

Usama Malik

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SPEAKERS

Mary Wilson, Usama Malik

- M** Mary Wilson 00:02
Hi, I'm Mary Wilson. This is Wednesday, March 17th 2021. I'm interviewing Chaplain Usama Malik. He is the chaplain of the ATX Muslim Space organization. We were talking before I started recording [and] I found out he's working at Austin Presbyterian Seminary in Student Affairs. So, we'll be talking about both of those positions and the people that he serves in those arenas. Before we get into that, I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about how you came to be a chaplain and I'm assuming you're an Imam as well?
- U** Usama Malik 00:46
I'm actually not
- M** Mary Wilson 00:47
You're not? Okay. Thank you for clarifying that. Just tell us a little bit about your journey that's brought you to where you are.
- U** Usama Malik 00:55
Yeah sure. So, the shortcut supercut of it. I graduated from Austin Pres. [Austin Presbyterian Seminary] with my M. Div [Masters of Divinity] last year and going into Austin Pres I already had my sights set on chaplaincy work, interfaith chaplaincy, higher education chaplaincy - that's

kind of where I saw myself landing per se. After completing my M. Div - going through CP[Clinical Pastoral Education] and all that stuff - through that process - I then began work at Austin Seminary full time. I felt that that was a space that I could one, I wanted to work in higher education long term, in terms of in chaplaincy setting - and I felt that this was a good kind of starting point for that. As I was doing that I had, prior to the pandemic gotten hired for contract work at Southwestern University in Georgetown, for chaplaincy services, for Muslim chaplaincy. There's maybe like nine or 10 students there. The week before, the spiritual life director and I met and we talked about different things. The students there had an Islam Awareness Week plan the next week. That same week COVID hit. So, things got put on remote there.

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Usama Malik 02:17

In that conversation I had with her, she had recommended for me just to check out the Islamic chaplaincy graduate certificate program at Hartford Seminary. I was actually considering between Hartford Seminary and Austin. It was familiar territory, so I was like, "Why not look into this?" Even when that chaplaincy opportunity got put on hold last March - between then and now, I've really just been supplementing my M. Div with the Islamic chaplaincy aspects of it as well, with the coursework and training and things like that. Since having graduated with the M. Div, it's been a journey to supplement, with the Islamic components as well. But I think for me, it's helped refine where I would like to end up moving forward. Through this program, I was able to start that conversation with Muslim Space about possible chaplaincy in a community setting in a Muslim third space, "What does that look like?" Apart from that, also just getting involved with and getting networked with other Muslim chaplains, in fields like education or healthcare, the military, corrections - so, that that's been a really tremendous part.

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Usama Malik 03:51

I tell folks that while in seminary, I learned the ins and outs of becoming a chaplain and that training process and how to think theologically and to expand my own theological framework, but the next year or so has been more so how to become a more refined Muslim chaplain and better resourced to the community that I'm in. So, this has been a better journey with regards to knowing where I kind of see myself now. Now, it's not so much, "Okay, higher education," I'm getting a little bit of both of the best worlds with working at the seminary and then doing community chaplaincy on the other hand. That's kind of where we're at right now. It's an exciting space in Muslim Space and seeing how chaplaincy has been able to fit in, but also what it can bring to the table.

M

Mary Wilson 04:48

Sure. So, you've started both of these positions at the time of the pandemic, so you don't know what they're like pre pandemic.

U

Usama Malik 04:58

Yeah. The funny thing is one of the students in our cohort at Hartford had started doing community chaplaincy maybe a month or so before, so she and I were talking about this - and we were just going off of what we had seen pre-pandemic, but also like, "What can we do to address the needs during the pandemic, but also what will things look like going forward? What can we keep? What can we look forward to? What's going to change?" It's definitely a unique time. I think it was helpful to see, in degree, what chaplaincy was like prior to the pandemic, but now going forward it's like, "Okay, what can we do to retain some of the things that might improve access to chaplaincy services? But also bringing that embodied aspect of chaplaincy back to the forefront? How will that look because now we have to get out of the Zoom world and actually be able to go and talk to people and read their body language and meet with them fully present. That's definitely going to be a new challenge, but it's one that will have me rerun my memory because it's like, "Okay, this is what it was like before."

