An Islamic University in the West and the Question of Modern Authenticity

Kirstine Sinclair

Keywords
Modernity, Subjectivity formation, authenticity, Cambridge Muslim College, Abdal Hakim Murad

Abstract
The aim of this paper is to discuss how Islamic universities in the West facilitate and condition the formation of modern Muslim subjectivities in minority contexts with emphasis on the institutions as providers of guidelines for good, Muslim minority life. This is done through a case study of Cambridge Muslim College in the UK, its values and aims, as well as through interviews with the founder and dean, faculty members and students and participatory observation. Cambridge Muslim College sees itself as mediator between Islamic traditions and modern Muslims in the West, and as having a responsibility in engaging in the development of both Muslim minorities and the wider society within which it operates. The questions guiding the study are the following: What role do Islamic universities play in shaping modern Muslim subjectivities in the West? How does Cambridge Muslim College combine understandings of authenticity with preparing their students for professional careers in Britain?
**Introduction: The College**

In the foreword to *Islamic Education in Britain: New Pluralist Paradigms*, Timothy Winter, founder and Dean of The Cambridge Muslim College, explains the choice faced by “young Muslim school-leavers seeking to ‘travel the path of knowledge’”: either they can study Islam in traditional seminaries or they can enrol in an Islamic Studies programme at a secular university (Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015). The first type of education is characterised by Winter as a “warm and spiritual fellowship nurtured by centuries-old Indian theological syllabus”, whereas the latter is dominated by an “‘area studies’ paradigm of little relevance to the needs of domestic Muslims or by a nineteenth-century orientalist philological approach, many of whose older texts are written in woundingly disdainful or patronizing idiom”. As we shall see in the following, a “warm and spiritual fellowship nurtured by centuries-old Indian theological syllabus” is the ideal behind Winter’s college in Cambridge.

Winter’s (b. 1960, convert to Islam) harsh characterisation of university area studies should be understood as neither ill-informed nor ill-willed. With an educational background from Cambridge University and al-Azhar in Cairo, Egypt, and a clear vision of what British Muslims need in terms of education and community development, there is no reason to think that Winter would find Islamic studies in modern universities superfluous or irrelevant to all. It is more likely, rather, he finds them less than ideal for Muslim youth in Britain. Secular universities offer secular education and while that may be of sound and good academic quality and benefit some, it does not meet the expectations or requirements of young believers. Therefore, Cambridge Muslim College offers young British Muslims a programme bridging the traditional seminaries with the surrounding British society, thus making sure that the individuals graduating with knowledge from “centuries-old Indian theological syllabus” can use this in serving their contemporary Muslim community in Britain.

Cambridge Muslim College was founded in 2009. Since then it has received formal accreditation by the British Accreditation Council for Independent Further and Higher Education and offers a Diploma in Muslim community leadership in Britain entitled: *Diploma in Contextual Islamic Studies & Leadership* – the first of its kind in the British
Isles. The one-year Diploma is especially directed at graduates from dar al-ulum colleges in Britain.¹ Dar ul-ulum institutions derive from India where, in 1866, a school in Deoband in Uttar Pradesh became the starting point of the Deoband movement (Reetz, 2007:139). The core of the curriculum consists of Qur’an exegesis, Hadith, Fiqh and Arabic language. Graduates from dar ul-ulum seminaries in Britain have studied Islamic scripture extensively for a minimum of five years, but purportedly lack knowledge and experience regarding contemporary British society and its historical and philosophical foundations. The Diploma, then, provides introductions to a broad selection of academic disciplines and opportunities to study British history and society empirically. Most years have seen a student enrolment of 15-20 of which dar ul-ulum students constitute approximately 90.²

This study of Cambridge Muslim College is guided by two interrelated questions: What role do Islamic universities play in shaping modern Muslim subjectivities in the West? And: How does Cambridge Muslim College combine understandings of authentic Islam with preparing their students for professional careers in Britain?

Taking a case study of Cambridge Muslim College as a point of departure, these questions are discussed and answered through analysis of Cambridge Muslim College’s curricula, background, values and aims; through observation, participation in classes, excursions, and through interviews with students, faculty members and the founder of the institution. I have paid special attention to what kind of place the college is and what practices students and faculty engage in in order to understand the college as frame for subjectivity formation.

