

Interviewee: Fahim Guamali

Interviewer: Holly Cunningham

Date: November 30, 2017

HC: My name is Holly Cunningham. I'm a student at Wake Forest University School of Divinity, and can you say your name?

GF: Fahim Gulamali

HC: And what year did you graduate?

GF: 2014.

HC: What was your major and what roles do you play on campus now?

FG: I was a Religion Studies major and I minored in Anthropology and Spanish. My current role is Assistant Director of Social Justice Education and Programming at the Pro Humanitate Institute.

HC: Awesome. In general, what role does your faith play in your life, not just specific to campus, but how does that inform you or who you are?

FG: In Islam, we believe that we can't ever escape our religion, that it should be infused in every action that we take throughout the day. So, from the minute that I'm awake to the time that I go to sleep, I'm a practicing Muslim. It infuses every single decision, and every breath, and every action that I take

HC: Are there specific ways it impacts you when you're here on campus?

FG: Yes. I really like the work that I do, and the only reason that I am able to do it, the social justice education and programming piece is that I was told as a Muslim that it is my responsibility to advance justice for people, and that if I'm advancing justice for one person it's as if I'm advancing justice for all of humanity. In helping students understand identity, power, privilege, in practice, I'm able to think critically about the ways in which I am representing my faith. That is generally, and for concrete examples, I think that having a Muslim identity is really good as a staff member because I remember, as a student, I didn't really have that many Muslim individuals on campus to look up to that would be open to talking to me about identity, power and privilege and all that. I think that students are able to see that in me, and I have built relationships with Muslim students because we have that connection.

HC: So, are there other resources or spaces for Muslim students at Wake, or do you feel those are only formed when you realize you share these connections?

FG: There are now. The Muslim Student Lounge is a really good space. It just opened last year, and Nyla, who is the Director of Muslim Life on campus now, she's an amazing resource. She just started her job in July, and she is so fantastic. We're really lucky to have her. Now that there is that dedication to developing Muslim student experiences on campus, I think there is more accessibility than there was before.

HC: Could you say more about what the Muslim Student Lounge is or offers?

FG: The Muslim Student Lounge is a space for Muslim identified students to enjoy either through prayer or just hanging out or different programming or discussion events. You'll go there on a random day and you'll find Muslim students either hanging out or talking about feminism in Islam or praying or eating. So, it's just a space that's dedicated to Muslim students.

HC: Why does the Muslim student experience like in the classroom? Because I know some classrooms can feel like really safe spaces and sometimes they don't. Do you feel like professors understand the experience?

FG: Yes. I can, I don't know about now, but I can speak to my experience as a student from 2010 to 2014. Definitely, it was weird in certain affects in that sometimes I would be asked to speak up about certain things about Islam. I knew them because I went to religious education classes when I was in high school or throughout my life. But I wouldn't have known them if I didn't. It's interesting that I was kind of expected to know those things as a Muslim and it's not necessarily something a Muslim necessarily should know. So that was a little interesting. I think it is very interesting, I've noted that there is not a Muslim professor that specifically focuses on Muslim identity. I don't necessarily think that is a bad thing, but it's something I have noticed. It has irked me a little bit because I think that the experiences of Muslim individuals, and especially Muslim professors, and there are a lot of them and they are competent, the fact they are not here is, I mean, I feel like we are lacking in that area.

HC: So, that leads me to wonder are there specific things that you think that Wake could do better or differently to improve your experience or students' experience as Muslim students? Now they have this lounge, so that seems like a...

FG: Yes. We need to take a critical lens when we're looking at representation on campus because our representation matters no matter what anyone says. I think that just because you teach a Muslim or an Islam 101, or a Women and Islam course that that is enough and it's not. I think we need to have more Muslim faculty, we need to have more Muslim faculty and staff on our campus that are visible. We need to look at the courses that professors are teaching that are related to Islam and see what they're teaching and see if the teachings are interceptional or not. I remember there was this professor that was brought onto campus when I was a senior that taught an Islam and Gender course and essentially said that Islam and feminism were never going to be, that was just never going to happen. You could never equate feminism with Islam and that was really frustrating to me because I was like, I came to Muslim and that is my experience. So, you saying that is antithetical to my existence and my understanding of my faith. I see that as an example of not an intersectional lens to approaching feminism. If we start talking about these things and start centering these conversations and areas around whether we're having a critical lens to approaching Islamic Studies, then we'll see that we need to do more, or I may be wrong, and they may think this, but we're not talking about them, because I haven't heard about them.

