III. Embracing Tradition

LAYTH ALKHANI Interview

WELCOMED: What aspects of your background, origins, or community are most important for readers to know?

Layth Alkhani: My name is Layth Alkhani. I'm Syrian-American, and I grew up in Bridgeview, a southwest suburb of Chicago, one block from our local mosque. The neighborhood was about 90 to 95% Muslim, and we all went to the same public school, so faith and culture were woven into everyday life. Between mosque events during the week and on weekends, plus weekend Arabic and Islamic school, we enjoyed a highly engaged, supportive environment. I feel fortunate to have grown up in the U.S. while also experiencing a community life similar to what many people associate with Muslim-majority places

WELCOMED: What was your daily experience?

Layth Alkhani: There were wonderful regular experiences I took for granted growing up and only realized their impact after I left for college. In addition to growing up one block from the local mosque, within a 30-minute drive, there were five to six mosques where I got to know kids outside of school. At school, I played soccer, so my friends there were Polish. But when I wasn't playing soccer with those groups of kids, I was always at a mosque event. We would hop from mosque to mosque. One mosque would have events on a Thursday, another on a Friday, another on a Saturday. Sometimes there'd be two events the same night, and we would go to one and then immediately jump to the other. I think that helped because, since a lot of my Muslim friends were also my friends in school, we had a very strong connection.

WELCOMED: Tell us how you connected with the Muslim community here at Stanford.

Layth Alkhani: I like to joke that when I went to Stanford, I had culture shock, because it wasn't a primarily Muslim community, very far from it. But I left Stanford with a much stronger grasp and understanding of my faith, the role it has in my life, and what I wanted to take with me going forward.

I arrived at a turning point for Muslim students here. Before COVID, the community at Stanford was historically between forty and fifty people. When my class entered as the first class that came in person after COVID, it was north of two hundred. I remember the Muslim Student Union had two spiritual events fall quarter, maybe only one. So in winter quarter of freshman year, I joined MSU as a frosh intern and started running spiritual programming and organizing events. Turnout grew slowly, but we set the foundation so that by the time sophomore year came, I organized over forty events across the academic year.

Fall quarter we continued the tradition of the Golden Gate Fajr, the dawn prayer. Then we developed Qur'an circles. We'd rent space in Old Union for halaqahs, informal faith-based discussion circles where students reflect on scripture and everyday experiences. There was a brothers' circle and a sisters' circle, for conversations about everyday life shaped by faith, and we'd talk until midnight or 1 a.m. sometimes, or until staff in Old Union kicked us out.

Some of my deepest friendships at Stanford grew out of those circles, and I know many other Muslim students found the same kind of connection there. Eventually, many of us even began doing charity work together and by the end of my Senior year we had raised over $25,000 in total for Syrian Refugees, which was awesome.

WELCOMED: At what point did you start doing your chaplaincy work at the med school?

Layth Alkhani: That started my junior year. I was lucky there was an M1 I met who had come from Hopkins, and he introduced the idea to me. The second I heard it, I thought, this is the coolest thing in the world. Being pre-med I had tried volunteering at the hospital before but could never seem to get my foot in the door. When I learned about this volunteer opportunity, I asked, how do I get started, and what can I do to help? It was the fall of my junior year, and then it took a very long time for the hospital to let us get it up and running. About 10 months after I initially spoke to the Stanford Medicine staff, it was up and running, and we currently have about six volunteers still actively visiting even after my graduation which is, I believe, a testament to how important the work truly is.

The first patient I ever visited, I walked in with another spiritual volunteer who was much more experienced, so I was supposed to be shadowing him and letting him take the lead. He introduced himself in English, and it was a mom, her husband, and a son. They looked terrified. After staring at us for what felt like an eternity the son quietly let out, "No English."

So it became my time to shine. I tried Arabic and explained that I was part of a new initiative to get Muslim volunteers to visit Muslim patients. The second I said that, the demeanor flipped 180%. Everyone was smiling. They brought us seats, made us sit down, gave us coffee, and gave us dates. It honestly felt like Arabic hospitality, like visiting someone's home. Then they started talking.