In the case of Cambridge Muslim College, I argue that notions of authenticity are referred to both in the college design and the academic content but also in how the students are expected to develop and change their perception of their own religiosity and its usefulness in a British context during the course of the Diploma programme. In this process, authenticity becomes a reference point in the creation of an understanding

---

¹ During a visit in November 2014, 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 aims to enroll one or two students from ordinary university Islamic studies courses each year.

² Dr. Atif Imtiaz in interview, November 2014, and via email correspondence in June 2016.
or feeling of rootedness which is otherwise typically absent from the modern experience of contingency in social affairs. The college is based on Shaykh Abdal Hakim ’s ideal of education as a means to preserving and maintaining a good life for Muslims in the British minority context through emphasis on the connection between tradition and modernity. The tool offered is authenticity which, then, is understood and practiced in different and partly overlapping ways as we shall see.

In the following, I am going to start with an introduction of the analytical framework before turning to empirical examples of how the college can be understood as both place and practice. Based hereon, I discuss how different types of authenticity become a tool to overcome discrepancies between tradition and modernity, before returning to answering my two questions.

**The Conceptual Triangle**

I tie my study of Cambridge Muslim College to the broader question regarding the role of Islamic universities in the West through a conceptual triangle consisting of modernity, higher education and authenticity. When talking about modernity, I refer to the experience of contingency of social life; that nothing is impossible, and nothing is necessary (Jung and Sinclair 2015:25). This implies that the individual is subjected to no dominant natural order and is responsible for creating coherence and meaning herself. This does not imply any specific connection to institutions, neither does it point to the absence of religion as a feature of modernity, nor the absence of durable historical structures. What it does entail, however, is placement of the individual at the center of sense making and subjectivity construction. Thus, modern individuals and collectives live in constant tension between order and uncertainty as a consequence of the mentioned contingency. This line of argument is developed elsewhere with Dietrich Jung and pointed to the works by Wagner, according to whom the ways of overcoming this tension are multiple and diverse but all draw on – or depend on – the individual striking a balance between her own autonomy and the autonomy of the collective (Jung and Sinclair 2015:25).
In translating this starting point to the concept of subjectivity formation, I look to the later works of Michel Foucault who observed two kinds of processes and technologies: external technologies of domination and internalised technologies of the self; both serving the purpose of disciplining the individual and her social interaction (Jung and Sinclair 2016, Foucault 1995, 1988). The subject is the result of successful disciplining processes drawing on both external factors such as requirements of the state, behavioural regulation through upbringing and education as well as internal factors such as individual priorities and understandings of moral right and wrong. Here my interest is in higher education as a specific means to form subjects through academic programmes and syllabi as well as shaping the self-understanding and worldviews of students in a transformative phase of their lives. At Cambridge Muslim College, this is expressed with reference to the necessity to educate students in both the circumstances of the surrounding modern world and the Islamic intellectual tradition.

Although authenticity is part of the analytical framework, the status of the concept differs from that of modernity and higher education as I have been open to different understandings and practices as encountered empirically. My attention was drawn to the importance of the concept as it is referred to at the college’s home page and was used to stress the importance of the diploma program in conversations with individuals at the college. For instance, when explaining the aim of the college, the following is stated at the homepage:

It is the College’s aim, by Allah’s grace, to serve the Muslims of Britain and abroad by supplying education at the very highest level. With a full commitment to values of Islam and the most authentic classical Islamic scholarship and equipped with a critical and deep awareness of the nature of modernity and contemporary British and European contexts, the College hopes to be a flagship institution of which Muslims everywhere can be deeply proud.

3 http://cambridgemuslimcollege.ac.uk/about/history/ (last accessed 1 February 2019).
4 http://cambridgemuslimcollege.ac.uk/about/history/ (last accessed 1 February 2019).
Rather than taking a specific definition of as my point of departure, I follow the ambition in much of the literature discussing authenticity, which aims at gaining insight into “the discursive and social generation of authenticity claims” (Bramadat 2005:1).

Ergo, the aim has been to find out what is referred to as authentic at the college rather than decide on a specific definition. What I have found so far, is that in the context of Cambridge Muslim College, authenticity is understood as being innate, experienced and instrumental simultaneously which I shall discuss after turning to the college as place and as practice (Banks 2013).