HC: Do you think there are safe spaces for students to voice that type of feedback or...

FG: Yes. There are a couple of professors on campus now that are, that really are here to listen, so for example, Dr. Tanisha Ramachandran, she was a huge mentor for me when I was an undergrad here. She's also a huge mentor for south Asian students in general, but also Muslim students, particularly. She is a huge voice and really helps to empowers students to use their voice. At the time when I was a student here, it was frustrating to go to some professors who held more power than other professors. For example, I voice my concerns about the Islam and Gender course and I was told that this was just a perspective that the professor had and that it's important to engage a class difference, and to me, if you're going to teach a course on Islam and Gender and show a video on Muslim women getting stoned or read Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who is this huge voice for Fox News for example, who is an ex-Muslim and her experience has been completely, her experience in Islam is completely legitimate and it's also just one iteration of Islam, without even thinking critically about other women that are leading movements like Amina Wadud, who led a prayer in New York, it's not an adequate answer. I think there are safe spaces, and I also know that, I still know based on last year's article that was released through written by Shannon Gilreath, that there are professors here that don't have the cultural competence to engage with Islam critically.

HC: On the flip side, are there some things you think Wake is doing well as far as engaging Muslim students, and you've named some but...

FG: Yes. Number one, I think that bringing Nyla on was an awesome decision from the university. First of all, she's a Muslim-American Hijabbi woman who affirms LGBTQ identity, who is not afraid to say Black Lives Matter, who listens to student's experiences whether they are super super traditionally Muslim, like they pray 5 times a day and they have no idea of what it means to be queer and be Muslim and all that, to individuals that are like me who hold multiple marginalized identities and understand Islam through a different lens than somebody else may. So that shows a huge commitment on the university's end to bring her on. She's amazing. Another thing is the Muslim Student Lounge space-just having a space and be able to have conversations at night, you know, at midnight, in a space that's yours, and just like learning, growing from each other, that's a huge thing. I remember when I was a student here, we'd like to go to a person's apartment, we'd all do that. It was like fun because we were all like, it felt like home but also it would be nice to do it on campus. I think that, and like I said, I think there are professors on campus that are awesome.

HC: So, for like the general population of students who aren't Muslim or don't fully understand Islam, what are things that you wish people knew more or which people understood about the Islamic faith. The media construes it so much.

FG: I've been harping on that representation matters, and people need to understand that Islam is not monolithic. It's so intersectional and vast, and there are queer Muslims, and Shia Muslims and trans-Muslims and black Muslims and South Asian Muslims. In the South Asian Muslim community there is anti-blackness that we're really trying to work through, and homophobia, and we also have different food tastes. There are Muslims who drink and there are Muslims who don't. There are Muslims who pray 5 times a day and Muslims who don't. I think people have this idea, they have a single story, like? Says, they have an idea of what Muslims are and unfortunately that is harmful for people like me, for example who, I am religious, I'm religious, not only spiritual, I am religious. I have been in spaces where it's hard for people to understand how I can be religious and queer.

HC: Can you say anything about how some conversations might go when you talk to people about those intersecting identities? It is something, a voice that's underrepresented and one we don't hear from.

