

Episode 2 — Sean on covering his conversion to Islam

Sarah Kaplan: This limited series podcast is from GATE Audio. GATE stands for the Institute for Gender and the Economy at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, and I'm GATE's director. Our goal is to engage current and future leaders in rich conversations around inequities in our society and how we might address them. In this podcast series one of GATE's MBA Fellows, Narjis Premjee, explores the different ways that people cover and uncover their identities at work. Through interviews, first-hand accounts, and rich storytelling, Narjis ventures into the world of covering, why it happens, and what employers can do to make workplaces more inclusive. You'll be moved and inspired by her deeply personal takes on these issues, as was I. So up next, listen to what Narjis has to say.

Narjis: Welcome to covering in the workplace a podcast from the Institute for Gender and the Economy or GATE. I'm Narjis Premjee. In each episode I will be interviewing one individual on how they have covered in the workplace or perhaps never felt the need to do so. Today we will be speaking to Sean Robertson. Sean currently works for a consulting firm that specializes in solving challenges at the C-suite level. Born in Canada and raised in the United States, Sean's family was agnostic. However, his story about covering is with regards to his conversion to Islam. Thank you for being with us today, Sean. I'm sure our listeners are very curious to hear about your story of uncovering your religion in the workplace.

Sean: So, my story of covering starts about a year and a half ago when I converted to Islam. I was not really a religious person per se. Through most of my life we grew up in the states my parents were agnostic. We never went to a church although we were surrounded in where we lived by religion and predominantly Christianity and Catholicism, but it was never a part of my life. When I returned to Canada for school and met the woman who became my wife I was exposed to Islam because she's Muslim. And we had been together for quite a while, and it was clear that to progress and to get married I would need to convert. And so, I was open to that, I knew about it for a long time but you know it was only in the past five years or so that I seriously began to study the Quran. So obviously the covering aspect is in religion if I didn't say it before. I was fortunate enough to have people from her family come and you know take me to the mosque for the first time and show me how to pray, the aspects and the pillars of Islam what they mean and what they are and just gave me a smooth on ramp into the faith instead of you know having me climb the stairs myself.

Narjis: Very cool. That's a very fascinating story. And so tell me a little bit about how you told people about your decision and how did it differ from say telling colleagues versus your friends or family?

Sean: Yeah so, I think at the time I mean I'm fortunate enough to have a very close, trusted and mindful, really deep group of friends. Like a small group but a tight group of friends. And so, I was always able to be open about really anything with them. And so, I was kind of hashing my feelings and my thoughts out with them as I went on. So, I guess from the beginning even as the process was kind of unfolding, and my education was continuing I felt safe in opening and in being open about it with them. At the time I was working with a small company there were only three of us and I think that you know the nature of my openness with my friends made me comfortable in saying like "oh like it's Friday I'm going to the mosque. I'm taking a chunk of time away from work and I'll be I'll be gone. And sometimes I'll pray at my desk, and you know it just is what it is." I guess I chose not to specifically hide it. But also, I mean I'm very cognizant of the fact that I'm you know a Canadian born white male person who speaks like not only the English language, but you know my accent is local. So, people don't look at me and say, "ah this guy is" you know "I don't have any reason to make a prejudgment on this person based on the dominance of the society." So, kind of when I say oh, I'm Muslim it surprises people. People don't see me and fit me into their prejudgments and their conceptions and whatever misinformation they've had coming to. So, it's interesting to kind of have that piece pulled back and have them you know understand "oh this person who I've been talking to and have known doesn't fit into that bucket of preconceptions that I had about this group of people or this religion before."

Narjis: Absolutely. And so, you would say it's been easier for you as a straight white man a Canadian man?

Sean: Absolutely. I mean the thing that I always joke about with my wife is that you know when we were setting up our marriage there was no culture per se no deeply ingrained culture of mind that we had to reconcile with her. It could like just be that and it was fine. I've had a lot of friends get married, recently someone who is a relatively observant Jew and a relatively observant Catholic and they have to you know navigate this with their families and there's inevitable tensions and conflict. And I've been fortunate enough as a straight white man with no kind of deeply ingrained culture to overcome or to reconcile.

