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# The medicine chest: education in the light of Abdel Hakim Murad's understanding of modernity

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**Abstract:** This contribution examines the relationship between understandings of modernity, Islam and educational ideals at Cambridge Muslim College (UK) and how such understandings contribute to the formation of meaningful selves amongst the students attending the college. The analysis takes as its point of departure the understanding of modernity of the founder of Cambridge Muslim College – Tim Winter aka Abdal Hakim Murad – as it is expressed in his publications, social media appearances and from conversations at the college. In a nutshell, modernity for Winter signifies a fragmentation of meaning and coherence and is associated with blind consumerism and superficiality. The aim of the college is to counter such fragmentation by providing coherence and meaning to its students. The college is presented – and perceived by students and graduates – as mediating between Islamic traditions and modern Muslim lives in the West and as living up to a responsibility of engaging in the development of both Muslim minorities and the wider society of which they are part. Thus, the educational ideal is not only pursued in traditional academic activities – it implies a certain lifestyle based on a particular understanding of Islam which is not as much about theological content as it is about how to instrumentalise the religion in everyday being and practice.

**Keywords:** Abdal Hakim Murad; Cambridge Muslim College; Islamic education; modernity; subjectivity formation

## 1 Europe is sick – Islamic education is the cure

When talking about his latest book *Travelling home: Essays on Islam in Europe* (Quilliam Press, 2020) in an interview available online, Abdal Hakim Murad argues that Muslims should be seen as therapists rather than complainants in Europe,

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because Muslims can help Europeans overcome troubles of integration and identity and conflicts over bodily politics – to name but a few of current themes making headlines in contemporary Europe. Thus, Murad appeals to fellow Muslims to take it upon themselves to function as therapists in contemporary Europe, which is considered to be both challenged and sick. He continues to recommend that fellow Muslims should reach out to help rather than despise Europe and Europeans. Muslims, in this understanding, hold the keys to a better future, since they have access to the ‘medicine chest’ of Islam.<sup>1</sup>

There are several very interesting elements in the short passage from the interview referred to here. First, when Murad suggests that Muslims can help Europeans, he creates a dichotomy disregarding the significant number of Muslims that self-identify as Europeans. The underlying notion is that Islam and Europe are categorically different, and of course such mutual exclusivity need not be the case. Second, characterising Europe as sick is a provocative statement appealing to a limited and (presumably) Muslim audience that is placed in opposition to certain lifestyles predominant in contemporary Europe. At the same time, it also appeals to those historically aware of the characterisation of the Ottoman Empire as ‘Europe’s Sick Man’ that was in vogue during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Finally, it is striking in implying that Muslims should be more respectful of their heritage, in Murad’s view, as it holds the solution to the world’s problems.

In the following, I examine how the Shaykh’s understanding of Islam reflects his perception of modernity, and how these two understandings inform the educational programmes offered at Cambridge Muslim College. I seek to answer the following questions: What understandings of modernity and Islam form the basis for education at Cambridge Muslim College? And what do these tell us about the college’s ideals for the subjectivity formation of Muslim students in contemporary Britain? My interest in education at the college lies in how, on the one hand, it is a specific instrument to form subjects through academic content and processes inspiring transformations in self-understanding and worldview. On the other hand, at the college, education is seen to be contributing something other and more than individual intellectual and social development, namely community building in opposition to a modern, non-Muslim majority.

The article is divided into two analytical sections: Islam as core and Islam as instrument followed by a discussion of how these two understandings form the basis of education – or rather a wider educational project – at Cambridge Muslim College. To begin with, however, we take a closer look at the Dean and his college.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Abdal Hakim Murad, YouTube 10 May 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smnXzfzWJOc> (last accessed 24 November 2020).

## 2 The college and the Dean

Since 2009, Cambridge Muslim College has provided a diploma programme in Contextual Islamic Studies and Leadership to a student population predominantly recruited from *dar ul-ulum* institutions in the UK. This one-year programme has been supplemented, since 2017, with a four-year BA in Islamic Studies. The college is accredited by the British Accreditation Council for Independent Further and Higher Education, and the BA was validated by The Open University.

According to the college homepage, it sees itself as a mediator between Islamic traditions and Western modernity and as a responsible agent in the development and support of the wider British, Muslim community.

The mission of the College is to develop Muslim faith leadership through world-class education, training and research based on a dialogue between the Islamic intellectual tradition and the ideas and circumstances of the modern world.