M

Mary Wilson 06:29

Right. I'm wondering what is it like to be the chaplain for Muslim Space? And without divulging personal stories what does that role look like?

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Usama Malik 06:43

Yeah sure. Actually, Sadia, the executive director, and I were kind of thinking of the same things. I was thinking about this when I approached Shadia with regards to this proposal, in terms of what would it even look like? Because even then when I put a proposal together, it's maybe like eight or nine different things, "What is it going to look like?" Chaplaincy, I've seen it in other settings, chaplains doing x, y, z, and whatnot. So having an idea was definitely helpful. But again, each space is unique. Again, each church, each worshiping community has its own needs and looks a lot different than every other one. The first aspect of it, for me was, "What's the baseline that I can provide to Muslim Space - just sheer baseline?" Two things stuck out to me. One was, obviously let's set up a regular kind of chaplain check-in hours or just general appointments with the chaplain so people can know if there's hope, [so that] people can have a chance to have a space for whatever issues they've been seeing. As I was coming in, I was like, "I don't even know if people will use these," because it's just like, if you were to tell me, "Hey, this space now offers

chaplains service." I would be like, "Oh, God, I don't even know what that is." So, you know, what was going to come of it? So, that was the first thing - was kind of doing the chaplains appointments and general awareness about chaplains. So, doing some education around that [and] making some videos for the community.

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Usama Malik 08:03

Apart from that, you're probably familiar with spiritual formation groups that that are held. So, we have those here at the seminary - at Austin Seminary. In the conversations I had, I think we hold them for our first year students, in the conversations I had with our first year students on that experience, and what spiritual formation groups were like, I was like, "This is actually a really critical tool that we can use within a Muslim community, especially in a space that values that and maybe doesn't think too much about tying narrative in with faith." So, based on that framework, I put together these recurring groups called spiritual connection groups. So, we put not just our own narrative, but a lot more conversation about our spirituality. Those are two baseline things we started off with.

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Usama Malik 09:14

Again, that was like, "Okay, this is what I'll put in. Let's see where it goes from there and what I can do." My background is in organizational development and digital media. So, immediately once I got in, part of that was just me kind of wandering off. Here's the chaplains aspect, but knowing that in any kind of startup or organization, you're going to have a lot of other roles than what is just your thing. If you're the executive director of a startup or organization, you're probably doing the finances, the communications and all that. You're the chaplain in the third space, in the community space, for me, it's not, "Hey, I'm coming in. I'm going to hold these chaplain hours and do these groups and that's it. Peace, I'm out." I imagined it would be a more encompassing role and Muslim Space has been a space that has been welcoming of that. So, alongside setting up the chaplains programming, we did a website redesign, you know, so that was just something I've done for other organizations - and this was something that I was like, "Hey, I think this will help not just my services, but the organization in general."

M

Mary Wilson 10:21

Every organization needs to do that from time to time anyway, things get stale without even realizing it.

U

Usama Malik 10:27

Exactly. I was just like, the chaplain can be someone, especially in a space like this, that

not only helps identify the needs and what might need to get done for the community members, but also the pulse of the organization itself. It's like, "Hey, what can we do to better serve other folks?" In doing so, one of the main things we're doing during this time that we haven't done before, which is under chaplaincy services, is a comprehensive community survey. So, doing a survey of needs, doing a survey of demographics, and a survey of just feedback from our community members. We've never done a comprehensive survey of who our membership is or who our community is. So this is one thing that I'm kind of spearheading on the backside. A recurring thing each week, every other week is meeting people, surprisingly [during] chaplaincy office hours and appointments, [which] have been very stable. People have been coming almost every week, multiple times. We previously didn't know that was a need, until a chaplain came in. Some people were just like, "I just want to talk to somebody." After 20 other appointments later, it's just like, "Okay, this is obviously a need that our community has."

M

Mary Wilson 11:48

Well, and it may have been one that was exacerbated by the pandemic. It's hard to hard to know since it wasn't in existence prior to that - just the disconnect and de-socialization the pandemic has imposed upon us, it would seem like that would heighten the desire to connect and a chaplain is a really great way to do that. So, I'm really pleased. I actually got to talk to Shadia the other day and she was very excited about the development and how this has all worked out nicely. So I was wondering now, how do you then balance the work there with the work you have at the seminary? And who do you serve at the seminary?

