

Amanda Quraishi

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SPEAKERS

Amanda Quraishi, Tiffany Puett

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- A** Amanda Quraishi 00:01
My name is Amanda Qureshi.
- T** Tiffany Puett 00:04
Tell me something about your life, your story?
- A** Amanda Quraishi 00:08
I think probably the most important way to frame this conversation is that I am Muslim, but I was not born Muslim. I was born into a Christian family, grew up Christian, ended up leaving the church that I was raised in and converted to Islam in 1999.
- T** Tiffany Puett 00:29
Okay, tell me a little more about what it means to you to be Muslim?
- A** Amanda Quraishi 00:35
Sure. I think it's something I think about a lot, because, especially at this point in time, I feel like Muslimness is very much tied up with identity politics in America and I have also struggled for a long time to understand my identity as a convert. I'm in a religious

community where I'm not the majority, ethnically. I feel like I stick out a lot of times. I also don't cover, which a lot of converts do - my hair by the way. I feel like I've given a lot of thought to it, I've thought for a long time about what it means to be Muslim.

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Amanda Quraishi 01:27

I go back to my original path, where I was looking for religion, after I had left Christianity. There was a very specific day, when I was tormented by my lack of clarity around my spirituality, around how I wanted to worship, and how I wanted to be a religious person in the world, and ended up praying - one of the most impactful and important prayers in my life.

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Amanda Quraishi 02:06

In that prayer, I didn't hold anything back. I think that was the first time in my life when I completely allowed myself vulnerability with God. By that, I mean, I wasn't afraid of whatever answer, or lack of answer that I was going to get. At that point I was so at the end of my rope seeking and trying to find out what I wanted to do or how I could be in relationship with God. I was ready to just walk away from it completely. So, I prayed in the most humble way possible and just asked - I called God by any name I could think of - and I asked that I have some kind of direction.

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Amanda Quraishi 03:06

When I was finished with that prayer, I had the most overwhelming sense of relief. It was physical as well as mental, spiritual and emotional. I realized that I had let myself completely submit to whatever that will of God was, whatever it was, whatever it is, I was ready to take the answer. Even if the answer was one that I didn't want. It was all there on the table, just the knowledge that even if I didn't get an answer, that would be the answer, and I wasn't afraid of that either. That was before I actually studied the world religion of Islam.

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Amanda Quraishi 04:05

It was shortly thereafter that I discovered Islam. When I did, one of the first things I learned was that the word Muslim means one who submits to the will of God. Phonetically and the etymology of the word in Arabic, is one who submit to the will of God. I realized that that is what I had done before, before knowing about Muhammad, before knowing about the Quran, before knowing anything that is technically what people would identify as Islam, I had turned myself over to God completely. It's what I hold on to to this day,

even when I'm confused about my identity, even when I'm not sure. That's the thing that I go back to, and I remember that moment. I realized that the definition of Muslim is one that no one can take away from me. It was the most genuine, spiritual moment, I think of my life.

T Tiffany Puett 05:12

Mm, I love that story. Tell me about your work as an activist, the activities or initiatives you're involved in, and how you got started with those.

A Amanda Quraishi 05:16

My foray into activism began in a very rude way. I had converted to Islam in 1999. I was very happy just being Muslim and practicing my new faith. I had very little interaction with a larger community, just a close group of friends that I knew when I converted. Two years after I converted, 9/11 happened. It was at that point, when I started to see myself and my religion in a broader context. It wasn't just a personal decision anymore. It was also drastically misunderstood by many people, and it was being actively misrepresented by both Muslims, who were acting badly and by people outside of my tradition, who were speaking with authority about what it meant to be Muslim and what Islam really was.

A Amanda Quraishi 06:04

I felt really compelled to speak to that, but I also was kind of dragged into it a little bit because I didn't feel necessarily qualified to represent our community because I was still a new Muslim.

A Amanda Quraishi 06:52

However, at that time, Muslims - they still are - but we were really were quite a minority community in Austin, and Texas, and in the United States. We weren't nearly as organized as we are now, and we're not really that organized now. So, I would be requested by people in our community, imams or other leaders to go and represent our community at events, to speak to church groups, or to write an article.

A Amanda Quraishi 07:30

This was just so scary and uncomfortable for me, but I also knew, and was told that there wasn't anyone else who was going to do it, and it had to be done. I couldn't just let people have whatever misconceptions they had. So, I did the best I could, made a lot of mistakes

and fumbled around, was very confused, but in that process, I also started to get involved with the interfaith community. That was a wonderful, wonderful moment for me when I discovered interfaith work and interfaith engagement. I didn't even realize there was such a thing up until that point.

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Amanda Quraishi 08:14

When I began to hang out in interfaith circles I thought "My, this is what I had been missing for most of my life, having been raised in this very narrow, evangelical view of religion," and then I was like a kid in a candy store. I just started going to every interfaith event, I wanted to know everything about every religion, and I wanted to contribute to that conversation, and why Islam was important to me and why I saw value in it.