This is a response to the urgent need for leaders and thinkers capable of articulating and enacting the positive role Muslims and Islam can and should play as part of modern, multi-cultural British society and the world as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

This ambition was further elaborated by Dean Murad in a conversation at the college in 2014. Here he explained the aim of the diploma programme as 'giving back to the community' rather than altering any beliefs or practices.<sup>3</sup>

While the college is independent of any Islamic organisation, the one-year diploma was, from the outset, targeted at graduates from *dar ul-ulum* colleges in Britain.<sup>4</sup> The first *dar ul-ulum* institution was founded in India in 1866, as part of the Deoband movement.<sup>5</sup> The core of the curriculum consists of Qur'an exegesis, Hadith, Fiqh and Arabic language. Thus, graduates from *dar ul-ulum* institutions

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<sup>2</sup> The mission is described on the Cambridge Muslim College homepage: <https://www.cambridgemuslimcollege.ac.uk/about/mission/> (last accessed 24 November 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Murad in Cambridge, November 2014.

<sup>4</sup> During my visit in November 2014, the academic director, Dr Atif Imtiaz, explained that in 2013 and 2014 all of the accepted 15–20 students came from *dar ul-ulum* institutions; however, the college aimed at enrolling one or two students from ordinary university Islamic studies courses each year. For more information about the Deoband movement, see Reetz 2006. See also Sinclair 2020 for a description of the origins of the *dar ul-ulum*. See also work by Gilliat-Ray on Deoband institutions in Britain 2005 and 2010.

<sup>5</sup> The anonymous reviewer made me aware that a discussion of modern elements in the Deoband movement itself would be worthwhile. This is something I look forward to investigating further. If this aspect of modern features in self-perceived traditionalist enterprises is of particular interest to my readers, I can point them to Pieri's work on the transformation of the self as a modern feature of Tablighi Jamaat (Pieri 2020).



have studied Islamic scripture extensively for a minimum of five years before attending the college in Cambridge but have very limited knowledge of and experience with contemporary British society. Similarly, their knowledge of Britain's and Europe's historical and philosophical foundations is limited. The diploma course, then, provides introductions to a broad selection of academic disciplines and opportunities to study British history and society. Courses include British and European history, literature and arts, astronomy, philosophy, contemporary politics and community leadership. Between 2009 and 2019, the diploma had approximately 15–20 students per year.<sup>6</sup>

The BA programme in Islamic Studies is a three-year degree which requires a good command of classical Arabic, as it covers Arabic courses as well as courses on classical texts of *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth*, *fiqh*, logic and history. The website explains:

The BA (Hons) in Islamic Studies provides students with a deep, balanced and nuanced understanding of the Islamic tradition and its application in the context of modern society. Our educational philosophy combines the best of traditional Islamic learning with contemporary scholarship. There is currently no such course available in the UK, and its provision is a major contribution to the development of Islamic knowledge and leadership at a time of urgent need for the Muslim community. It is the College's hope that these sacred sciences and their accompanying methodology will guide and inform our students' thinking and intellectual endeavours as well as their personal and spiritual growth.<sup>7</sup>

The students enrolled in the BA programme benefit from their experience with the diploma programme at the college. The diploma programme consists of the mentioned liberal arts modules as well as a series of guest lectures on social and political issues, such as the role of British Muslims in the British army in connection with participation in military interventions abroad or challenges within social services and the NHS. Typically, but not exclusively, the lecturers are of Muslim background. Another way the BA programme stands out is the fact that the programme is hosted by a college that is Muslim, which means that all staff and all lecturers are practising believers. This, according to the college itself, assures authenticity.<sup>8</sup> This reflects the Muslimness of Cambridge Muslim College and is one way in which the BA distinguishes itself from Islamic Studies at other British

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with former administrative employee, Dr Imtiaz, in Cambridge, November 2014.

<sup>7</sup> From the Cambridge Muslim college website: <https://www.cambridgemuslimcollege.ac.uk/programmes/islamicstudies/> (last accessed 24 September 2021).

<sup>8</sup> From a newsletter announcing the admission of the first 13 students to the BA programme: <https://cambridgemuslimcollege.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CMC-Newsletter-2017-Oct-9-WEB.pdf> (last accessed 24 November 2020).

universities: these programmes are not faith-based but aspire to sceptical and critical analyses of religion.<sup>9</sup>

The dean, Tim Winter, otherwise known as Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad, is sometimes referred to as the most influential Muslim in Britain.<sup>10</sup> Educated at Cambridge University and al-Azhar, he is a convert and widely respected for his scholarly accomplishments. To the students I spoke to when visiting the college in 2014 and 2015, Murad personifies the ideal of bridging two worlds – Islam and the West, tradition and modernity – just as his profound knowledge of British society and history and his deep respect for the needs of Muslim minority communities means he can provide guidance on career choices, lifestyle and other priorities to his students.<sup>11</sup>

The present work is based on participant observation at the college between 2014 and 2019 (five visits in total, the longest taking place in November 2014 [two days] and May 2015 [four days]), conversations with Abdal Hakim Murad, students and lecturers at the college, and email correspondence with members of staff between visits, as well as analyses of Abdal Hakim Murad's publications and online presence. My previous studies of the college and the diploma programme have been read and commented on by Dean Murad and other members of staff.