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Usama Malik 12:37

Yeah, absolutely. The fortunate thing, for me has been that all of our stuff for Muslim Space is after five p.m and on the weekends, so that's been great. My office hours are Thursdays, six to eight p.m. Our spiritual connection groups are either on the weekends or in the weekday evenings and then in general, appointments for me are after five - but logistically that works out. At the seminary, even in this pandemic world, this remote working world, it's still on that general eight to five schedule. My work there is primarily with the Office of Student Affairs and Vocations. So, it is primarily with the students but from a non-academic standpoint, not that that's like completely non-academic - but in the sense that it's their life and experience outside the classroom. That's been very helpful, especially in this COVID time, that's been where a lot of the pulse of the campus has been - a lot of the touch points have been outside of the class setting. You had that first few months of a bumpy transition from an embodied classroom to a virtual classroom, but now we've gotten into over a year of this. So, that's more of a mental health aspect. That's more on sustaining your own drive aspect, that's a lot of the outside-the-class aspects. So,

I work with the Dean of Students who does provide pastoral care and things like that. For me, it's been very helpful to see the kind of work that's being done and being involved in helping students navigate that time outside of the structure of class - because this time is one that doesn't have much structure outside of the time you've got there - you're probably at home and struggling to make some ends meet on certain things.

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Usama Malik 14:44

So, it's been helpful for me to serve a demographic like this because as you know, the student body at the seminary is very diverse in where they come from, you don't have just like, "Oh, these are 18 year olds out of college," - these are people who are coming from second professions, who are lawyers, who are pastors, who are coming from other places all over the country. So, that's been very helpful for me, because one of the things I had listed for myself as a goal was being able to be prepared to serve people, regardless of their theological background, but also just the different kinds of folks that would come into the chaplaincy space. I feel that it's been helpful to be at the seminary for the past five years, in working with people that are coming from very different theological angles, very different states, very different mindsets. That has been a very helpful environment to continue the work outside of my formal job into these other settings.

M

Mary Wilson 15:52

Sure. I mean, there's a U.S culture on the whole, but then each region of the U.S has its own nuances and certainly the seminary has students from other places as well outside of the US. So, I can see where you would start to be able to take your experiences there and translate that into the Muslim Space group because that's a very diverse group in terms of geographic background, much less theological emphases. So, speaking background, where are you from? What's your family story and current situation?

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Usama Malik 16:31

Sure, so, I was born and raised in Round Rock. I've been in the Austin area my whole life. I tell folks that I've moved around the 512 area code a lot, but I have never left it. So, that's kind of where I've been. My family prior to that were originally from Pakistan. They went from there to Nigeria, in the early '80s. My dad worked as a professor in a local college there. After about 10 years or so, they then moved to the States in the late '80s and they moved to the Austin area here. We've kind of been here ever since. Apart from me, I have three other siblings. I was the caboose of the train. So, I've enjoyed the benefits of that. But my parents are still here and in the Austin area. I went to UT Austin after graduating high school here. After that went to went to the seminary.

M Mary Wilson 17:46
You are an Austin boy [laughs].

U Usama Malik 17:50
It makes me feel young. Folks ask me, "Haven't you gotten bored of the city, you've been here for almost 30 years. How have you just stayed put?" It's interesting because one, the city has changed so much over the last 10 years, but also moving from the corner of Round Rock, which at that time was not bustling like it is now. It was very different, in terms of political swing, but also geographically, it was very different. And then coming to Austin was a very different scene. Since college and being here since seminary, it's just drastically changed to where you live in different parts of the city and you feel like you've lived in a completely different part. I didn't know how different it was to live in the seminary campus area than it was to live in west campus in the UT area. It was a night and day difference.

M Mary Wilson 18:52
Oh, yeah.

U Usama Malik 18:53
And then from there moving to the North Austin area, I'm finding new places of the city that'll keep me entertained. My wife and I have since settled down here, and with the pandemic, our work has been remote. She was previously in Dallas and that barrier has been mitigated by this. But yeah, I find something here. The traffic has stayed the same, so everything else got to change.