Narjis: So, which one was easier? Was it easier to tell people in your workplace or was it easier to tell people you know, your friends and family?

Sean: Easier to tell I would say definitely friends. Family was, I mean so it's interesting. I think I've been completely open with my friends about it. I've been out in the woods with them and I'm like okay it's time for prayer and they're like "oh interesting. Like can we watch you?" Or "can we participate?" and it's like "I mean if you like I'll speak loudly and I'll give the cues. If you want to you know Join me but you know I'll just be doing what I'm doing." I don't really have the (ijtihad) (reasoning) to know like is it good or bad to give people the tools for salah (prayer) if they don't believe? I don't really know. But you know I've been very open about that. I guess there's still an aspect of potentially covering to my parents because when it's time for prayer I just kind of disappear and go do it. I'm not like "okay sorry guys I've got to go and do this now." Obviously during Ramadan when I'm fasting it's very obvious. they'll sometimes wait to have dinner, but you know the Canadian summer goes until 9:00 PM in the depth of the summer So they'll wait and it's very nice and we break the fast together. But at work definitely not as easy as with friends. I think with friends there is that deep trust and there has been for a long time and I've been fortunate to have that. With work, I don't think intentionally conceal it, but I also don't leave a meeting to go pray. But I will structure my schedule around "okay. It's Friday. You know the mosque has 11, 12, 1 and 2 o'clock prayer times" I look at my meetings, I'll move a meeting around to make sure I get there. I haven't I haven't yet canceled the meeting saying, "sorry I have to go to the mosque."

Narjis: So, tell me about their first reaction, specifically in the workplace what was their first reaction?

Sean: So, I think the first reaction in the workplace was I told, well I mean it was really in the interview process I think is where it began. I think the question that the person who was interviewing me asked, and you know he's a very probing kind of person, but he said, "what are you reading right now?" And I was like "oh I'm currently reading the Quran" And he's like "interesting. Have you read a lot of it?" And I was like "yeah. I mean I'm pretty much all the way through a couple times, but I mean I'm often reading it and the meanings you know unfold and change each time you read. So, I'm doing that" And he was like "okay cool." You know he didn't directly guess; I think he's a younger person than me and he didn't directly ask me "so are you Muslim?" And that didn't really come out in that interview. But when I went and spoke to the person who is our head of HR and was like "you know every Friday I'll be outta the office for about an hour to hour and a half. And I hope that's okay." And she's yeah of course like you know I think that I'm fortunate to work at a company that has a good multi-faith community inside of its walls but also has a deep respect for family and for the rights of people and things. So, they were like "yeah you just make up an hour somewhere. It's not a big deal." And in my limited sample set and equals one. I would say that at work the first experience was positive. It was like "yes of course. Like we'll definitely accommodate" obviously and I was like "okay great!" I mean now I am very comfortable just putting on my stuff and just disappearing on Friday for an hour or two. It's not a big deal. Even with friends I am very fortunate and to have very accepting friends and they are very like interested to learn and to understand and to talk through things with me because it was something that was new for them too. I don't think any of them had visibly or otherwise Muslim friends in school. So, I think that was also new and interesting for them too. In both these I would say that resonates with me, that the first reaction kind of sets the tone for the future. And I mean even the

situation that we're in right now I read your thing on- I guess it was LinkedIn, and I was like this sounds interesting. I think I had to maybe give someone else the opportunity to kind of see themselves in my experience and share that. Just on a whim I reached out to you boom without a second thought.

Narjis: Yeah absolutely. so, as a relatively newer person to Islam how has that education process been? Because I know a lot of people would have had questions at work specifically you know when you reverted to Islam, how have you dealt with those questions?