### 3 Successive modernities and education

In theoretical terms, the point of departure for this study is an understanding of modernity drawing on theories of multiple modernities and an interpretative approach placing culture at the centre of the understanding of modern life. Modernity, then, is defined not by institutions or specific rules or regimes but by the experience of social contingency,<sup>12</sup> namely: nothing is impossible, and nothing is necessary.<sup>13</sup>

Different kinds of modernity produce different frames or templates for subjectivity formation. With Reckwitz, I understand modern subjectivities to be collectively shared but contested cultural types.<sup>14</sup> Thus, I draw on recent sociological debates about modern selfhoods emphasising the hybrid and socially constructed nature of modern subjectivities as contingent and temporary results of competing and

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<sup>9</sup> Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Peck, *The Independent*, August 2010: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/timothy-winter-britains-most-influential-muslim-and-it-was-all-down-to-a-peach-2057400.html> (last accessed 24 November 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Informal conversation with students, May 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Wagner 2001, Jung and Sinclair 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Luhmann 1992: 96.

<sup>14</sup> Reckwitz 2006.

sometimes even contradicting orders of social and discursive practices, ergo different modern orders and practices. Reckwitz translates these debates into three different types of subject cultures that have subsequently dominated the modern period in the West: the classical form of a patriarchal and morally saturated bourgeois modernity; the peer-group-oriented form of organised modernity; and the order of a creative and consumption-oriented ‘post-modern’ form of subjectivity.<sup>15</sup>

Inspired by Reckwitz’s work on successive modernities, I argue that, while the educational ideals and understandings of modernity and religion present in Abdal Hakim Murad’s thinking are presented as forming an opposition to modernity and perhaps its entrepreneurial and post-modern version especially, they are in fact deeply modern. For example, creativity and entrepreneurship are central to these ideals and understandings. At the college, Islam itself is understood to form such an opposition to modernity by representing religious and scholarly traditions and traditional ways of life; however, as I shall argue, the combination of understanding Islam as both core and instrument is modern to its core. This, then, raises the following question: At what level do we understand phenomena as modern? If someone chooses deliberately to distance himself and his educational institution from modernity, is it fair to argue that this is indeed a modern choice? We shall return to this in the discussion.<sup>16</sup>

Previously, I had studied other aspects of Cambridge Muslim College, including how authenticity and authority are tied together in activities and academic content in the diploma programme at the college and how the college contributes to subjectivity formation by appealing to the students as both working and moral subjects.<sup>17</sup> Here, I complement this research by seeking to understand how students are taught to choose between aspects of modernity and modern

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<sup>15</sup> Reckwitz 2006.

<sup>16</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for guiding my attention to Ingram’s work (2018) on the co-constitutive potential in the dichotomy between traditional and modern. See also work by Metcalf 1982 and Mathiesen 2013.

<sup>17</sup> For inspiration behind working and moral subject, see Foucault 1988 and 1995. For discussions of authenticity see Heynen 2006. For the mentioned other work on Cambridge Muslim College, see Sinclair 2015 and 2020. All former studies were part of the larger project run by Professor Dietrich Jung at the Centre for Modern Middle East and Muslim Studies at the University of Southern Denmark. My sub-project was financially supported by the Carlsberg Foundation, and the larger projects were supported by the Velux Foundation and the Danish Research Council for Culture and Communication, FKK. The theoretical framework is borrowed from and shared with the wider Modern Muslim Subjectivities Project 2013–2019 based at the Centre for Modern Middle East and Muslim Studies at the University of Southern Denmark, headed by Professor Dietrich Jung. The project has functioned as an umbrella for smaller subprojects, including three PhD projects and other publications. The most recent is from May 2020: Jung/Sinclair (eds.) entitled *Muslim Subjectivities in Global Modernity*, Brill, May 2020.