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Amanda Quraishi 08:45

I've been doing interfaith work largely here in Austin and in Texas, for about 10 years. In the course of doing that, there's also been activists, if you're an activist in one area, you're gonna be an activist in another more likely. I feel like activism is as much a personality type as anything else. So, there would be lots of cross pollination as far as social justice activism. I, at one point, got a job working at an amazing Christian based organization that serve the homeless and was able to bring my own Muslim perspective to that community.

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Amanda Quraishi 09:32

As a Muslim, and as someone who has my own perspectives and challenges within the Muslim community, I feel like I'm an activist as much inside the community as I am outside the community, challenging things that I feel aren't completely representative of the tradition that I hold dear. That would be things like making sure there is womens' representation in mosques and at Muslim events, making sure that there is inclusion, racial inclusion, sexual orientation, political inclusion.

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Amanda Quraishi 10:22

I really feel very strongly that the Muslim community, in some ways, because it is a minority community, really fears that kind of internal pluralism. I think that that's very natural, I think, when a community is a minority, and it's under fire, the immediate tendency is to close rings and to try to make things are as safe and cozy as possible, get everybody on the same page, everybody on the same team, but by our nature, the Muslim community is so diverse. I feel like a lot of people continue to be pushed out because they

don't fit exactly into those definitions of what it means to be an "ideal Muslim" and to represent Islam in America. I think that at this point, our community is mature enough to be able to handle that kind of internal pluralism and it's actually a joy to watch that flourish.

T Tiffany Puett 11:37

This is an added question, not part of the list I sent you, but what would you say are some of the successes, things you feel like you've accomplished through your work? Along those lines as well, what are some of the challenges you feel like you have faced or continue to face?

A Amanda Quraishi 11:58

Well, I think - I don't have metrics, but I do believe that the work I do, and the work that I've done in concert with many other people in my community has broadened the understanding of Muslims in our city, in our states, and in our country.

A Amanda Quraishi 12:18

I feel like where we are now through the just tireless - and without giving up - like years and years of trying and showing up and having the same conversations and just trying to push past these preconceived ideas that are everywhere - I think that there's progress. I've seen progress,. I've seen a broader acceptance of Muslims.

A Amanda Quraishi 12:54

I do think that there are still the narratives that are false and harmful that are still out there. They're being actively propagated, but I also think that a larger, broader community understanding about Muslims and Islam is also there.

A Amanda Quraishi 13:15

A really great example is that when something happens - so, anecdotally, a small mosque by my house was vandalized a couple years ago and it was heartbreaking. I was so saddened by it. It was so cruel what they did. That kind of thing, every time it happens, it brings shockwaves into our community. We just look at each other, and we're like, "What are we going to do?"

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Amanda Quraishi 13:53

What was amazing about that is that the larger community actually showed up. They heard about this, it was in the news, and the larger community actually contacted the mosque. It was led by one person who said, "Look, we need to rally around you guys." So, she organized a sort of a vigil type thing where everybody showed up and crowded into this tiny little mosque and there were literally people spilling out right into the street.

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Amanda Quraishi 14:29

There were so many people all together, thinking about this community and holding this community in their hearts and praying and interfaith prayers for this community. That is extraordinary. That doesn't happen if you're not actively engaged in building bridges in your community. That kind of thing didn't happen immediately after 9/11 in my city. It was a lot of fear and a lot of "You come and talk to us and tell us why you're not dangerous," and in this case, people were like, "Let us come and take care of you."

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Amanda Quraishi 15:12

Another perfectly good example was the Texas Muslim Capitol Day that happened last legislative session where thousands and thousands came. Every time there's a session, the Muslims come, we bring kids from all over the state. Muslim kids come and tour the Capitol and get educated about the process. A couple years ago we actually had protesters that came waving signs and tried to take over the microphone when we were talking.

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Amanda Quraishi 15:45

This time somebody organized, a non-Muslim person organized thousands of people who came, many of them wearing shirts that said, "I stand with my Muslim neighbors." They created a huge wall of people, two feet deep, all around the Muslims who were standing on the steps of the Capitol having their rally. The Muslims were out numbered, probably three, four to one, it was spectacular. Again, that was not done by the Muslim community.

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Amanda Quraishi 16:16

But that kind of thing doesn't just materialize. People don't just show up unless they feel cold and there are relationships there that motivate them to stand with their community. I think that's the fruit of well over a decade of work in building those relationships. It's amazing to see it when it happens.

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Tiffany Puett 16:42

Yeah, that's great. I was there at that. That was an amazing event. Tell me a bit about what Texas means to you, or what it means to you to be a Texan, how all these pieces fit together.

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Amanda Quraishi 16:59

I love this question. I'm not originally from Texas. I moved here in 1998. That's how old I am, end of 1998. I didn't expect to stay here when I moved. I was getting on my feet, my dad was living in Round Rock. I came to stay with him. I ended up finding a job, getting settled in and finding Islam, getting married, buying a house, and having kids. I ended up loving it and identifying very much as a Texan.