Sean: So, I think that there's two questions in there. I'll try and unpack them a little bit. So, I think the first one was how was my education about Islam in the beginning and how and how have people reacted at work? My education as a new Muslim has been, you know, I began obviously with not being able to read Arabic in the beginning. There was a very terrific resource called the study Quran, recommended by a number of like very preeminent scholars on Islam. It's a new translation and everything and has lots of commentary and tons of notes about any given verse. So I used that to kind of come to the Quran the first time in English. And you know I had a lot of questions that were clarified in the notes. and I had opportunities to also use the internet or talk to people. And I would take pictures of the commentary or whatever and share it with my now father-in-law and kind of like ask questions like "what do you think about this?" I kind of imagine 10,15 100 years ago English speakers converting to Islam without these kinds of resources and having to you know do the practices of the faith without having Arabic with which to read the Quran and having to kind of absorb religion as if by osmosis from people around them and I imagine it was very difficult. I found I never lacked for a resource to learn. And when I had a question, I could always you know look something up on the internet whether it's the Sunnah or you know whatever it was. I would say it was easy to educate myself. I had the things I needed. So, regarding educating colleagues and friends I mean I think a lot of the education is people have what they've absorbed what they know what they think they know or what they've conceived through the things they see whether it's media, television, the news, especially news around like conflicts and things like that. And you know that they're like I mean this isn't meant to be, I don't think a political thing specifically, but you know I think there is a lot of um politics that is layered over the way that Muslims are, and Islam generally is portrayed in the west. and you know people absorb that. And so, (inaudible) their reaction is interesting. "I wouldn't have thought that that you would be Muslim because you have a white name." Like my name is Sean Robertson. People often change their name when they revert. And I guess that that is a separate question of itself. But their immediate confusion, I like that, it's interesting, Ramadan like "even water" or "fast from everything even water like wow that must be hard." Like all the memes are true memes which is kind of funny. So, is it stressful to educate people? I think you know I guess I look at it from what we are taught, which is that you know I kind I view it myself as an honor and privilege to share with people the aspects of my faith and to educate people and god forgive me If I tell 'em something that is wrong that I have misunderstood, but to give them my understanding of something and to you know set the ship right in their mind of what their perceptions and their prejudices are and be like "ah actually it is this way." I had a colleague just the other day say to me like "oh I'd really like to sit down with you sometime. And just like learn from you because I mean I know a lot about Buddhism and about Christianity and about all other things. I don't know a lot about Islam, and I'd like to hear from you" and I was like "I'm honored to yeah. It would be a great honor to sit with you and to share what I know." We're not meant to proselytize but if someone asks us it's it is our duty to share, I think this is the way that I view it.

Narjis: And what would you say was the inner process that allowed you to raise this level of comfort with your religion being such a strong part of your identity and bringing that to work?

Sean: What is the inner process that makes me comfortable with sharing? I think the thing that and I mentioned before that religion wasn't really a part of my life earlier on and my parents were agnostic and all these things but I always viewed myself as someone who ascribed to certain values, things like truth, justice, doing the right thing, people are equal people, when someone is struggling you should help them if you can, when you are struggling you should ask for help, being humble, all of these things. As I educated myself about Islam and you know as my faith grew what the thing that I think made that really easy kind in the first place was that those values are core important values

within Islam. And so, it's like oh there is a direct overlap between the values that I have always had. And the values that are in this faith that I'm learning about. There always has been a vertical integration between what I learned through my life and the kind of values that got me through my life and the values of my new faith and it is important. These are values that I think that help whether it's society or the world become better, or you know correct injustices I think that those things are important and because I am aligned to those values then it's like oh this is the right thing to do there isn't really another option right? I should share all of those things.

Narjis: So, tell me a little bit about your first job. You mentioned that in your first job you were you were not Muslim and then you got engaged and then converted, what was that transition like within that first job?