British society while making sense of their Muslimness. The thinking of founder and dean Abdal Hakim Murad is key to this understanding. Not only is he himself a role model to the students due to his own educational background, combining both al-Azhar and Cambridge University, but he is also a very sharp observer of modern British society and the contemporary challenges facing Muslim populations in the West. Mentioned on the *Muslim 500* list, his many publications and talks reach wide audiences, and his reputation is instrumental in drawing students to both the BA and the diploma programmes.<sup>18</sup> In short, I argue that the college builds its educational programmes on the idea of the founding father and Shaykh, namely that Islam is a reservoir of traditions and knowledge which can be activated in all societies at all times. Muslims hold a responsibility to protect and maintain this reservoir through their lifestyle and education. In accordance with this understanding, the college and the educational programmes offer personal practical and academic development to individual students. These outcomes are not only useful to building personal careers but also to serving the Muslim community. As an educational project, it is based on a very particular idea of Islam and modernity and a conscious attempt to stand outside the contemporary modern world. This is not rare if one contemplates religious sects isolating themselves from mainstream society, but it is a rare basis for a college programme.

## 4 Islam as core

In his most recent book, *Travelling Home: Essays on Islam in Europe* (Quilliam Press, 2020), Abdal Hakim Murad discusses a number of controversial issues concerning integration, identity, racism, islamophobia, body beliefs, gender and Muslim community leadership. As implied by the title, Muslims are encouraged to return to their roots and seek a better understanding of (their) contemporary challenges through a respect for the resources located in traditional Islam. Murad encourages Muslims in Europe to familiarise themselves with their home in Islam in order to make better futures and homes for themselves in Europe.

His encouragement is supported by a number of examples from the 'surprisingly strong' history of Muslims in Europe as well as strong metaphors about the wealth of knowledge and wisdom in traditional Islam.<sup>19</sup> Rather than point to Cordoba – which is an example of early Islamic presence in Europe often referred

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<sup>18</sup> Link to the relevant mention from the 2021 version of the list: <https://themuslim500.com/profiles/timothy-winter/> (last accessed 24 November 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Abdal Hakim Murad, YouTube 10 May 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smnXzfzWJOc> (last accessed 24 November 2020).

to, with Andalucía being under Moorish influence up until 1492 – he turns the historical encounter between Europe and Islam on its head and explains that the former Roman empire became almost exclusively Muslim. The only exception, according to Murad, was a small corner of the empire, today known as Europe. He points to the importance of the battle at Poitiers on 10 October 732 as determining the future for Europe because it marked the stop for further Muslim expansion on the continent.

Shaykh Murad's view that Muslims in Europe could be therapists and take on modern Europe as their patient is rooted in his understanding of Islam. He understands Islam as the point of departure for the believer's mind and being, as something powerful and static that the believer carries with him or her regardless of where he or she settles geographically or career-wise. Islam is that special something which adds sense and direction to the believer. It is not an added perspective or superstructure of Muslim subjectivity, but rather it is its very core.

Another useful metaphor is that of 'root' – Islam as the root of the believer's mind and belief. I have written about this elsewhere when analysing Murad's understanding of 'roots' in his *Commentary on the Eleventh Contentions*, where he explains the role of Islam vis-à-vis contemporary British culture.<sup>20</sup> This is the understanding that a root is something a believing individual has, rather than something shared by a population, an entire society or a state. So, in cultural studies, where a static and rooted understanding of culture implies an innate and inherited connectedness with territory which can be lost if an individual changes his or her locality – a migrant can be perceived as uprooted for instance – and a dynamic understanding of culture implies seeing culture more as a language or as a tool carried by the individual and applicable in many different settings, Murad combines the two in a novel way.<sup>21</sup>

Murad understands 'roots' as connected to religion, tradition and moral guidance, and he insists that they cannot be limited by national borders or territory. Rather, these roots are internal and metaphysical, something tying the individual to larger principles. Roots, then, connect the individual believer to traditional Islam, not to a nationally defined territory or a state, just as roots become the core of the individual believer's self-understanding and their compass in life. These religiously guided roots determine all actions, interactions and relationships.

However, Islam as root and core is not confined to the individual but can be illustrated with historical examples demonstrating how Islam adapts smoothly to different geographical and societal contexts. It is something shared by the Muslim

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<sup>20</sup> Sinclair 2020. Abdal Hakim Murad 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Cresswell 2004; Hall 1995; Massey 1995, 2005.



community, too. One illustration is found in Murad's publication *Muslim Songs of The British Isles*, a songbook published for educational purposes.<sup>22</sup> The songs meet the requirements of the national curriculum, and the book is intended for musical education in British Muslim schools. The songbook is a collection of traditional British folk songs in new arrangements and with lyrics inspired by Islamic scripture in English translation. Thus, the songbook illustrates how the individual believer can combine any tradition or cultural practice with Islam. In this manner, Murad revives British traditional music for an audience of (young) Muslims in Britain and shows how Muslimness is in no way a contradiction to British culture or traditions. Rather, Islam is the core of any believer's identity and makes it possible to belong anywhere. In this line of work, Murad invents new and hybrid traditions but does so while insisting on the superiority of an adaptable and flexible Islam carried within the individual.