M Mary Wilson 19:23
Yeah. Do you have any children?

U Usama Malik 19:25
No. We just got married two years ago or so. So, we have three rabbits [and] they keep us busy.

M Mary Wilson 19:32
Right. Because, as I've talked to people, those that have children at home, have another

layer of trying to figure out how to be parents in the middle of this as well.

U

Usama Malik 19:43

Yeah, hats off to those parents. My boss at the seminary is actually - she's got that schedule too, I think just last week or so her son was able to attend in person finally. And she was just like, "Why does he want to go? He doesn't think it's fun to hang out with a couple of 40 year olds?" And I was like, "Yeah, I guess we're at that point of the pandemic, where we're just attached now to that."

M

Mary Wilson 20:09

[Laughs]. Oh, my goodness. Well, tell me a little bit about what it was like growing up in the Austin area and being Muslim? Because it is a minority religious tradition in the area. What have your experiences been as you grew up?

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Usama Malik 20:28

Sure, sure. So I honestly would say that, up until high school, and even right now, relatively speaking, the Austin Muslim community is very small compared to the likes of Dallas and Houston. There are a number of more mosques now than there were back then. But for me, growing up, apart from our family, we had quite a bit of a big extended family here. We just had a small mosque in the Round Rock area, which we've since still been going to. You definitely felt it, especially in the wake of post 9/11 and whatnot - the community support was usually was primarily the family. So, at least for me, growing up, I saw my family and some folks at the mosque, that's it. But we all became very close, especially in that decade of 2000-2010. After 2010 or so, that's when things started to really pick up around. So, now you see a lot of people moving in and a lot of other mosques kind of coming up. It was a constant initiative to find footing within the conservative Williamson County at that time because of the rhetoric around what was going on at the time, internationally, with Islam being used by different groups. There's a lot more outreach in that aspect.

U

Usama Malik 22:18

For me coming up, the vibe was, "This is who you are as a Muslim." One of the things we are out to do is dispel any kind of misconceptions about Islam. So, it was constantly a - I don't wanna say a reactive kind of stance that was taken, but that was part and parcel. Growing up, it was not just being taught what Islam is, but being ready to answer different questions or misconceptions about Islam. That was from there up until college, and through college it was very similar. For me growing up, it was kind of like

Islam in that defensive pose - in the sense that we are expecting different comments or different things to come about after 9/11 - you have different things coming about and so always having this defensive pose that's there. And this posture, I think, stuck from that point until even towards the end of college or so it was continually like that. And I think just recently now it's changing into a little bit more beyond, "Islam is not that," to more proactive. That's what I recall, of growing up even through college was literally just that - you're taught Islam, but taught it in a way, [like], "These are the accusations that you might get, just be on your toes, in case you encounter things like that," or statements like that.

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Mary Wilson 23:49

Do you find that that is exhausting?

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Usama Malik 23:54

I would say that in hindsight, I'm surprised I didn't get exhausted earlier. Because I think in that moment, you're kind of taking things in stride. I think that reflecting back on it, you kind of underestimate how much was in that moment. We would just be out here or doing something and we would get into these same kind of questions. I think [people would] get into this mindset at the time that, "This is just the Muslim experience. This is just the American Muslim experience of getting questions like this." And you don't necessarily stop to ask, "Why am I getting them?" until a little bit down the line and then you reflect on a time like this and you're like, "Oh, man, that was actually there because it just felt like this was just part of my Muslim experiences. It's not that I'm fundamentally different, but it's that maybe my faith tradition just requires a little bit more clarification. It's just people are not familiar with it. You know, we are a percent or so of the population. This is natural." So, you rationalize it in your mind. But now, in hindsight, when I think of it objectively, I'm like, "You know that's quite a bit much that's that's going on there." So, yeah I think that in hindsight I think about it, but at the time it was just like, "Hey we're going to get questions like that," so it wasn't like you're blindsided. This was taught in the mosque that, "hey you're going to get questions like this. Be prepared to answer." It's just kind of like any other kind of religious training or service that you're trying to be equipped to handle that.