Sean: Yeah, so in the job where I first began to really like properly learn about Islam it was a very small company only three people, but you know pretty intense and personally important work. My grandfather had just passed away, so you know there were many things happening at once. But I'm trying to recall when I had actually begun to you know read the Quran, it was probably about two and a half years ago, which is when I was in this job. I was learning and this was around the time when I first think I revealed as like I exist to my now wife's parents some people in her family had known about me for a long time but some did not and so it was kind of like the big reveal and like and it's like "okay well we better make sure that he converts before he marries her" because that's important obviously. So that was kind of the nudge but so kind of as that job moved, and I was actually on the road a lot, so I was reading the Quran on the road and kind of you know educating myself about the faith. I had a prayer mat with me as I was in the road, and I first learned with her family like they took me to the mosque the first time. showed me how to pray so it kind of gave me you know a booklet that that said here are the things that you say, here are the motions, here's how you do it. So, I was kind of like beginning to incorporate that into my life and you know waking up early to pray. When I was at the office I would go, and I would do my wudu and I would pray at my desk and no one really, I mean of the other two people who are my colleagues no one questioned me about it because they were often outta the office too. So, I was just like I would just do it. And then on Fridays they'd be trying to reach me, and I'd be like sorry I'm going to the mosque you won't be able to reach me. So, they knew, I didn't consciously hide it from them. But I think that it was interesting because I remember there was a point when so fast forward from that point in time a little there was a week when my now wife's family came over because it was time to do the engagement so until that point I hadn't officially like reverted and actually spoke in the words like you know in a mosque with witnesses (la ilaha illal la) so they came over and there was this week of time where there was you know dinners and my family meets her family for the first time all these things and work was kind of getting in the way. I think I was doing like three hour commute out to Hamilton or you know further and then back at night. Then at nighttime at like 6:30 it's like okay this is the time to go to the mosque and the Imam will be ready and you'll go. So, it was like really really stressful but there was this con and I didn't at that point feel like I couldn't really in that situation stand up for myself and say "nope. I'm not gonna do I'm not gonna go out into the field because this is important to me." My dynamic with my boss at the time; he was a pretty overbearing person and very controlling. So, I didn't feel comfortable standing up for myself and like kind of sticking out. But you know we got it done. We did the dinners. We did the reversion; my family was there which was wonderful. And so, at that point I was like officially Muslim. And then I was only at that company for another couple of months because being away and on the road and all these things was very very taxing and difficult. Especially newly engaged you know but just being separated from family and community. Like there were no mosque where I was going. So in this period of transition, it was like I had been regularly going to the mosque in Toronto and then I was out And so praying in the car you know on three hour drives like trying to pray while driving you know not facing the right direction. I mean that was definitely I would say a challenging time to be going through the process of solidifying my faith and kind of incorporating from a non-practicing to fully practicing within that situation.

Narjis: And did your workplace and your boss they knew that this was happening in your life?

Sean: Yeah, I think I was open about it, and you know my boss was like trying to negotiate and it's like some of these things are non-negotiable. This is not a thing where I will compromise who I am to serve my professional needs. And that that conflict in those words never came up and were never surfaced and spoken between us but there was that tension where someone who did not have faith or did not have a strong sense of faith or understood a strong faith trying to kind of dampen and mute and put in a box like "great that's all fine that you have that. Fine. But it can't affect work" and I was kind of like "Hmm interesting." Like interesting as it (inaudible).

Narjis: So, you shared some of the challenges in this story about being vocal religion in this workplace are there other challenges professional challenges you faced in the second workplace as well?

Sean: that that's a good question. So did I face challenges in in the workplace after that workplace that I described where it was very difficult? Um I'll go back and I'm very conscious of the fact that I am like you know a heterosexual white male who speaks English well and who understands the value system from which a lot of these people are coming from because it was the one I was raised in, all of that is like a mountain of privilege versus someone who has come to a western community from a Muslim majority community and from having it all through their life. Again, my name is not a obviously Muslim name in fact quite the opposite and people you know potentially because of the fact that I am a heterosexual white male with a white name they don't suspect or even if they know people are fairly visually driven so it doesn't come up. I have light skin they don't look at me and their prejudices are called to mind. I'm just another white guy at work. Their idea of Islam and Muslims is not conflated with (inaudible) idea of "this is Sean the person that I work with." It feels like I haven't faced essentially any challenges at work. When I went to go get married, they were like okay with it, I was very open when I was interviewing, I'm like I'm leaving for two weeks to go and get married, and I know I only get two weeks of vacation, but can I get some more?" And they're like "yeah of course like you can have some vacation to go this is important Da da da" Obviously you know with all the details around of where it was and what kind of wedding it was and coming back and sharing that story is like "oh five days of events. Because it's a big deal and there's lots of community and all these things." So, you know I was very open and honest about it, but they were highly accommodating and curious in a friendly way and just interested in my experiences and how it went for me in a very genuine and warm way. So, I mean it's been really honestly tremendous.

Narjis: In the process of obtaining religious accommodations, I know you mentioned earlier you spoke to head of HR about a few things but is that how the process works generally? Do you just go to speak to the head of HR or how's the religious accommodation process?

