of the Muslim LGBTQ experience
- 🕒 Look for online resources and communities

Consider, too, the many forms that a Muslim community might take. A traditional mosque might not be fully welcoming and inclusive, but there are alternatives. You might:

- 🕒 Join or organize a study group for LGBTQ Muslims
- 🕒 Join or organize a weekly prayer group
- 🕒 Join an online community that will connect you with a national or international network of people with similar stories
- 🕒 Join a Unity Mosque, if there is one in your area
- 🕒 Attend the annual LGBTQ Muslim retreat

For all of these options, you will find contacts listed in the Resources section at the end of this guide. You can also contact the Religion and Faith Program at the Human Rights Campaign for advice on starting faith-based gatherings. Email us at [religion@hrc.org](mailto:religion@hrc.org).

Remember, each step forward, no matter how small, opens a door and broadens the possibility of joining a community grounded in the core tenets of Islam—tenets that stress diversity, acceptance and love.

## XI. Conclusion

The idea of “Coming Home” is a profound and personal one—even more so when we consider the words that follow: “To Faith, to Spirit, to Self.” Indeed, a particularly beautiful hadith depicts Prophet Muhammad ﷺ saying, “To know yourself is to know God.”

For so many people, faith is central to their identity — as important as family, community, gender identity and expression, and sexual orientation. These pages provide just a suggestion of what is possible for LGBTQ Muslims who feel distanced from their faith community or from Islam itself. Faith is an essential element of our lives. In embracing and nurturing our faith, we embrace and nurture ourselves. And when we do that, the opportunities for a full and happy life open before us.

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### Reference:

<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center (2011). “Muslim American Survey.”

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A VERY SPECIAL THANKS to our contributors for so graciously sharing their experiences. Thanks also to those who generously agreed to let us use their photos in this guide.

For more copies of this guide, additional coming out resources or more information on the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, please visit [www.hrc.org/muslim](http://www.hrc.org/muslim).

# Resources

## LGBT AND ALLIED ORGANIZATIONS

### American Islamic Congress

A civil society development organization promoting civil and human rights through advocacy, engagement and education. [www.aicongress.org](http://www.aicongress.org)

### MECCA Institute

An online center of Islamic learning and contemporary Islamic research. [www.mecca-institute.org](http://www.mecca-institute.org)

### Muslim Advocates

A national legal advocacy and educational organization that works on the frontlines of civil rights to guarantee freedom and justice for Americans of all faiths. [www.muslimadvocates.org](http://www.muslimadvocates.org)

Muslim Alliance for Sexual and Gender Diversity  
An organization working to support, empower and connect LGBTQ Muslims. [www.muslimalliance.org](http://www.muslimalliance.org)

### Muslims for Progressive Values

An inclusive community rooted in the traditional Qur'anic ideals of human dignity and social justice. [www.mpvusa.org](http://www.mpvusa.org)

### Reaching All HIV+ Muslims in America

An organization that addresses HIV/AIDS in the American Muslim community through education, advocacy and empowerment. [www.haverahma.org](http://www.haverahma.org)

## INTERNATIONAL

### Imaan

An organization based in the United Kingdom that supports LGBT Muslim people, their families and friends, to address issues of sexual orientation within Islam. [www.imaan.org.uk](http://www.imaan.org.uk)

### Inclusive Mosque Initiative

A volunteer organization working toward establishing a place of worship for the promotion and practice of an inclusive Islam. [www.inclusivemosqueinitiative.org](http://www.inclusivemosqueinitiative.org)

### Salaam Canada

An organization in Canada dedicated to Muslims who are LGBTI, as well as those questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity, their families and friends. [www.salaamcanada.org](http://www.salaamcanada.org)

### Safra Project

A resource project in the United Kingdom working on issues relating to LBT women who identify as Muslim religiously and/or culturally. [www.safraproject.org](http://www.safraproject.org)

### The Inner Circle

An organization based in South Africa working within an Islamic framework to give psycho-spiritual and social support to Muslims who are marginalized based on sexual orientation and gender. [www.theinnercircle.org.za](http://www.theinnercircle.org.za)

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## ARTS

Queer Muslim Projects [queermuslimproject.tumblr.com](http://queermuslimproject.tumblr.com)

Coming Out Muslim: Radical Acts of Love [comingoutmuslim.com](http://comingoutmuslim.com)

## SUPPORT GROUPS

Transgender Muslim Support Network [trans-muslims.tumblr.com](http://trans-muslims.tumblr.com)