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Amanda Quraishi 17:42

I think that this is interesting. I don't even know how to explain this. It's something where I just - and actually, weirdly, the same kind of thing happened with Islam - where one day I just remember being out doing something and thinking, "I am just so in love with this place. I love my state." It was probably during the spring, when all the flowers were out and I just remember being like, "I feel sorry for people that don't live in this state. This is the best place in the world. Man, I'm a Texan." Officially, no. It was very much an emotional response. It was the same thing with Islam. I just remember one day being at an event and looking around at people and being like, "These are my people," like shocked to realize that I feel good here. I feel at home here.

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Amanda Quraishi 18:38

It was never a conscious thing. It was just being there. I guess what it was, the accumulation of so many good and right and positive experiences and relationships over time had built to a certain point.

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Amanda Quraishi 18:54

It was just this moment of, "Oh, that's who I am, I'm a Texan or, oh, that's who I am, a Muslim." I think that's really interesting. I didn't ever set out to do either of those things in my life and here I am a Texas Muslim. I actually, I love it. I love who I am now.

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Tiffany Puett 19:20

Do you think being Muslim in Texas is a different experience than being Muslim in another place? I mean, I know this is all kind of speculation to imagine that.

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Amanda Quraishi 19:30

I think so. I have Muslim friends from around the country and they think that we're crazy. They're like, "Why do you live there?" They don't understand. People have crazy ideas about what Texas is like, and I think it actually kind of rubs me the wrong way. Again, in the same way that I feel when people make assumptions about what it means to be Muslim. I feel the same way when people make assumptions about what it means to be Texan.

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Amanda Quraishi 20:03

I always try to push back on that. I say [that] I choose to live here. I chose the religion, I chose the place I live, I love my state. There are reasons for that. One is that there's so much space here, and I don't just mean physical space. I really feel like Texans, the vast majority of Texans are the kind of people that are live and let live people. It's [also] a really good place, if you're an independent person, if you're an independent thinker. If you like to make up your own mind and do things your own way, people can make space for you to do that here. I love it.

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Amanda Quraishi 20:42

I went up to the northwest in the summer on vacation, Seattle. I was born in Washington and breathed most of my life in the northwest. When I got off the plane -when we came back, I got off the plane and I could literally just feel my body relax, and I was like, "Ah, space." There's big, big chunks of land just sitting around here. I don't feel like I have to tiptoe around and be around people all the time.

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Amanda Quraishi 21:14

Maybe it's also, if you're the kind of person that likes to be alone, it's a really good state because you can find places to do that. I love it. I will say it again, I feel sorry for people that don't live in Texas, we're the best state.

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Tiffany Puett 21:31

The Tourism Commission should hire you. Pretty good pitch. So, what else would you like or is there anything else that you would like people to know about Islam, Muslims, social

justice, movements for change?

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Amanda Quraishi 21:54

I think, probably the thing that I really want people to understand, in general, not just about Muslims and Islam, but across the board [is that] I think that - the reason why I beat this drum because I talk about this a lot in my work and in my own activism - we have to let people define themselves. We have to allow for nuance in the way that we approach one another and approach the subjects of politics and religion and everything else that we do in this country.

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Amanda Quraishi 22:39

Pluralism is not about everybody being on the same page, there are going to be disagreements, that's not a bad thing. I think that it's only a bad thing, if you feel so insecure, or you don't feel secure in your own identity that everything seems to be a threat.

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Amanda Quraishi 23:06

In an ideal environment, if you feel comfortable and secure in your identity then what other people are doing or thinking or believing doesn't really matter. I think it's a testament to how insecure we are as a culture, as a nation right now, that we're constantly running around and trying to change people or taking offense at other people's beliefs or ideas.

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Amanda Quraishi 23:32

We have a democratic process for trying to enact policy and make things work the way that we believe they should work. I would like to see more of us investing in that process than just trying to engage in unproductive conflict with people.

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Amanda Quraishi 23:56

Again, I'm all about conflict. I think conflict is good and healthy, as long as it's productive. We aren't being productive. I think we're making a mistake. I think that when we engage with one another - this is true in interfaith work too - we spent a lot of years doing Kumbaya, interfaith work where we were all talking about what we had in common. The reality is that we have some very, very big things that we disagree on. If we don't talk about those things then what happens is those remain as fractures, and when pressure is

applied to us as a community, then we start to break apart.

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Amanda Quraishi 24:44

We have to be willing to acknowledge those differences. I mean that across the board, like externally with people interfaith. I mean intrafaith for Muslims. I mean, politically across the the political spectrum. I really feel strongly that we need to work on building ourselves, own competence and our own security up, and then also being able to let other people live and let live. It's got to be that way, anything else is not democracy. Anything else is not pluralism, and I don't want to live anywhere else, but there.