From my understanding, when I talked to the nurses, it was the first time since they had been in the hospital, and they had been there either over 20 days or over 30 days, that they had someone just to talk with, to vent with, and to let out their feelings and emotions. When the doctors would enter with an interpreter the conversations were always short. The doctor's diagnosis, a plan, maybe time for a question if they were lucky. No one was there just to talk, to ask them how they were feeling. So we sat there and started talking, and they explained everything they wanted.

They had a miscommunication with the spiritual care team because they were asking for a sheikh to perform *ruqyah*, a special humble form of prayer that involves reciting Qur'anic verses and prayers for comfort and healing, and the staff misunderstood the request as a general chaplain visit. A lot of times, needs like this can fall through the cracks. So when I was sitting there, they explained what they wanted. I contacted the chaplain, and we made it work.

The next week, the same family went to Friday prayer because they were still in the hospital. They came up to me, gave me a hug, and said thank you so much, and it worked out. The mom was feeling better, and they were about to get discharged. So I saw the change in that specific interaction, and then it came full circle a week later when they were about to leave the hospital. The experience made me reflect on how I want to show up for people, both now and when I'm a physician.

WELCOMED: What religious readings or content is important both for you and your work with others?

Layth Alkhani: I think it's a mix. I wouldn't say it's one specific reading. Obviously, there's the Qur'an and the Hadith, which are stories of the Prophet, and we can read these scriptures of faith and learn from them. But the biggest thing for me, whether it's podcasts or conversations with other people, is to take those texts and have an honest conversation about what that means in our life. One of the things we did in the circle at Stanford, and that I love doing now, is we pick a specific passage or story, read it beforehand, and then when we meet, we have an actual conversation about what this means for us. What does that mean for us as college students living in the U.S.? What does that mean for us as professionals working on the next steps in our career?

There are also a couple of podcasts I listen to. One is from Yasser Qadi, *The Story of the Prophet*, and I think he does a really good job of saying, this is a specific story from the life of the Prophet, but what does that mean in 21st century America? What are we actually implementing into our life? For me, as a Muslim living today, that's been the most important thing to keep engaging in. As busy as I get, I need to keep a relationship with my faith, but also understand what this relationship means for me today, and how that's going to influence my everyday life and my actions.

WELCOMED: Can you explain what you believe religiously?

Layth Alkhani: Growing up, and I think this is true for a lot of religions, religion is often described as a series of actions. There are specific religious practices that matter deeply to me, but what became clearer in college is that faith is more than a set of actions. It is a way of seeing the world. It shapes how I treat people, how I make decisions, and what kind of person I hope to be.

For me, one of the biggest things cemented during college was this. There are specific spiritual actions that are very important and are an aspect of my life, but the more important thing is that religion is a perspective through which you see the world. Because I'm Muslim and I practice my faith, I draw from surahs and stories in the Qur'an, and I try to let them shape how I live day to day. For me, that means anything I do. When I wake up, when I decide to volunteer with this community, when I decide to travel here, when I decide to sit with my parents and have a conversation, the motivation behind that is what my faith is teaching me, to be the best person that I can be. It manifests in daily life, but it affects how I view the world.

Sometimes faith is easily recognized, like stepping away to pray. Other times it is not labeled as religion from the outside, but it is still driven by faith. When someone notices that and asks about it, even though it is not an outward religious practice, I think that is the coolest thing.

I think many of us wrestle with this on a secular campus. In theory, you arrive, keep your faith, and carry it with you. In practice, the first step is finding your community, a home away from home. My advice is to find that support system and community first, a place you feel comfortable. Once you have that safety net, it becomes much easier to carry your faith with you across campus. You can be part of everything else you are doing here while still holding onto what matters to you. It is about being able to be yourself in shared spaces and still meet other people with respect. That is where real belonging starts, when faith is understood as part of someone's lived life and that's when campus starts to feel like a place you can fully belong.

WELCOMED: When someone finishes reading your story, what do you hope they better understand about faith, belonging, or life at college?

Layth Alkhani: I hope people better understand that faith is not something you hide in a corner and return to only in private. For many of us, it shapes how we move through the world, how we care for other people, and how we build community. Real belonging on a college campus means not asking students to separate those parts of themselves, but making room for them to live with integrity in public. When that happens, faith is not a barrier to community. It becomes one of the ways people learn how to serve, connect, and fully belong.