M

Mary Wilson 25:31

Right. Well, I'm wondering - I'll see if I can phrase this correctly, but do you get nice people who consider themselves to be nice people - who want to have your permission to somehow discriminate against you? Like, "It's fine that you're Muslim but we really don't have to accommodate your faith or take it into account in the way we live or the way we talk or the way we think about Muslims throughout the world?"

U

Usama Malik 26:04

Yeah. This may have been because the number of encounters was probably a lot more for me in that early college/pre-college time, growing up here. I remember getting questions like, "Oh so you were one of the good Muslims." I remember we were handing out flyers and things like that - we would just be at a parade or something and just handing out flyers about our mosque and be people would say, "Oh y'all are one of the good Muslims?" At the time, you're a kid and you're just like, "Yeah of course, you know we're the peaceful Muslims," and you kind of buy into that.

M

Mary Wilson 26:50

That's exactly what I was trying to get at.

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Usama Malik 26:52

I think now, if that question was to come up, it's definitely a loaded question, it's definitely a loaded statement so you'd be able to answer it a lot different, but I think at that time there were a few different lenses coming at it. There was one of how Islam is portrayed in the media - you had, "this is Islamism and this is radical Islamic terrorism," so you have these dichotomies already there and then they filter into the pulpit at the mosque. And the mosque is saying, "No we're not this. We're the peaceful Muslims." So, then when you go out into the community and you're like, "No I'm not this kind of a Muslim, I'm not a terrorist," you're feeding into that dichotomy. And the people who ask you these questions are a product of that dichotomy that being drawn. For better or for worse, responding to them and affirming that dichotomy keeps them in that head space. Now that I look back on it, I'm like, "I actually did say that to people, that I'm not this, I'm not this, rather than saying that it's a lot more complex than that." I think there were different layers of that narrative being fed, but it just kind of stayed in a bit of a loop that, "Hey, here are peaceful Muslims." Even in the mosque, the mosque being kind of tied to where it has to respond to that narrative accordingly rather than [saying], "No let's do a campaign or let's do some kind of educational initiative that counters that," [they] go along with what they feel will encounter with the least amount of resistance.

M

Mary Wilson 28:47

Right. I completely understand that because I've seen that in Christian faith tradition as well. "I'm a Christian, but I'm not like those Christians," especially those that are often given voice in media and deemed spokespersons for the faith when it is so broad and one person can't speak for all Christians. In my own congregation, we're like, "Oh, but we're not like this church across the street." Part of my job became, "Well how about we stop worrying about what other people are doing and we just try to focus on who we are and these are the things that we care about and here's how we're going to spend our time

and energy." And that's a difficult train to navigate because you get used to saying, "Oh yeah we're not that," before you get used to saying, "But we are this," and then staying on, "This is who we are."

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Usama Malik 29:56

Exactly. That's what I reflect back on, that's exactly kind of what it was. For lack of better words, it was a negative approach in the sense that, "I'm not this," and then the few positives there, rather than - and that's what the experience became - it was reactive, but also continuously trying to stock back up rather than focusing on ourselves, thinking, "This can't just be the Muslim experience." But a lot of it was coded by that. I think now, when we look back on it, there's a bit more breathing room. There may not be an active war, in certain regards to this where you see it every night on the news. But you know it changes its face, in terms of how it looks. We might combat that narrative that was being projected, but that just forms into a different monster. So now, as a society, we have been tackling a lot more of these deep seated issues, and, "Why are things the way they are?" and tackling the system, the attitudes behind it. I think that's where we may be heading as well. That's where a lot of the Muslim community has been, I think, for the past 10 years, beyond the rebuttal narrative of, "No, we're not like them," and reclaiming that sentiment of "There's a lot more complex things we probably didn't touch."

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Usama Malik 31:38

There's a few Muslim voices outspoken about foreign policy in the time of 2000, and then 2010, to 2020. It was like, "Wait a second, there was a lot more foreign policy here at play than just Islam being evil or whatnot." So, you see a lot of that. Then, for me, just in hindsight, thinking about my experience, it's like, "Yeah, we never really talked about that element until maybe just in the last five or six years." We really bought into that sentiment that we were around, and a lot of it was to kind of keep the peace, "We're already kind of on the periphery here, let's not jeopardize where we're at and let's just try to be as least disturbance causing as we can and buy into that model minority mindset."

