

**Interviewee: Raza Khan**

**Interviewer: Leanna Coyle Carr**

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LC: Let's start with getting a few pieces of basic information on for the recording. My name is Leanna Coyle Carr, I'm a student at Wake Forest School of Divinity. What's your name?

RK: I'm Raza Kahn. I'm currently a Senior here, an undergrad at Wake. I'm a major in Finance at the School of Business, and minoring in Computer Science.

LC: Yes, yes, OK. Raza, what role does Islam play in your life?

RK: I would say a pretty big role, more like a significant role. It's sort of like my decision-making guide. It's like my number one identity. It's probably tied with a few identities I affiliate myself with.

LC: What are those identities?

RK: There's Muslim, there's American, being a student, just being a young adult overall.

LC: Did your religious beliefs play a role in how you decided to come to Wake?

RK: That's actually a funny story. When I was applying to colleges, I actually wasn't really looking for, it didn't have to with how religious the student body is, how many Muslim students are on campus. It was more like just getting into a great school with a great program that will, in the long run, just get me a job and a career. By the time all the acceptances came in, which is now four years ago, the two biggest ones that I got accepted to was Wake Forest and New York University. Both those schools are on completely opposite ends of the spectrum. They're also schools near my home state, New Jersey, as well as New York, that my parents also wanted me to show more interest in. But, I really was set on Wake Forest. I had a high school economics teacher who went there. He was the only teacher who bragged about his alma mater. So I figured Wake was doing something right. The only thing was, my parents weren't too crazy about my going to school nine hours away in North Carolina. Both the accepted student days were on weekends where I couldn't attend because I was either in a completely different part of the country or I had some other commitment to make. However, during my spring break, Senior year, I got an email from who was then the President of the Muslim Student Association, Nailja Faizi. She got a list of all the students who put Muslim on their college applications. So she reached out to all of us. I

forget what the exact number was, but I figured if there was any chance of me coming to Wake, she would be the one who would be able to convince my parents. My parents, they're not religious religious, but they're more moderate, but they do more like a safety margin with other Muslims. So my parents agreed. They were like, OK, we'll check out Wake. I think we went during Easter break. Nothing was really open, but the university made sure that we also had a proper tour guide. Nailja said she would also come along and explain other things that the tour guide might brush over because you know they're tour guides, they're supposed to tell you the nice things. We did the tour. The tour was great. Then Nailja came, and her, I think they were already engaged at the time, Mohammed, so they came, and they impressed my parents. I told Nailja in an email before coming that if you're going to sell Wake, sell it to my parents. I'm already sold on it. Both of those two were able to do that.

LC: What were some of the things that spoke to you?

RK: It was more about the liberal arts education here. My parents really want me to be an engineer. So, in high school, they made sure I took all the science classes. By my senior year in high school, I wasn't into engineering anymore. It wasn't for me. I want to go into more of a client facing role. That's why I chose finance. Yes, they said if you just put in the work, there's a great alumni base. It really touched on the intangibles of Wake Forest. Then they would speak about the Muslim body, yes, it's growing, but right now, the Muslim Student Association is pretty small. It actually works to their advantage, because it's very close knit. Coming from New Jersey, there's a school called Rutgers University and that has one of the largest Muslim student populations for any university. It's just a whole mess in my opinion, how it operates. To come to a school that's on a much smaller scale, intimate, with still that high quality of education was something that really made my parents feel OK about sending me. I do owe it to the Muslims that were already on this campus for coming to Wake Forest.

LC: What is it like to be Muslim at Wake? And then I've got a question about your association with the Muslim student group.

RK: It's fine, in my opinion. I've always tried to compare it to my time living in New Jersey. In New Jersey, you just have so many Muslims. Not in my town particularly, but in towns that border ours. And you have New York City, and just a few miles one way you have Philadelphia a few miles another way. Those have huge Muslim mega centers. I really haven't seen much difference. I find it just perfectly fine. Luckily, I believe most students here at Wake are very educated and have had very worldly experiences for the most part, be it from traveling or towns they're from, just overall pretty accepting.

LC: What's it been like to be part of the Muslim student group?