FG: Yes. So, I think it's not necessarily a conversation that's even had, and that's a problem, right? So, when Pulse happened, I'm from Orlando as well, so when Pulse happened, I was frustrated because my Muslim siblings were talking about how we need to be ambassadors of Islam and make sure we're really demonstrating that we are

not the individual who went in and shot everything up, Omar Mateen. Then we had LGBTQ people, most of them, not necessarily thinking critically about, but some of them, not thinking critically about how there are Muslim queer people from Orlando that could be grieving in a certain way. But some of them were more than Muslim people honestly. So, a conversation with a Muslim person would look like, you need to realize that there are Muslim queer people, and I get like a bunch of older Muslim men freaking out that I'm like queer and that like, I'm in the community, right? And then you have LGBTQ people that are like, but me too, I need to grieve too, and I'm just like, yes, and the Latin population and the Muslim population of queer people are very much in a weirdly vulnerable space right now. And so, it's not necessarily what a conversation looks like as much as it is, that it doesn't happen, and I constantly must be reminding people of the fact that two identities can exist.

HC: Do you think that, as we move forward, that there's hope that those conversations will happen more, or what do you see as the trajectory either here at Wake or just in general even?

FG: Yes. There are awesome organizations like MASGD (Muslims Advancing Sexual and Gender Diversity) that really are focusing on increasing representation of LGBTQ identified Muslims in the United States and internationally. For example, they have a retreat that kind of calls on LGBTQ Muslims to be in a space together and be in community. I think, and I believe, the optimistic side of me is very much excited to see that happening because it really shows that we're thinking about how to be in community. And then from that, being able to amplify our own voices. I do believe that the more people that are out there, and the more people that really rise to, you know, getting their voices amplified and heard, that people that are non-Muslim and Muslim and that are not LGBTQ will hear them.

HC: Absolutely. I'm hopeful also. Thinking back to when you were a student, or maybe even now, are there any experiences that you remember specifically, on campus in a classroom, or just on campus in general, that really like touched on your identity as a Muslim student in a negative way or conversely in a positive way, like an interaction with someone, or something that happened?

FG: I think more from when I was a student. I think just being here was a really good experience for me. I'm just speaking from my personal experience, because I have friends who've had shitty experiences here. But in being able to be who I was most authentically and unapologetically, I was able to build relationships with individuals that didn't necessarily have any idea of what it meant to be Muslim on campus or in the world. So, I was a lot of people's first brown Muslim, friend and queer leader. But it was

really great to have those conversations. I enjoyed having conversations with people that had no idea of what it meant to be queer and Muslim. Or Muslim specifically. And so just generally that relationship building piece, I found a good group of friends that had the cultural competency to not be harmful in the questions they were asking, and curious in a way that made me want to engage with them. So that was beautiful. And then, negative? You just hear radical Islamic terrorism every single day on the news. So, it got to a point where I just couldn't listen to the news or watch the news because I was like over it. It's not necessarily a campus issue as much as it is the world.

HC: Do you hear people saying that on campus?

FG: Not really. I think that I'm privileged in the sense that unlike my Muslim sisters who choose to wear hijab, I'm brown, yes, but I know I've had sisters get very frustrated because they are stared at but never talked to, that are like visibly invisible. Where people are confused but they don't ever engage. I know that that's happened but that's not my experience.

HC: Do you think that it ever does get talked about in spaces on campus or that there are always visibly invisible?

FG: Yes. I think in spaces that are culturally competent they are talked about. And I think places where they are not talked about, but they are never really like bridged. And I think there are some people that make mistakes. There are people that are, that would consider themselves socially competent that do make mistakes, and that's frustrating. For example, when I first walked onto campus as a Staff member there was a protest, and they had chalked, people had chalked the floor. They had written something about how Muslims exist here and like in Islam you're not really supposed to write anything sacred on the ground because it's knowledge and you can't do that. That is not OK. It was frustrating to me, because I'm just like, if you had asked one Muslim person how they wanted to be represented...

HC: So, non-Muslims wrote that?

FG: Right, right. It would just be frustrating, I mean it was frustrating. I was like that's crazy. You need to think critically about what you're doing.

HC: Have there been other protests or movements or things where this kind of stuff is brought up, especially like in the wake of Trump's election last year. Do you feel like you've noticed any shifts in dynamic or things that are happening or being said or not said?