M

Mary Wilson 32:35

Yeah. That strikes me as a trauma response. We make ourselves small as a reaction to trauma, so that we don't get traumatized again. So, it seems like as a community, that is a trauma response that the community sort of huddled together and said, "Okay, we've kind of made it through this so that we're not targeted. Let's be small."

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Usama Malik 33:01

Yeah, yeah, exactly. You kind of now see that when you look at the community, especially

the younger generation, the millennials are at work right now, Gen X as well, you see that being undone a little bit. Previously that shell that was being formed from 2000-2010, it was kind of coming apart. Growing up, you get questions like, "Why does your mom dress like that? Why do y'all pray like this?" You get a lot of these questions from that angle. And rather than feeling ashamed about it now, I am coming to a point of where it's my identity and not something I am ashamed about. I think that's been a newer trajectory. But it's been, I think, coupled in regards to the other experiences of other minorities that are in the country as well, that, you know, previously it might have looked funny in terms of if another person's heritage looked odd or out of the mainstream. But now in 2020, or the last five years, that diversity is kind of being celebrated. So you don't stand out as much as you might have maybe 15 years ago.

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Usama Malik 34:18

So, I think that there's also this concept of a lot more allies that are existing. There's a lot of other people who are sharing this experience, but it's also Muslims themselves. For myself, looking back and saying, "This is where we were at, this is where we are at. What has changed?" It has been kind of an awakening. We were in kind of a sedated state from 2000-2010, we were just going where we felt was the right spot and now we are waking up to being like, "Wait a second, hold on that wasn't exactly what we wanted, that's what we were pushed into. How can we reclaim a lot of that?" So, I think a lot of the work put out are a lot of community building, an internal identity aspect. It's no longer - you could just even look at Facebook events from Muslim communities in 2007 - and see what that tone looks like, and it's kind of just seeing, "What does that tone look like?" - and it's no longer that "Islam versus terrorism," or "Is Islam a message of peace?" and more so, "What is Islam's stance on so and so?" you know, more of these complex issues beyond that dichotomy. I think that's a sign that the Muslim community, not just here in Austin, but in general in the United States, is opening up to identity reclamation. And then also just going back through what we've experienced in the past.

M

Mary Wilson 35:57

Yeah. All that is a great explanation. Thank you for that. It struck me in the Christian Church in the United States, we have seen across the board, regardless of conservative, progressive, or whatever label you want to attach to it - a decline in participation among youth, 20-somethings. What is happening in your community that you know of?

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Usama Malik 36:28

Yeah for sure. So, from my research on it, and just from what I've witnessed, it's an interesting two part type deal. So one is kind of a flip of what's happening within the wider

Christian community in the U.S., especially within the Protestant traditions. The Muslim population in the U.S is actually fairly young, I think the average age is around 30 or so. If you look at the population, it is literally a pyramid basically. Most of your population is youth under the age of 40 and a lesser percentage is in that top portion. So, the Muslim community is definitely demographically flipped on that end. Whether for cause of birthrate or immigration - different reasons, but it's a younger community that is definitely there.

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Usama Malik 37:39

Now, in terms of community participation, if you go to a mosque, you will most likely - depending on when you go as well - you will see a mix of different folks there. There are people who are seniors, but you will also notice there are probably a lot more youth on average than you might see in another religious community. Now, an issue that's gotten a little bit more refined has been the youth participation, because a lot of Muslim communities have this issue of reclaiming that mosque space. You have an inter-cultural conflict that sometimes brews between our intergenerational groups. We've seen a rise of spaces like Muslim Space, these third spaces. So, maybe not necessarily a mosque, but just community gatherings outside. And a lot of these for the most part are people under the age of 40 who kind of want their own space. That's not to say that it's completely separate from the mosque movement, it's usually done in conjunction with it. But I would say in the Muslim community, you'll see a lot more youth participation and youth going from anywhere from Gen Z all the way to Gen X. It's a lot more youth driven in that aspect - if it's not happening in the mosque setting, there's other spaces that it's happening, you'll see campus organizations, things like that. That's one thing that is definitely a distinguishing factor with regards to the Muslim population here in the U.S is demographically it literally looks like a pyramid. But also its participation in its different spaces will probably also reflect that, different spaces are different. That might reflect that but you'll see a wider participation from people that are under the age of 30 than you will see in many other religious communities in settings.

