

The Trans Muslim Dilemma

Transgender Awareness Week is upon us. As we celebrate and uplift our trials and triumphs, it's important to remember that inclusion goes past just our language. If there's one thing a transgender person will tell you it's that our experiences are incredibly diverse, and putting our identities into neatly labeled boxes does more harm than good. A voice often missing from trans communities includes trans people of faith, particularly trans Muslims, who often feel like their identities force them to pick one side or the other. The conflict becomes compounded – Muslim communities don't accept your trans identity, and queer communities [don't accept](#) your Muslim identity. This idea that queerness is secular erases the narratives of trans and nonbinary Muslims such as myself and countless others, who's faith practices live alongside their trans identities. We're not a niche, but we've been made into one.

"Exploring my queer and trans identity always felt forbidden to me as someone who has grown up within Muslim spaces," says Hana Suliman, a nonbinary Sudanese graduate student. "This concept of the "forbidden" has informed a large part of my experiences with my queerness and transness as a Muslim-identified person. It wasn't that my identity was inaccessible – it was how I was socialized to believe that my identity was unacceptable."

In the LGBTQ+ Muslim community, Hana's story isn't unusual. The gender binary is deeply entrenched into most aspects of Islamic tradition, including having gendered spaces in mosques, encouraging specific dynamics in (heterosexual) relationships, and even ruling in inheritance laws. The relationship with one's gender becomes even more complicated when battling against the pervasive idea that our body belongs to God, and to alter it is to reject his creation.

I was once asked why I wear the headscarf when I pray if I'm nonbinary. I responded genuinely, saying that I didn't view acts of worship through a gendered lens, and that I had faith in God understanding my identity regardless of the form I use to stand in front of him.

This wasn't a new line of question, unfortunately. *Homosecularism*, or the idea that religiosity and queer identity can't coexist, is a term [coined](#) by Dr. Bee Scherer that has been described to [negatively affect](#) mainstream acceptance of religious queer people, and even more so for trans Muslims. Dr. Momin Rahman, a professor of Sociology at Trent University in Canada states that "the positioning of Muslim cultures as anti-LGBTQ structures responses internationally but also in the West, with most Muslim majority community or NGO organizations having almost nothing to say about their queer populations, as though we are invisible."

The doubts faced from society become internalized as well. "Internal conflicts are not completely separate from external conflicts and are often very interconnected," says Professor Maruq Khan, a sociologist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign whose research focuses on the queer Muslim community broadly across the U.S. "For example, if someone grows up hearing khutbas at their mosques that are homophobic, that could translate into experiences of

self-loathing, mental health problems, and low self-esteem. Also having to compartmentalize one's religious identity in queer secular spaces and vice versa. However, it is important to know that queer Muslims do not all have negative self-perceptions. Their experiences will vary a great deal."

While I struggled a lot in the beginning, it was less of feeling like my transness conflicted with my faith as much as it did with the people that practiced it, as well as with the larger queer community. Transness isn't just a physical experience, but often also a spiritual one, regardless of faith identity. Writing about my experiences helped – poetry and essay writing gave me not only an avenue for self-healing, but also communication.

"I decided that if Allah is perfect and Allah created me, then the person I am right now is exactly how I should be," Hana says. "My God loves me exactly as they created me."

Other trans Muslims have started to step forward in the media too. [Samra Habib](#), a queer, nonbinary Muslim author released a memoir called *We Have Always Been Here* that became a national bestseller and won numerous awards. HBO Max's [Sort Of](#) stars the first transfeminine Muslim actor. TikTokers like [Aliyah Ali](#) have bravely and joyously taken to social media to detail their everyday lives and experiences as a trans Muslim. Despite harsh feedback, they've become role models for visibility and celebrating queer Muslim life.

Small but important waves are being made in the queer Muslim community. [Masjid al-Rabia](#) is one of the few mosques found by and for queer Muslims, where the prayer room is welcome to everyone, regardless of gender presentation. There have been virtual Friday prayers conducted by a branch in D.C., which asks you to fill out a form to be given permission for safety reasons. The [Mecca Institute](#) has been vocal in supporting LGBTQ+ Muslims through nonprofit research and education.

"Trans Muslims are also extremely resilient, brave, and creative. Many believe in God's love and the Islamic teachings of peace, compassion and care for the most marginalized among us. These important qualities of Islam play a critical role in their continued identification as Muslim," says Professor Khan.

I think about my last phone call with my cousin. "Can you really envision it?" He asks. "A practice of the faith that comes from a place of compassion rather than contradiction?"

"I can," I say. The blue gems of my tasbeeh, my prayer beads, gleam under the desk lamp. "And I know I'm not alone."