FG: I think with the Muslim ban and with the Shannon Gilreath article where he said that Muslim people being kicked out of the United States was good for gay people only not even like Lesbian, Bi-sexual or Trans people, just gay men. I think that brought a spur of activism via the Muslim community on campus. I also think it's kind of died down a little bit. I think that our students now are just trying to graduate and it's not necessarily, if they are not wanting to engage in activism, you can't force someone to.

HC: Do you experience other students who are not Muslim wanting to learn more about Islam to find ways to engage in different?

FG: No, no, no, there are. Yes, I have one student for example who, super involved. One just graduated-super, super involved with the Muslim Student Association and she was not a Muslim. And we've had that throughout the past however many years. It's not a huge population of people who are like that, but yes.

HC: What are the best ways, do you think, for non-Muslim students to be, to show, either like they're support for their Muslim siblings or for to just get more involved like in these communities- especially here?

FG: Yes, literally to show up. There is this Muslim anti-Islamophobia coalition that was built, and people were like brainstorming all these things, and we were sitting there, and it was like, just like an hour of talking about the things we could be doing, we could be doing more programming, we could be doing blah, blah, blah, blah blah blah. And I said, it's Islam Awareness Week this week, and y'all don't even know about it, and y'all are not coming out to these things. It's problematic that only Muslim Staff and Faculty members are coming out to these things, and that non-Muslim people are not. That's bad. We had a community-wide Muslim prayer, six people showed up and they were all Muslim. That's horrible. It was in the Green Room of the Reynolda. To me, whenever someone says what can we do, I say, do you know the names of any Muslim student on campus? And if you don't, then that's a problem and you need to engage in these spaces and get to know Muslim students. Because if you say you want to do something and you care, then actually learn the name of one Muslim student on campus. Again, representation matters and that means you need to get to know people.

HC: How do you think, for example if non-Muslim students come to things like a prayer session or different things where it's not their tradition, are there ways that you think help either them to feel comfortable or how can they be there appropriately without stepping on someone else's' traditions, if that makes sense?

FG: Yes. If there are people who want to come to Friday prayers, we're more than happy to host them. It's not like non-Muslim people are not allowed to pray with us. It's going to be uncomfortable, right? Like it's never uncomfortable to experience something that is different from you. But just do it. And then you'll see that it's not, you may mess up, and you may do or say something that is inappropriate, and people are going to get a little weird, and then you'll just be like "I'm sorry how can I show up better." And then, they'll tell you and you'll do it. Right?

HC: I completely agree. So, I guess, just in general is there anything else that I've missed, or you may feel like is important about Muslim life at Wake or just anything else you would want folks to know?

FG: We're lucky at Wake Forest to have a widely diverse population of Muslim students. We have Shia Muslims, we have Sunni Muslims, we have queer Muslim students, we have black Muslims, and white Muslims and brown Muslims, and that is not necessarily a thing you would normally find on campuses. People need to take advantage of the fact that, even the Muslim student population needs to take advantage of the fact that we have such diversity and we need to engage it. That's really it.

HC: Are there ways you think Wake Forest can make this better known? For example, when they are recruiting students or students are coming to Wake Forest, how can that be something that they know when they come here, like here are some resources we have?

FG: I think we are reaching out to them. Muslim Life on campus does that, and MSA does a good job. So, I think that just amplifying that is really like allowing, giving Muslim students and Staff, specifically the Director of Muslim Life the opportunity to engage with prospective students.

HC: I was also just curious, like in what ways as a college student do you think that students are able to also engage with like broader communities, like outside of Wake Forest? Do you think there is good partnerships or ties or spaces they can plug into? Or do you think there is a lot of focus on campus?

FG: Whenever we have Eid, a lot of times we have our Eid prayers off campus, the first time this year it was on campus, but usually it's at our community mosque, and so we have good, we don't have like a crazy amount of engagement, but it's also because it's like not, people don't have access to a car and that kind of stuff.

HC: Well, any other words for the wise or anything else you want to say in conclusion?

FG: Just learn the names of Muslim students on campus and engage with them.

HC: Well, thank you so much Fahim.

FG: Thank you.