Murad's understanding of Islam as root and core forms a stark contrast to modernity understood as constant transformation and fragmentation. In the view of Shaykh Murad and partly reflected in Giddens' Juggernaut metaphor, the modern world is marked (or marred) by shallowness and blind consumerism, just as it is functionalist and opportunistic (for example in its environmentalism). Excessive speed and selfishness are ubiquitous. Buy new, own more. Travel further. Be seen.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, life at the college is marked by a deliberate, slower pace and a quiet atmosphere that leaves room for contemplation. Voices are lowered and there is a solemn, serious atmosphere surrounding the place. Education is serious business – and so is securing a prosperous future for the Muslim community. Dean Murad is stern and wise while being approachable and engaged in life at the college; he stands out and maintains an elevated and near-aristocratic attitude. He embodies old-school learnedness and the seriousness connected to having access to tradition and Truth. When he suggests that Muslims in Europe should see themselves as therapists in a challenged continent, he himself functions in the role of the therapist in his relationship with his students. One of the therapist's tools is heritage and a firm effort to protect what is worth protecting and restoring what is at risk of being lost. As illustrated with the songbook initiative, respect for heritage covers both Islamic and British pasts and traditions.

At the college, the purpose was never to change the religiosity of the students, but rather, it was to raise their awareness of how they could use their religion as a source of good in their careers and personal lives. Hence the quotation about 'giving back to the community' already mentioned. Since the first cohort studying towards the diploma in 2010, the aim has been to support the community by not

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<sup>22</sup> Murad 2005.

<sup>23</sup> Giddens 1990.

focusing solely on the academic curriculum. Hence, students are offered exercise classes according to Chinese tradition and conversations at lunch would as frequently be about lifestyle choice and diets as they would revolve around lectures or upcoming exams. Here, the Dean engages in conversations about herbal tea and walking routes as easily as about Shakespearean plays or essay writing. As I have argued elsewhere, he is a not only an academic role model but also a ‘life coach’ who advises individual students about life choices and opportunities (Sinclair 2016).

While attending the diploma courses – and now the BA courses, too – students are invited on several excursions. They go to Rome to see the vitality of a European religious present, enabling the students to understand that Islam might play a different role in their home country, the United Kingdom, than is presently the case. Another excursion goes to the countryside and coast of Norfolk, northeast of Cambridge, to see remains of the Kingdom’s religious past, from medieval churches and fortresses to a present-day pilgrimage site: The Shrine of our Lady of Walsingham. Again, the idea is to show Muslim students that the United Kingdom was and is religious indeed and that it is not the religiosity of the students per se which makes them stand out in contemporary Britain. Rather, it is social circumstances, skin colour and life choices.

It is against this background that the Dean impresses on his students that they need neither excuse nor downplay their religion. What they need to do is use it in specific and thoughtful ways. And in order for them to do that, they need to understand their British surroundings, just as they need to know when to express their religious cores – and for what purposes.

## 5 Islam as instrument

‘Everybody is worrying about their identity,’ says Murad in the interview about his recent collection of essays.<sup>24</sup> And this is just one of many elements in Murad’s characterisation of Europe as being in a general state of crisis. All necessary resources to overcome such crises exist within the Islamic traditions:

I am proposing [...] the return to the resources of that enormous, huge thing called traditional Islam that is neglected in libraries in order to show how we can be therapists and not complainants in modern Europe. How we can actually help to heal people. Their spiritual crisis, moral confusion, their arguments about gender and identity and their worries about the body. All of this is something that instead of despising or feeling superior about we should

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Abdal Hakim Murad, YouTube 10 May 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smnXzfwJ0c> (last accessed 24 November 2020).



be reaching out to see what is wrong and how we can help, and the medicine chest of revelation is full of some very powerful remedies though, basically, that is what I am looking for in terms of this question of identity.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, together the essays outline the reservoir of Islamic traditions and presence in Europe and suggest that Muslims turn to 'theological arguments' to ascertain how they can contribute to changing the discourse and provide positive solutions rather than 'moan and demand rights and protection'. This, argues Murad, would be met with respect and would certainly 'be better for *dawa*':

