

Imam Daayiee Abdullah

Daayiee Abdullah is a prominent Muslim LGBTQ+ and human rights activist who was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1954. He moved to San Francisco, California at age 20, where he became involved with the city's black gay activist communities. Abdullah worked as a coordinator for the 1979 National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, which prompted his move to D.C. Once in Washington, Abdullah attended Georgetown University to study Chinese and Arabic, which allowed him to live in both China and the Middle East. These experiences ignited Abdullah's interest in Islam and prompted his conversion to the faith in 1985. He began researching homosexual-affirming interpretations of the Quran using various Arabic, Chinese, and English translations to illuminate discrepancies. He sent his findings to Faisal Alam, founder of the U.S. LGBTQ+ Muslim organization, Al-Fatiha, where he worked as a religious advisor and eventually an imam. Today, Imam Abdullah leads his own mosque in Washington, D.C., Masjid el-Tawhid An-Nur Al-Isslaah, or Mosque for Enlightenment and Reform.

To learn more about Imam Abdullah, visit the LGBTQ+ Religious Archives Network: <https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/daayiee-abdullah>

Document A: Excerpts from “Imam Daayiee Abdullah | Oral History,” LGBTQ Religious Archives Network, 2011.

Daayiee A. I'm originally from Detroit, Michigan. I was born and raised in Detroit. And at the age of 20, I left Detroit and moved to San Fransissy – or that's my pet name for San Francisco. And it was there that I had an opportunity to move out of the Midwestern framework and to further develop my understanding of myself as being a black male homosexual. And after five years of living in San Francisco, I moved to Washington, D.C. in 1979 and have lived there on and off since that time...

I was raised as a Southern Baptist, and at the age of...I think I was seven years old when I told my parents I wanted to get baptized...And it seemed that during that year, a lot of the stuff just didn't make sense that [the church was] talking about...

So I told [my parents] I didn't find [for] myself it was good for me. And my parents said, well, we can't tell you what faith you should follow, but you should have one, because as a human being there are times in your life when you're going to have to call on something greater than who you are as a person. So therefore, you should know something...

When I left San Francisco and came to D.C. I was working for the IRS...and then something was not satisfying me...

I spent about two weeks in meditation. And during that first week of meditation...the first vision came to me... And about a week later, the second part of the dream came... And it was just a repeat of the same thing over again, and then the inner voice said, Study Chinese. Study Chinese? [*Laughs.*]

Monique M. Interesting.

Daayiee A. ...But I said, okay, if that's what you want, God, I'm going to study Chinese. Because part of my wish was... give me something, God, that would help me work with people for the rest of my life. That was my wish...

Well, on April 2nd I received a letter from Georgetown [University] saying I had received a full fellowship from them to study Chinese. And so that following summer I entered the Chinese program, and nine months later I was at Beijing University.

Monique M. Wow, full immersion.

Daayiee A. Full immersion. And so it was a year at Beijing, and then I continued for two years at Taiwan National University. And it was through this process... when I was at Beijing, some of my classmates were Uighurs, or the Chinese Muslims from the western part of China. And so the conversation, on one of the occasions, was...our language of communication was Chinese, of course, and so they were saying, —Well, do you know anything about Islam? And I'm like, —Well, the Nation of Islam, I heard about that... And so he says, —No, no, no, the real Islam... So I said, — Okay, explain this to me...

So he says, —I'd like to invite you over to the Mosque, which is called Cow Street Mosque there in Beijing. And I said sure...And when I heard the Chinese, it made perfect sense...

I didn't convert immediately... But I did feel that Islam was the faith that I should utilize, and it was because of the prayer process. As a Christian, whenever I would pray, I felt that I was supplicating all the time. —Oh, God, help me do this, God, help me do that... But in Islam, whenever I would do the sujud, which is the part where you place your forehead onto the floor, it's the full sense of surrender...

You surrender it over to God, and I would turn it over. And one of two things would happen. Either God would, by the end of the prayer, provide me with information in terms of inspiration or whatever, in terms of responding to my question, or I'd be left with such inner peace [that] I could wait for the answer. Because I knew, after a while, that sometimes you're not ready for the answer, so sometimes you have to just remain peaceful...or the term they use, *sabr*, to have patience until the right answer comes.

...

Monique M. How did you connect with lesbians and gays in the San Francisco area when you first got there?

Daayiee A. ...Good question. [*Laughs.*] When I first went there to visit San Francisco, I met a gentleman. His name was Monty Cardwell... And he was the first black person to run...the San Francisco Museum of Art. And Monty was originally from New York. He...outstanding sculptor. I mean, *outstanding sculptor*... I met him at MCC (Metropolitan Community Church). I had gone there to the MCC church while I was out there and met him...