M

Mary Wilson 40:00

Yeah, yeah, it strikes me that some of that may have to do with the fact that like yourself, you're first generation American and so forth and there's not a steeped tradition that you're carrying from living in the same country for generations. And so you have a newness that maybe allows creativity. Is that assuming too much?

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Usama Malik 40:36

Totally valid. I think that it's also that in addition to that, when you come into a country like that, you're coming from countries and societies that are communal and family oriented. So, that's where the priority is. When people go to the mosque, at least from a young age, a lot of the times it will be in a family unit. So, it'll be a family activity - but it's also that when you go to a mosque, things like tradition and faith are intrinsically tied to that. It's not a separate sphere, to where it's just this, we go to the mosque on Fridays. No, you're doing that, but also, faith is an activity that occurs beyond those walls.

U

Usama Malik 41:04

It touches on a number of different things with regards to - you see this also in Latino communities, very family oriented, everybody comes together and so you have that element to it. So, you'll see that it's rarely seen as just Islam is something you do on Fridays. It's seen as a way of life and you will see people engaging it as such. But I just think the demographic dynamic of Muslim Americans is that they either recently immigrated here or are the child of immigrants that have come in the last 40-50 years or so. Especially when you're a percent of the population, you try to draw a little bit nearer. Of course you'll have a number of Muslims that will just say, "No, I have no issue with purely assimilating. That's not my thing, I don't go with that." You have a lot of Muslims, at least from what we're seeing now - that are gravitate into communal settings and you see that with a more predominant pattern than you see in some other community or religious traditions.

M

Mary Wilson 43:07

Well, I'm trying to be careful of your time and we're coming up here almost to noon. So, I want to ask one more question. Can you think of anything that we haven't covered that you really want to make sure gets addressed - any gaps or any train of thought that we bypassed that you want to come back to?

U

Usama Malik 43:27

I would just kind of touch on what I've been able to work with Muslim Space, in terms of chaplaincy in the Muslim community, and especially in Muslim Space. For our community, things like mental health and self care are all very new things for the Muslim community here in the USA and maybe even broader than that. So, the interesting thing has been the exposure to these elements, which has given us a lot of room to work on. Previously, like I mentioned about growing up - Islam was more of a reactive then, now Islam is reclaiming your identity. Now we're in an age, especially with COVID, that we have to really confront our own personal insecurities or experiences, things that we go through - challenges, mental challenges that we go through. Now, I'm coming to a space to where I interact with my community members in a way that this is normalized - having conversations about our struggles, that that's okay.



Usama Malik 44:49

That's kind of been one of the challenges here because a lot of the things that we're doing here, Muslim Space, a lot of things that we've been doing - when we look back in our previous two decades, we draw inspiration from the Islamic tradition - it's not something novel we are doing. These are conversations and challenges that occurred in our faith's founding. I would just say that a lot of the new things that we are coming across, at least within our space are literally just a refurbishing of what is already there. My role has been that I might be introducing something new, but the substance of that is something that's already been there. But it's requiring us to do a little bit more research on it. If we have a conversation, maybe 5, 10 years from now, it may be very different from what we've got, just because of what new things we might polish out and find in this wilderness of sorts.



Mary Wilson 45:56

Exactly. Well, I was talking to a rabbi yesterday, I made the comment, I need to follow up these interviews in another year [or] in five years and see what has transpired post-pandemic. One of the things that came up yesterday was the roaring 20s followed a pandemic as well, and reshaped culture in many ways. So, it'll be interesting to see what these next 20s bring to our world and to our culture, and to the diversity of the culture that I think probably didn't exist in the United States in the 1920s in the same way as it does today. Usama, I want to thank you so much for your time today. I appreciate it. It was delightful to talk to you and to meet you, and I hope to meet you in 3D before too much longer.



Usama Malik 46:48

Absolutely, definitely.



Mary Wilson 46:49

All right. Thank you and we'll be in touch with the transcript and look forward to talking to you again.



Usama Malik 46:58

Take care Mary, have a good one.



Mary Wilson 47:00

Thank you. Bye.