Muslims need to think about what it means to be a precarious minority in a continent where more and more people are voting for anti-Muslim, populist parties [...]. We need to react not sociologically or go crying to the EU, to Strasburg, 'Please protect us from this wicked Islamophobic person', but instead to see how we can react to an aggression with something better and something more beautiful. Instead of just complaining, let us see if we can come up with something more therapeutic. And that is, I think, the more authentic, religious response.<sup>26</sup>

In these quotes, we can see how Murad connects theology and practice. In traditional Islam, he finds qualities of beauty, goodness and truth that can be turned into a therapeutic instrument to heal crisis-ridden Europe and underwrite identities more broadly. To him, traditional Islam holds the key to salvation for individual Muslims, for the growth and prosperity of the Muslim community and eventually for the whole of Europe, too. This understanding is reflected in the aim of Murad's college. As he says in the quotation above, Islam has been neglected in libraries; it has become irrelevant to Muslims. As a response to this, the diploma and BA programmes bring traditional Islam out of the dusty libraries and include modules demonstrating to students how they may make Islam work to heal the world. While the purpose of education in some contexts is understood to be facilitating individuals to flourish through nurturing talent and strengthening individuals' opportunities in life, education to Murad is about overcoming ego. An important purpose is to make the individual student understand his or her place in the world.<sup>27</sup>

At the college, students are treated as already shaped and educated believers whose Islamic knowledge and practices are neither questioned nor challenged. Rather, the diploma (and the BA) are superstructures added to their religious

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with Abdal Hakim Murad, YouTube 10 May 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smnXzfzWJ0c> (last accessed 24 November 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Abdal Hakim Murad, YouTube 10 May 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smnXzfzWJ0c> (last accessed 24 November 2020).

<sup>27</sup> Murad in lecture available online entitled "Overcoming Ego": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S68W1ogXShE&t=94s> (last accessed 24 November 2020).

education from the *dar ul-ulum* institutions. At Cambridge Muslim College, the students are offered tools to understand their British context and how to make their religion work for them as both individuals and community representatives. The college does not include religious studies as part of the diploma programme, and students are perceived as perfect moral subjects on arrival. What they lack, and what the diploma offers, is practical knowledge and know-how about engaging in society and local communities. This is reflected in the emphasis on knowledge of British history, majority culture, fine arts, Christianity, politics, etc. Students need help to understand how their contemporary Britain functions. Hence, the college aims at shaping them as working subjects.<sup>28</sup>

Apart from the liberal arts content of both of the programmes on offer, the BA in Islamic Studies covers modules such as ‘Islamic Revealed Foundations, Islamic Intellectual Foundations, Islamic Law, Theology and History’.<sup>29</sup> For the purpose of reading primary sources in the original language, Arabic, students are required to study Arabic intensively for a year before starting on the BA. Yet, the homepage does not include information about what level of Arabic is required to begin the first year of the BA. Most likely this means that students admitted up until this point have come from *dar ul-ulum* institutions, which implies fluency in Arabic.

Both programmes offered at the college live up to the Dean’s ambition of offering a nurturing and faith-based learning environment. In his own words:

Young Muslim school-leavers seeking ‘to travel the path of knowledge’ are confronted by a seemingly abrupt and even absolute dichotomy: They may choose to enrol in a traditional seminary, thereby entering a warm and spiritual fellowship nurtured in centuries-old Indian theological syllabus. Or they may pursue Islamic Studies in a secular British university, dominated either by an ‘area studies’ paradigm of little relevance to the needs of domestic Muslims, or by the nineteenth-century orientalist philological approach, many of whose older texts are written in a woundingly disdainful or patronizing idiom.

[...] Lecturers may be highly sympathetic, but may also be polemical or dismissive: one distinguished professor of Islamic Studies recently told me that ‘I like to study Muslims, but I do not like to meet them’.<sup>30</sup>

According to Dean Murad, the faith perspective missing (or consciously discarded) in Islamic Studies programmes at ordinary universities in the UK is a serious problem. As we see in the above in the Dean’s typically polemical and blunt expression, this is even seen to fuel hostility towards Muslims.

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<sup>28</sup> Sinclair 2016.

<sup>29</sup> From the description of the programme on the homepage: <https://www.cambridgemuslimcollege.ac.uk/programmes/bahons/> (last accessed 24 November 2020).

<sup>30</sup> Winter’s foreword in Scott-Baumann/Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: ix.

