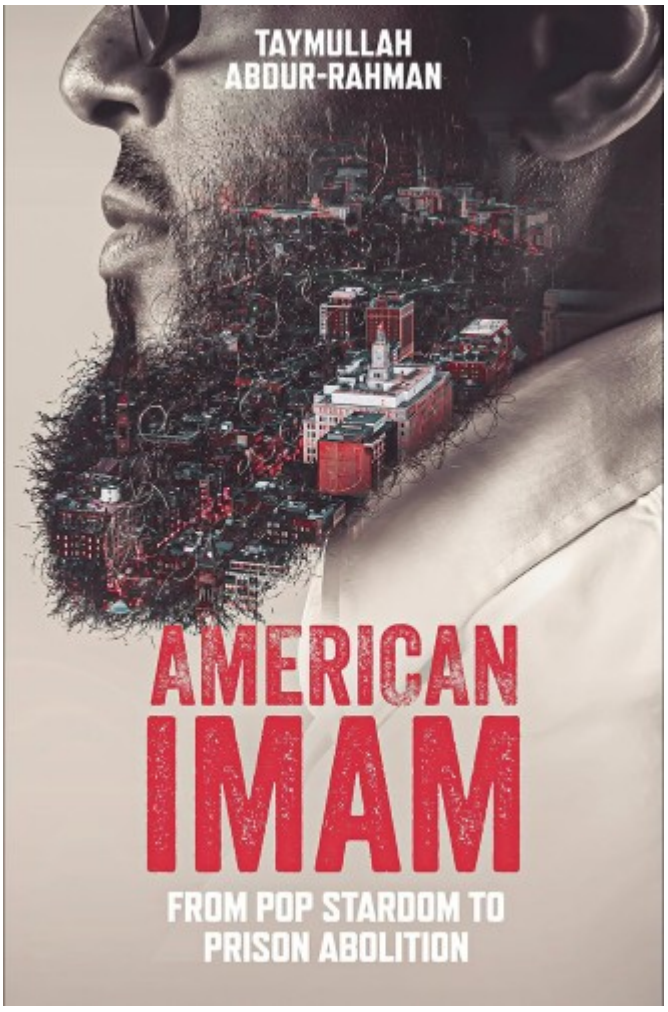
How a boy band star from Boston became the beloved Imam Tay

Taymullah Abdur-Rahman demonstrates that friendship across religious difference can elicit personal and social transformation.

by Rafia Amina Khader in the February 2025 issue
Published on January 23, 2025

In Review



American Imam

From Pop Stardom to Prison Abolition

By Taymullah Abdur-Rahman
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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

I met Imam Tay, as Taymullah Abdur-Rahman is affectionately known, last year at an interfaith program at Auburn Theological Seminary. The thing he said that most resonated with me was that after his conversion to Islam, he was a Salafi for many years. Salafism attempts to get behind centuries of Islamic scholarship and prioritize the tradition's earliest texts and practices. It encourages proselytizing. At its best, it encourages devotion. In some extreme cases, however, it can damage one's soul and community.

I know this from experience. At age 22, I became convinced I needed to learn "pure Islam," unadulterated by the Sufi practices I had been raised with. I started working at a K-12 Islamic school, where a parent alleged that my style of dress was *haram* (forbidden) because my shirts were not long enough. I started second-guessing whether I was sufficiently obedient and became anxious about what my disobedience might imply. Islam is meant to be a hopeful faith, but I became overly legalistic, convinced that one wrong act would condemn me to hell. There was no room for flexibility or nuance. It wasn't until I met my husband, who reintroduced me to Sufism, that I began to realize how much being in that environment had warped my understanding of Islam.

Given my history, I was curious: How did Abdur-Rahman recover from Salafism? Given that background, what does his interfaith leadership look like? *American Imam* offers an almost unbelievable—though highly accessible—answer to these questions.

Abdur-Rahman grew up as Tyrone Sutton in Roxbury, an impoverished Black neighborhood in Boston. His rise to fame—his R&B group Perfect Gentlemen toured with New Kids on the Block in the '90s—and subsequent fall is a fascinating story on its own. The crux of this memoir, however, is at the point where he finds God and sees the impact of interfaith relationships on the pursuit of social transformation.

After his brief brush with fame, Abdur-Rahman returns home penniless and broken. A few days after his 24th birthday—while he's sitting in his car, smoking marijuana, and trying to evade the cops—a tremendous sadness comes over him. In that moment, he knows he needs God. He visits a few local churches but feels nothing.