Sean: It was very straightforward. And again I will always return to my consciousness of the privilege cause it's just like I have the confidence of the white man to ask for something when I need something I'm like "oh I'll just go and talk to a senior person in my company," I'll just say this is something I need with the full expectation that the need will be met or that they will you know give ground to fulfill that need. Which I don't think is something that a lot of people experience.

Narjis: Yeah. So, you've mentioned your name quite a bit, Sean Robertson, you said when some Muslims do revert to Islam, they choose a Muslim sounding name. I'm curious to know what is the reason why you said you decided to keep the name the way it was?

Sean: So, when I was about to revert there, we had conversation about it. With all the other aspects of faith that are the obligations, requirements, and based on your duties to God my understanding is the name didn't seem like something like that. so, I guess there wasn't a driving force to change it. We did talk about it, and we were like "oh what will you change it to if you were gonna change it" and you know that that was fun. (inaudible) I don't know many other converts; I don't have a deep experience with how people have gone through that decision making process. The limited understanding, I do have you know is an example of the man who was formerly Cassius clay or Mammad Ali and I think that my understanding is that when people choose their Muslim name the old person is gone, and it is the new person, and it is your true name. I guess I don't know why but I didn't feel as if the name that I

still have was not my true name. And I think that I might be rationalizing as much as possible. but I think that because of the values that I have grown up with and the values that clearly aligned in the new faith and how aligned they both are I didn't feel like there was changed parts of my life. there's no mistaking it but I don't think that who I think I am and what I think I'm supposed to be doing with my time and with my energy and with the force that I have in my life has changed or that I have you know destroyed my old self. Rather I think that I have been completed. And so, I mean again might be rationalizing but there hasn't been that like "I must destroy that all identity and assume a new."

Narjis: Yeah, and so generally speaking what role do you think an organization plays in either keeping people covered or encouraging uncovering?

Sean: I think that the organization has almost the most important role outside of family and friends. Because no matter what organization you are in you'll always have the same family and hopefully the same friends, your friends will never leave you. But I think the organization you go to and spend 5,8,10,12 hours with those people. And so that's the place where you go and you're there five out of seven days for people who are employed full-time of course some people have precarious labor but it's this place where you spend a majority of your waking time. And so, the people that you spend that time with and the way that they treat you, what the boundaries they place on you, or kinds of the environment and the structure that they allow you to operate within are very very important not just in the amount of time but in how it affects you through your life. You know if I had the misfortune of being in an organization that was not welcoming or was very homogenous and not interested in the power of diversity and including diverse persons and empowering them to be who they are I think that would be not just a tremendous oversight and failure of that company but it would be very difficult personally to have this aspect of my identity that I cannot perform or cannot actually fully actualize. There's this big buzzword on social media and on professional media around um you know transparency and around authenticity that's like "oh you need to be able to bring your authentic self to work." I think that behind that buzzword there is that element of truth that if people cannot be who they actually are, that the aspect of having to always think about hiding something about yourself means that you cannot fully focus on what your goals are whether it's your direct task that you're doing or you know the goals for this year or my company's goals and meeting those goals and executing our vision. I think that a company is doing a disservice both not only to its employees but specifically to itself by not allowing its employees to be authentic in who they are and by practicing and actualizing their identities. Because it sucks the energy out of them to always be thinking about it and thinking about something else rather than actually just being who they are and doing what they need to do.

Narjis: Absolutely. I think you've highlighted a very important thing about bringing your whole selves to work and how an organization can put that into place and also the stories as you've shared so far I really hope that your stories help people who are considering uncovering about their religion and being open about it that they're able to you know bring that up and share it with their colleagues and friends as well. Well thank you so much Sean for your time.

Sean: It's been a pleasure. Thank you.

Narjis: It's been a pleasure to have you and learn about your story. And like I said I hope it inspires people listening. Thank you so much!

Sarah Kaplan: This podcast is brought to you by the Institute for Gender and the Economy at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. To listen to our other podcasts, check out the GATE audio channel on Apple podcasts or the GATE audio playlist on Spotify. For additional myth busting research and game changing guidance please visit gendereconomy.org. And thanks for listening.

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