RK: It's been pretty good, I'd say. It's kind of complicated actually. But, I like it. I like the complexity in that. Even though it's tight knit, there are groups within the group. For me personally, as a Finance major, somebody who wants to go into that kind of role rather than a grad school or med school. I am definitely more an outlier in that respect. When I sit down with the rest of them, they would all just be talking about their science classes, pre-med classes and all that. That just didn't interest me too much. So it wasn't more about them being Muslim, it was more the whole pre-med vs. liberal arts vs undergrad business school thing. You just see throughout the whole campus. So-they all take Arabic as their language requirement. We're all taught very basic Arabic since we were like little kids. That's just easier to go into that. I came in, and I just took French. I've also been taking French for the past ten years. There's a lot of things. It was hard in the beginning of Freshman year because all of those Muslims would be taking pretty much the same classes. And here I am taking Intro to French, Calculus, Africa and Modern World History, all the Divisional stuff.

LC: Do you all do spiritual formation together and pray together?

RK: Yes, that's interesting. Since I was a Freshman, the most consistent thing with the MSA has been doing the Friday prayer services. Although, I just found out this year that's not something MSA is supposed to do. It's not something that the Muslim Life Department, part of the Chaplain's department is supposed to take care of. But since our Chaplain at the time, Imam Griggs, he's a very busy guy, very popular guy, goes around the country speaking. Obviously, he can't handle all that. Plus, he has his own Mosque in Winston to take care of. So it sort of turned into a whole Muslim Student Association thing. I usually actually modify, not modify, but I plan my schedules around to make sure that on Fridays at that time window, I don't have classes. Now they've been doing more stuff. I think my Freshman and Sophomore year, they rarely did anything outside of the Friday prayer services, other than the Eid party. But now they've really been trying to do other things. We have these things now called Hallukahs. They're not really spiritual, they're kind of like counting all sessions. It's not solely political stuff. It can be like what does it mean to you to be a Muslim? I think later, next week, one of the Divinity School students, 'Kenly something', he's going to come speak to us.

LC: Can you tell me about an experience where you felt affirmed in your Muslim identity at Wake?

RK: Affirmed? I can't really speak to one thing in particular. I'm kind of like an independent person as is, so what other people would say never really affected me too much. I just affirm with myself. I'm Muslim, you just gotta keep going through with it. Like I know a lot of people, not here in particular, but elsewhere you have a sort of deviated or digressed from their Muslim identity. They just think it's too hard to be Muslim now. But for me, I just try to find ways to have my Muslim identity mesh well with normal college life.

LC: What are the characteristics of your Muslim identity? How do you, I hear you say that you affirm yourself, but how do you do that?

RK: Normally, it's like a lot of things just aren't in control in your life, a lot of things are based on luck. I guess when certain things are sort of based on luck, that's when I go to my faith. It's more like a security blanket. I don't know if that's how affirming an interview works, but that's probably the best explanation I could give.

LC: Are there any positive things that Wake Forest is doing to support Muslim students?

RK: I can see that they're trying. One of things was, I guess now they're trying to get Halal food back to campus. Right now, it's being spearheaded by the Chaplain's department. I think Gail Bretan, from Hillel, in particular, because she wants Kosher food in. Now, on a monthly basis they've been doing something called Global Food Tabling. It's just like food from around the world that people made for various holidays and what not and would be put on a showcase at The Pit. So for Eid they would do that with some Pakhistani food, some Arab Mediterranean food, that sort of thing. It shows Wake's willingness to go with that. A lot of Muslim students I know, they're pretty impatient with that. They're like what's taking so long? Why is it like this? I get it, we're not a big university to start with, and so therefore, we don't have a big Muslim student population to make it sort of feasible or worthwhile to have Halal food on a regular basis.