Monique M. Now, when you went to MCC, was that still part of your religiously eclectic searching for a religious something...

Daayiee A. Well, MCC, because I had known some people. Renee McCoy, who was the minister in Detroit for the MCC church in Detroit... So through that process I knew [that] MCC was a church for gays. And so when I went to San Francisco, well, why not go to the MCC as a place to center myself, basically.

Monique M. ...So going back to China and being there and being exposed to Muslims and finding something that clicked for you, were you out then as well? And would the faith choice click for you as an out gay black man following traditional Islam?

Daayiee A. I knew then that I could not [be openly gay] because what I had learned is that they felt that homosexuality was wrong within the Islamic belief system. But that just didn't seem to be correct to me, because from what I had heard, while talking to my Uighur classmates, I did ask one of them one day, I said, —Well, isn't the issue of homosexuality a problem within Islam?

And he says, —No, it's not. I said, —Well, please explain. He said, —Well, in China we've had a number of emperors who were gay... And so he says, — No, it's not an issue...

So the Islam of ancient times was different [from] the Islam that we were getting in the modern age. So I said, well, I have to find the way, the information that says it's okay...

So that first year, when I went off to the Middle East, because I did the same thing, nine months of study, then off to the Middle East, and I was in Egypt for a year, then Jordan for a year, then Damascus for a year...

...

Daayiee A. ...I had asked, I had prayed that I'd get a chance to go to Saudi Arabia since I had... while I was in school...I had become Muslim, and I said when I'm done with school, I'd like to go for Hajj [Muslim religious pilgrimage]. And there was an opportunity to work in Saudi Arabia for the Royal Saudi Air Force as a teacher, and since I spoke Arabic and that nature, they hired me. And I went there for three years and worked in Saudi Arabia for three years...

Monique M. When did you take Shahada [Profession of Faith or conversion]? You skipped to when you went to hajj.

Daayiee A. That would have been...I took the Shahada...It would have been in '85. I took Shahada in '85.

Monique M. And you left to do your Hajj when?

Daayiee A. That was '85. Then I went to the Middle East and did that for several years, and went to school...I came back in 2000 and... I was able to do the research, and I did my first paper on the homosexual positive interpretation of the Koran.

And what that was is that I compared interpreters of the Koran from various English, Chinese and Arabic to Arabic interpretations, and I started seeing these variances in how people were interpreting things – the Arab speakers, English speakers who were translating, then the Arab speakers translating to English. I noticed the differences in the way they would translate things. I said, so that means it's interpretations based on the individual... And I found that the way in

which the people were interpreting the thing did not follow the Arabic properly in terms of the grammar of the Arabic and things. So what they were doing...is they were translating specific information and [making generalizations]...

So then, in 1998... Faisal Alam started a group called Al-Fatiha. And I heard about it through a friend of mine in Washington, D.C. ... I sent Faisal an email and we talked by phone, and I sent him a copy of my piece I had just done. And he was just fascinated... So I told him, well, I'll be back at the end of my contract... And when I got back I started working with Al-Fatiha...

It was through Al-Fatiha that the idea of being an imam came about... I started doing lectures and things of this nature... Al-Fatiha would have conferences. Every year I would go there and give lectures. Then I started going to schools...

Monique M. ...Did that move from being a participant to being in leadership come because of your own aspirations...or was it sort of that's what you needed to do and so that's what you did?

Daayiee A. Well, part of it was the need. The gay Muslim community needed someone in the community that could deal with them on the issue of their religious faith and religious beliefs, and so out of necessity I became an imam. And so what happened is I would start getting these emails from distraught teenagers and young adults, males and females, and I could respond to most of their questions rather easily...

I knew I was doing the right thing, because I was helping people better understand themselves and not to do something drastic within their life. And so I knew that I was on the right track in terms of what I was doing was the right thing to do.

...

Daayiee A. One of the reasons I [started] my masjid [mosque] in Washington, D.C. is to establish a template so that people in other parts of the world can see it's not that difficult, and you can start your own prayer services that are inclusive for your communities...

Monique M. You're creating a model?

Daayiee A. That's the goal. The other centers that are in, like, New York City, Los Angeles, Ottawa, Canada...they have people who get together and have prayer services, but there's no religious leader leading their prayer service, so it's all community-oriented. But this is the first one here that has an imam leading them, and it's an openly gay imam.

...

Monique M. ...What are you most proud of?...

Daayiee A. At this point in my life, it has to be that through my process of learning that Allah loves me, God loves me in the same way that I love God. There's a saying that goes that if you take one step towards God, God takes two steps towards you. And if you take a leap towards God, God leaps towards you. And if you go running into God, God rushes to you. And so through this process, it's the joy that I'm receiving from helping other Muslims find God...