Of course, in academia it is important to distinguish between practising religion and studying it, and Murad's valorised and confrontational comparison merely illustrates different sets of expectations as to what academic education is and should be.

At Murad's college, students are offered education thought out and conducted from an insider's perspective and to suit the practising individual's needs. This is entirely unproblematic, as is evident from the college's public declaration of goods and content. What is interesting here is how the college makes up for the lack of formal approval of course qualifications with references to Islamic authenticity and criticism of selected parts of the surrounding modern society.<sup>31</sup>

## 6 Authenticity and modern choices

At Cambridge Muslim College, authenticity is the positively valorised contrast to modern fragmentation. Authenticity means continuity, originality and a wholesome and holistic lifestyle. References to authenticity centre on Islamic traditions, naturally, but also British history and local religious traditions and sources. I have already mentioned that students enrolled in the diploma programme participate in excursions to Rome to study the remains of the Roman Empire and acquire a better understanding of the foundations of present-day Europe and to encounter a living example of a society where religion is a visible and integrated part of everyday lives. Thus, a visit to Rome illustrates to the students that Europe contains elements that they as religious individuals in Europe can relate to and respect. Also, seeing religious practices visibly elsewhere in contemporary Europe may invoke more confidence in the right to practice religion in a conscious and visible manner.<sup>32</sup> What the students encounter in Rome is 'authentic'. Rome's ancient history and its vibrant religious present is perceived as rich, coherent and pure, something with depth – something to learn from.

The trip to the Norfolk countryside is also meant to give the students an insight into authentic elements of contemporary society. Visiting medieval churches and pilgrimage sites exemplifies a long, religious past and invites students to find the importance of religious practice in pockets of British society. In short, the students are asked to disregard the Britain of high street fashion, pubs and popular culture. They are shown a Britain hiding behind the shallowness of excessive alcohol-infused excuses for social interaction, consumerism and sexualised body ideals and the low self-esteem and economic and mental poverty that comes with it. They are shown a Britain with a religious past and proud traditions, one of world-

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<sup>31</sup> Scott-Baumann/Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 136.

<sup>32</sup> Informal conversations with students in Cambridge, May 2015.

renowned educational institutions. Such aspects and features of British culture and history are carefully selected and displayed at Cambridge Muslim College. Authenticity is also about taking care of the physical and material side of existence through exercise. Rather than going to the gym, however, (female) students are taught Tai Chi in the afternoon at the college, as Tai Chi is older and slower and more spiritual than a treadmill in a mirror-filled gym. Combined with offers of herbal tea and conversations about vegetarianism, authenticity is suggested through a certain lifestyle at the college. Hence the college draws on the following forms of authenticity: The students are authentic Muslims because the Islam they carry with them on arrival is uncontested and pure. The surrounding society contains a select number of pure elements, and if one makes careful lifestyle choices, one can avoid the contamination of ordinary British society.<sup>33</sup>

Behind these perceptions and interpretations lies a parochial and very elitist approach to education and society and a particular type of conservatism. An example of the elitist approach directly connected to the social status of the Dean is the fact that the excursion to Rome involves visiting the Pope in the Vatican, which is obviously not part of the average study trip to the Italian capital. The Dean's network is in part a product of his conservatism, which implies that certain traditions and traditional values are seen as superior to the modern, British majority society. The Dean has a strong belief in the value of preserving, for instance, the folk song traditions of the British Isles. He seeks to create and maintain a strong sense of religious core in his students and tie their self-esteem to this core. He values history and knowledge resembling renaissance ideals where literature, religion, art and astronomy are studied holistically rather than split into different disciplines. Put differently, he wants to recreate an ideal and does so by referring to tradition(s).<sup>34</sup> He suggests a rethinking of the historical relationship between Muslims and Europe in which he argues Europe depended on Islam in order to develop intellectually, and he wants Muslims in Europe to take pride in their heritage and to take it upon themselves to save Europe from its current crises.

Herein lies Murad's critique of modernity. The crises of Europe stem from an uncritical acceptance of change, 'innovation' and materialism and an absent-minded neglect of its religious past. However, the way Dean Murad singles out very specific historical examples – again let us take the folk songs with new lyrics as our example – one could discuss whether this constitutes a revival of Islamic traditions or rather (a quintessentially modern) invention of tradition.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Sinclair 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Sedgwick 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Term borrowed Hobsbawm/Ranger 1992.