Whereas like other schools, up the road like James Madison, Virginia Tech or UNC Charlotte are able to have that. I see them trying with that respect. That's a positive. I guess a huge positive would be, this lounge they've given to the Muslim students, right next to the Hillel Lounge, in Collins Residence Hall, it's a really nice space. I do go there on a nightly basis just to do my evening prayer or something, or just to do homework. That's by far the biggest step the university has taken. Now you start to see, now that MSA is going on to 10 years old, now you are seeing alumni who are already well established into their careers come back so they can work with the university on how to better Muslim students. This past homecoming, the Muslim Life had their first alumni

brunch. It was a pretty cool experience, even President Hatch was there. Melissa Harris-Perry was there, but her speech was terrible. It was also the day after the President's Ball, so MHP was a little hung over, it seemed like. With President Hatch at that event, that's just another affirmation that this is something that Wake is going to stick with this over the long run, they really wanted to invest in diversifying the university, which I'm 100% fine with.

LC: How does it make you feel to see these, what I'm hearing is they are steps forward toward greater inclusion and celebration of Muslim identity?

RK: I'm fine with it, so long as the Muslim students can show appreciation back to the university. I don't really want it to get to a point where we take it for granted that universities like Wake Forest, that we work so hard to get into, owe us something. I think you've got to earn what you work for. I'm fine with it, but you can't just keep being critical. You have to show a ton of appreciation for this because it seems like the university budget for student groups like this, and for organizations that don't rake in a lot of donation money like the MSA, like other religious organizations, I don't exactly know how they operate but we need to show the university some gratitude. It's not cheap for them to do this for us.

LC: That's the finance thing coming out. That's some realism.

RK: Yes. You have to be. It can't expect the university just to throw money at us. I would prefer the university to invest in actual education infrastructure by updating buildings, like Manchester or Carswell, then to renovate our lounge or something.

LC: Could you tell me about a time when being Muslim was tied to a negative experience for you at Wake?

RK: Tied to a negative? I mean, Freshman year is kind of like the eye-opening experience. Quite a few things happened. I know Imam Griggs, back when he was here, there was a bucket of urine that was left in front of his door. It was weird, no one really heard about it until 2 weeks after it was reported. That's a negative experience.

LC: Tell me more about what that was like to hear about. I'm shocked.

RK: I guess for me the value is just the university took so long to report it. The university did end up sending a campus-wide email about it. I'm pretty sure a lot of people pressured administration to do that and let everyone know. Freshman year was just kind of that weird time. A lot of stuff was going on at college campuses across the nation.

Not just anti-Muslim things, there was sexual assaults, and there was racism of campus police departments. A lot of stuff was hitting all these universities at once. When something like this happens, something that you identify with, that is put on the same level as other bad things, it was kind of bad. Then there was the Chapel Hill shooting. That was a big thing. Even though I didn't know those people personally, but when somebody is killed execution style, it does take a big toll, especially when the assumption is under that their belief, is their own faith is what drove the guy to kill them.

LC: Did you talk with other people of faith? ...other Wake students? How did you wrestle with that?

RK: I would speak with other Wake students in general. Their opinions, they matter.

LC: Other white students' opinions?

RK: White, black, Hispanics, yes. Yes, that's what happened. Then you also see the Muslim community come together a little stronger. I couldn't go to the actual funeral but they had shuttles, not shuttle buses, but they had a bus for Muslim students who wanted to go all the way to Chapel Hill. And then, for the Imam Griggs case, that was actually kind of weird. I remember walking into the old Chaplains' Lounge in Reynolda, and everybody was just seated there. I was just there to get coffee. I was like, OK, I'll join too. They were just talking about how to deal with this kind of stuff going forward. I don't really remember a ton of that, other than Imam Griggs was there, and at the end we had cake.

LC: Cake was important.

RK: Hmm. After that, it's been kind of uphill you know?

LC: Well that's good to hear. What are some stops along the way going uphill?

RK: Stops along the way? Trying to think. I guess the rise of isolated incidents, of like ISIS. That was more like a Sophomore year thing. Although it never really seemed like the focus was on their Muslim identity, at least to me. It was more like, this was a bad group, and we have to take care of them somehow.

LC: Where did you hear this talk going on?

RK: Just the news really. I'm on Twitter quite a bit, and you just see that.