He visits his local mosque and is immediately struck by its racial and socioeconomic diversity. Two of the men he observes praying have holes in their socks. As he recalls, “seeing those ‘holy’ socks was a strange confirmation that this was what I’d been searching for.”

Here Abdur-Rahman pauses his personal narrative and offers two chapters of exposition written for non-Muslim readers. The first, an overview of Islam, is the most comprehensive and honest exposition of Islamic belief and practice I have seen in years. The second provides a sociological survey of Muslim Americans, much of which juxtaposes immigrant Muslims with Black Muslims. Abdur-Rahman notes that many of the latter are what he calls system-affected Muslims, those who have experienced a combination of poverty, violence, broken homes, abuse, addiction, and institutional racism.

As a fellow Muslim, I applaud Abdur-Rahman for being honest about the Muslim American community and the challenges we face. There’s a tendency when addressing interfaith audiences to portray Muslim Americans as ideal citizens. Decades after 9/11, many of us still feel the need to show that we are not like those terrorists, that Islam is a religion of peace. Still, while Muslim Americans are the most racially diverse religious group in the United States, Black voices are often marginalized. As he writes, “we have been manipulated to be the ‘public face of mosque diversity’ only when it benefits the immigrant narrative.”

These chapters serve as an effective backdrop to the liberatory promise Abdur-Rahman believes Islam holds for system-affected Muslims—a promise that leads him to become a prison chaplain. His narrative picks up at the start of his prison chaplaincy in Concord, Massachusetts. He has a rocky start, preaching a combative form of Salafi dogmatism that has the opposite of his intended effect. After a gentle exhortation by an older prisoner, he starts to question the source of his negativity. He looks at himself and realizes he needs to reckon with his “arrogance, sarcasm, and . . . flagrant disregard for the feelings of others.” Around this same time, he meets Bruce Nickerson, an Episcopal deacon who volunteers at the prison. Through their friendship, Abdur-Rahman witnesses true religious leadership, which he calls “public love.” He writes of Nickerson, “He didn’t do a whole lotta preaching. He was plain. He used to say to me, ‘If this work kills ya, then what better way to die?’”

Realizing the error of his former ways, Abdur-Rahman returns to the prison to “repair the tainted Islamic framing [he] had ushered in.” He centers system-affected

Muslims in his ministry and recalibrates the stories of the Qur'an to suit the needs of that audience. As he powerfully asserts,

> Jesus needed to become an unhoused man of color terrorized by law enforcement. His mother, Mary, needed to become a teen mother rejected by her community. Moses needed to become a community activist. His mother, Jocabed, needed to become a single Black mother who fears for her son's life.

Through this restorative work, Abdur-Rahman witnesses the personal transformation of several prisoners—some of whom seemed unredeemable. He rejects the notion that the "correct religious methodology should be *believe, behave, then belong*," noting that "it should be *belong, behave, then believe*." As his faith moves beyond dogmatism, it is strengthened and becomes life-affirming. His personal transformation happens only after he begins to see the wisdom of others who do not share his faith.

Encouraged by Nickerson to continue his education, Abdur-Rahman becomes a Holocaust educator. In one of the book's most striking passages, he recalls the time when a young Palestinian student tells him that he could never be her imam because he is a Zionist tool. Instead of arguing with her, he asks questions. Their subsequent conversation ends cordially, and he promises to take a closer look at his passive stance on Israel-Palestine. He later reflects, "No two human tragedies are the same. . . . The Holocaust was the systematic, intentional murder of Jewish people based on their race. The Israel-Palestine conflict is not that."

These words—which Abdur-Rahman wrote before October 7, 2023—now carry a tragic irony. Many people see the Israeli government's current actions in Palestine as a systematic, intentional murder of people based on their ethnicity, and there's increasing awareness of the violence Palestinians have suffered since even before Israel's founding. I wonder whether Abdur-Rahman might rewrite this passage given the shifts in public conversation. Relatedly, he ends the book on an optimistic note that feels inappropriate to our current moment.

I can't help but wonder if this helpful book was published at the wrong time. *American Imam* demonstrates that friendship across religious traditions can help our efforts toward personal and social transformation. Will Abdur-Rahman's book remind readers of the rewards that come from interfaith work and propel them to continue

despite the difficulties? Or has the current conflagration of violence in the Holy Land ended all bonds of interfaith friendship for the foreseeable future? As with most things in this life, only time will tell.

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