The Dean's project at the College is, I would argue, avant-garde: it is highly political and hyper-modern. In a time where so many politicians and opinion makers are busy disregarding Muslims in minority settings and in general, the Dean's claims that Europe is sick, and that Muslims hold the key to the medicine chest is strikingly bold. The content of the medicine chest is the right type of Islamic education: 'Young Muslims are left naked by secularised education; they need theologically based arguments to protect themselves against modernity.'<sup>36</sup>

The Dean is leading his elite to salvage the masses. At the college, students are taught to think of Islam as their core and as an instrument to overcome all challenges. With Islam they can show positivity towards their neighbours (in both a concrete and a metaphorical sense) and they can take on 'the biggest controversy of our time', which according to the Dean is the relationship between Islam and the West.<sup>37</sup> Given examples demonstrating that Islam does not function in entire opposition to either Europe's or Britain's past, students at Cambridge Muslim College are instructed in how they can be critical towards some aspects of their contemporary surroundings but still engage and function in them.

## 7 Murad's creative avant-gardism

I argue that two things happen simultaneously at the college: the confidence of the individual student grows with increased knowledge of British history and society. With knowledge comes insights into opportunities and possibilities on the micro, meso and macro scales: individual career opportunities, community building amongst Muslims and aspirations for a better future for all Europeans. Thus, with a point of departure in understanding Islam as a permanent, solid, authentic core, identifying as Muslim becomes a source of superiority which means all challenges can be confronted. This, in fact is not very different from contemporary mental training courses focusing on mindfulness and inner peace. If you learn to focus on the calm within yourself, no storm outside can shake you. In this sense, the college offers a form of Muslim self-help course. The other aspect is that the Dean's

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<sup>36</sup> Online Q&A Session entitled 'Rethinking Islamic Education', available on YouTube, 22 February 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=np90fMwiM20> (last accessed 24 November 2020).

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Abdal Hakim Murad, YouTube 10 May 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smnXzfzWJ0c> (last accessed 24 November 2020).



following is growing and so is his influence amongst graduates and in the British Muslim community. Thus, the Dean becomes a Shaykh.<sup>38</sup>

The Shaykh's understanding of Islam and modernity is central to the college's ideals for the subjectivity formation of Muslim students in contemporary Britain. Shaykh Murad takes the clash between tradition and modernity to the heart of his college, not in a confrontational manner but by pointing consciously at what parts of history and society are acceptable to engage with. Going for a run in the park or on a treadmill in the gym is not acceptable, but practising Tai Chi indoors is. Singing along to pop songs on the radio is not acceptable but singing folk tunes with Arabic lyrics is. Where another Shaykh might be opposed to physical exercise and music, Shaykh Murad shows his students a path of pragmatism and balance. He is offering a conservative interpretation of British history and society through Islamic glasses.

However, showing students how the world works while maintaining that Islam is core, key and cure requires not only devotion but a high level of abstraction. In its insistence on the importance of choosing – whether choosing to celebrate parts of the past or to disregard elements of modernity – it is a deeply modern project. Since this is a daunting task, graduates are going to keep on relying on their Shaykh. They are going to return to him for advice, follow his online lectures and support his college.

At Cambridge Muslim College, then, one can find elements of two of Reckwitz's three characterisations of types of modernity. There are elements of a classical bourgeois modernity, where patriarchy and morality go hand in hand, and of a creative and consumption-oriented form of subjectivity, where students are expected to make sense of their individual lives and responsibilities to the community and the world. The most dominant of the two, however, is the latter. The college's conscious scepticism towards modernity and its requirements of the individual student point to this model. Even if an individual chooses not to accept all features of the surrounding modern society, the differentiation alone is modern.<sup>39</sup>

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**38** I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this article who suggested that I connect the use of the honorary title 'Shaykh' to reflections on Sufism and charisma. 'Shaykh' is the preferred name for the chosen teacher and guide amongst practising Sufis. As Sedgwick (2004) has shown, Murad's religious interpretation and practice draws on Sufi thinking and is evident in his emphasis on spirituality as part of the religious core in the individual believer. Also, his thoughts on the environment and mankind's obligations to securing the survival of God's creation as discussed in *Travelling Home* (20120) could be read as examples of Sufi inspiration. Concerning charisma, this would imply revoking Max Weber's classical analysis of leadership based on authority derived from the charisma of the leader (Weber 1922). All in all, based on these comments, I see the contours of an argument about Shaykh Murad heading the world's first post-modern Sufi tariqa out of Cambridge Muslim College, which I look forward to developing further.

**39** Jung/Sinclair 2020: 270.

This argument could be taken further: the creativity that goes into sampling, developing or even inventing traditions as useful tools to overcome contemporary challenges is avant-garde and perhaps even post-modern in nature.

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