Wake students are quite weird in some respects. Some can be very political and very much engaged with the outside world. Others are just more content on being in a bubble. I'm sort of like in the middle. I don't want to be completely out of campus, out of touch with campus. I don't want to be completely compliant with campus. You just hear opinions from both sides. I'm very good at taking a neutral stance at first, and then sort of gauging for myself what sounds reasonable. What are the proper precautions to take when making a decision, like how I should approach this. Think before I'm tweeting about a world event. Something like that.

LC: What do you think would happen if you didn't think before you tweeted?

RK: Oh, then I'm sure a lot of people would just argue back. You know, all that, because we do have a lot of, we do have a few Muslim students who are very engaged politically. Sometimes, I think that they mean well, but I think they should just take a minute more to think before they speak. I understand that passion can sometimes drive you to be on a roll in terms of speaking.

LC: Can you think of other challenges Muslim students experience on campus?

RK: I'm not sure if you're interviewing any more, but I'm sure 90% of them would say, getting into Med School.

LC: Why is that?

RK: They just want to go and become doctors, that's what their parents probably told them. They see it as a safe way, a safe career pretty much.

LC: What does that mean?

RK: Doctors will always be in demand. I'm guessing a lot of their parents worked hard to make a living in this country, so they also want to see their kids work just as hard. For most of them, doctors is the only profession where they have actually seen an individual work hard. I know there are a hundred other professions out there where people work hard, work just as many hours to affect just as many people. Maybe not medically, and maybe the results aren't physically shown...I'm sure most of them do care about Med School, more so. What are some other challenges Muslim students face? I guess another challenge is because college campuses are very diverse, Muslim student groups are no exception. Even though I say Muslim students are all pre-med, they are all individuals, and they all like to do their own thing as well, have different tastes in music styles and all that. It also comes down to the Islamic belief, the way they practice

Islam. In America, the number of different schools of thought in Islam you'll see, greatly outnumber the schools of thought you'll see in any Muslim country you go to. Just because everybody's parents or Grandparents are from different parts of the Muslim world. You got Pakistanis, you've got Iranians, you've got Saudi Arabians, you've got Sudanese, Egyptian, other parts of North Africa and the Levant, you'll see people practice Islam in different ways. You'll see Muslim students drink, it's just how it is.

LC: Is that a challenge for some folks?

RK: It probably is a challenge to some folks depending on the degree of which you're taught about Islam and taught how to follow it. I'd say if you're taught on a very literal scale, I think the school of thought is more like a Salafi School of Thought, you'll have a hard time with it. But if you're like me, and your parents mainly grew up with a Hanafi School of Thought or the Malachi School of Thought, you'll be a little more accepting of it. Those schools of thought, the people who normally are trained in Islam in that school, they interact with Muslims on a grander scale. So in Pakistan, you have India right next door, you got a big Hindu country there. In Sudan and Egypt, and those types of countries, you're interacting with Christians a lot more. For the Salafi School of Thought, mainly from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, those people don't interact much with people outside, so they all have a stricter sense of what Islam should be. We have, well we used to have like one in that school of thought. I don't really know what happened to him. It's sort of like that, sorry if I'm rambling on, but you just sort of have to accept what other people do. Even if you perceive what they're doing as not Islamic or not what a Muslim should be, you still just accept the fact that they identify as a Muslim and be accepting of it. For me, it wasn't such a hard problem, but I know people who it was a really hard problem for.

LC: I'm hearing you describe Muslim to Muslim socialization and the degree of diversity among Muslim student group, the Muslim population here on campus. Have there been any circumstances where you felt it difficult to socialize with non-Muslims here on Wake's campus, that from your perspective or from their perspective/Muslim identity people just didn't know how to handle it? Have there been any awkward situations like that?

RK: Personally, no. Not me personally. Every person has their own opinion about Islam and it may not be in favor of our religion. I do believe that most people here are just inherently good-natured, that they're not going to be just up front about it. They're still going to want us to feel secure in their presence. I personally haven't been affected or had any difficulty. I really don't know if other people have.

LC: How have your parents, have they had a change of heart or anything? Do they feel better about Wake Forest since you've been here?

RK: Yes, they feel a thousand times better. They like the fact that I have a good amount of friends here. Obviously, getting a job was the biggest reason. So now that I have a full-time job going forward after graduation, they're completely rested I guess. Really proud and all that.

LC: That's wonderful to hear. Have you always lived in New Jersey?

RK: Yes. Always lived in New Jersey, pretty much the same town. Holmdel, New Jersey. It's in Monmouth County. It borders Freehold where Bruce Springsteen is from. It's 15 minutes away from Asbury Park where Danny DeVito is from.

LC: Is there a striking difference between your experience and Muslims in New Jersey, in your hometown and your experience here?

RK: Striking difference? I want to say no, but I know that's not true.

LC: Why do you want to say no?

RK: I want to say no because I don't really, I can't think of any striking differences off the top of my head. But I know there are some major differences. I guess the big difference is that, you see Muslim communities in New Jersey are very close geographically to one another, so they'll be a Muslim community in South Jersey, there'll be one in Central Jersey, there'll be one in North Jersey, there'll be one in the greater Philadelphia area, one in the greater New York area. If something happens to that one, the other 3 or 4 will come and help out. Here, I sort of see Muslim communities that are more isolated. They're further apart from one another. That's pretty much it. They do have more like they're on their own type feel to it, which I still think is good, but it's kind of like, but you kind of like want to see more, I guess. You want to see a bigger support system.

LC: Along the lines of when you're on campus, you said that being Muslim does not make it more difficult to socialize with the broader population. Is there something you can pinpoint, where, well you've said people just need to be good natured here on this campus, can you say more about why you think you've had a good experience here?

RK: Yes. One, I like to stay involved. The MSA is a group I'm part of, but it's not the group I'm most heavily involved in. For 3 years, I've been part of the boxing club and I was the inaugural treasurer. So, for 3 years, I did treasury work. At times I had to step in

and be acting president, acting vice president. I was able to turn it into one of the largest club sports on campus, so a lot of people knew me. That was something that they affiliated me with. That was great. In the Business School, I was Treasurer for the Finance Club. The Finance Club is a pretty extensive group. I did that. It's really just about expanding and getting the most out of the college experience. Doing all these clubs, making all these friends, I guess that's why it was so good. The more you know somebody, the more likely you are going to be nicer to them every time you meet them. So, there's that. I guess there's also the fact that we're under 5,000 undergrads, so everybody's going to know everybody. If you do something stupid, everybody, if not most, are going to find out about it. You've got to always be aware. Know that you might not only be representing yourself, but the groups you're affiliated with.

LC: In the classroom, have you ever had an experience in the classroom where, I don't know, every head turned to you for the Muslim experience.

RK: No. Not at all. I have never taken a Religion class here. I know a few other Muslim students who have taken Intro to Islam, and they've had those experiences. I've never taken a Religion class. I'm thinking about the Liberal Arts classes I have taken. For some reason a lot of them are based on African society or more like China and Japanese society. I don't know why I took those classes. No, I've never, I've never had those really pressured intense experiences. In the Business School, we just don't talk about politics or religion.

LC: What changes would you want to make for Muslim students coming to Wake?

RK: I guess the Halal food would be a good start. It seems to be a big factor, when I've been with our prospective Muslim students, who are touring campus, that's always the one question that comes up that's consistently about being a Muslim student on campus. The others are usually just about academics. Although we have a lounge, the lounge is mainly nice to have. I don't think of it so much as a need to have. Maybe Halal food on a regular basis, or more frequent basis is probably the best I think the university could do right now. They already have the other things, we have a coordinator for student life for Muslims, we have the MSA. As long as you have those two, and those two are solid, I think the sky's the limit for MSA or Muslims.

LC: What is something you would want non-Muslims to know about the Muslim experience...about your Muslim experience?

RK: It's not really different from their experience.

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LC: Is there anything else that I may have missed or is important to know about Muslim life at Wake?

RK: For me specifically, I don't think so. I think I touched on everything we did. Thank you very much for taking the time to do all this. I really find this an interesting project. Naijla did reach out to all of us. I was thinking about it for a good week. And then it just sort of took a text message from her to get me to do this. Overall, it's pretty neat and having my voice immortalized in ZSR could be pretty interesting. Pretty cool.

LC: We appreciate your voice and your participation in this project. It's going to make this place better.

RK: Great.