The College as Place

The college is based in a big, beautiful, Victorian house from 1847 in St. Paul’s Road – a former vicarage called “Unity House” – in walking distance from both the train station and the town center of Cambridge. Next to it is a parking lot and opposite a privately-run kindergarten in a similarly sized house. The street sees a steady flow of pedestrians, parents, children, and traffic. As one enters the house, the reception and administration office is to the left and the lecture room on the right. The kitchen and stairway to the first floor are found further down the main hall. On the first floor one finds the bathrooms with washing facilities, two common rooms, a prayer room, a library as well as the office of the Dean, the Academic Director and the Operations Director.

The students have access to the kitchen during all breaks and help themselves to tea etc. Lunch is served in an adjacent dining area and everybody dines together in the middle

---


6 Banks differentiates between nominal, expressive and instrumental authenticity in analyses of Tasmanian repatriation claims (Banks 2013).

7 http://www.cambridgemuslimcollege.org/about/history/ (last accessed 1 February 2019).

8 This part of the article, The College as Place, is based on participant observations during visits at the college in November 2014 and May 2015. Dr. Atif has read and commented on draft versions of the article in its entirety and this section in particular.
of the day. The meal in the middle of the day consists of either a hot dish with salads and hummus, freshly made sandwiches or the like. The occasion is valued and never rushed. It is marked by vivid conversation of very diverse topics ranging from politics, health, food recipes, the weather to specificities of the curriculum. In other words, the mealtime is reminiscent of that in a rather large family.

The lecture room has a bay window facing the street at the one end and the lecturer’s place at the other. In the middle of the room, remnants of a wall on either side suggest that it used to be two smaller rooms. There are rows of chairs on either side of a central aisle, and in the academic year of 2015, the female students were seated on the left, and the male students on the right. When I took part in lectures, there were 12 male students and four females. Of this group, the men were more vocal than the women of which only one asked questions and took part actively in discussions. The students reside in a dorm separated from the college, and here gender segregation is also observed. The same goes for the common rooms at the college. Gender segregation is emphasised when students are recruited to the college by the Dean visiting dar ul-uloom throughout the country.

A typical day is structured around classes in the morning and early afternoon leaving time for breaks, the mentioned lunch and leisure activities in the afternoon. Classes are 90 minutes long and typically take the shape of either lecture-led discussions of course readings or guest lectures followed by plenum discussions. The afternoon activities stand out compared to other colleges in that social and physical activities otherwise organised in and by societies are organised by the college itself. Thus, on Wednesday afternoons, a tai chi instructor of South American origin visits the college and gives lessons to the female students. In this manner, the college provides for physical education in a protected environment, and the aim to create both strong and able bodies and minds is emphasised in conversations on diets, Chinese herbal medicine, tea habits and the like. Everything is tied together, one understands, and (re-)turning to Chinese traditions is not understood as forming a contradiction to living wholesome Muslims lives in Britain. There is no conflict, no contradictions; everything is presented as connected in traditional ways of life.
On arrival to the college in the morning, students ask Academic Director Dr. Atif in the office: “Is he in?” thereby referring to Winter. In his presence, they address him as “Shaykh Abdal Hakim”. The rhythm of the day differs slightly depending on whether the Shaykh is in. If he is in, the students expect to see him during breaks and at lunch and prepare by discussing what questions to ask him. If he is out, they speak more freely amongst themselves. As a visitor one feels more of a buzz in the house, if the Shaykh is in. The role of the Shaykh to the students at the college cannot be underestimated. The special role of the Shaykh is established before they even meet him and only becomes stronger as he visits dar ul-uloom institutions and talks to pupils and parents there. Shaykh Abdal Hakim is amongst the best-known Muslims in Britain and in the world. When he visits dar ul-uloom institutions, he draws on his name and reputation and his strong connection to academia and Islamic learning traditions in general and to his affiliation to Cambridge University in particular. The public standing and long history of Cambridge University has strong connotations of academic knowledge and solid scholarly traditions with generations of individuals growing up in the Commonwealth and thus also for immigrant parents of contemporary dar ul-uloom pupils.

As already established, the vast majority of students at Cambridge Muslim College come from dar ul-ulam institutions offering little other than Islamic and Qur’anic studies. Thus, Cambridge Muslim College does not offer courses in Qur’anic studies, Arabic language classes or Islamic Law. Rather, in courses such as “Introduction to World History”, “Introduction to World Religions”, “Introduction to the UK State”, “Introduction to Social Sciences”, “British Islam Today” and “Islamic Counselling” (all first term), the programme introduces students to academic approaches to the world outside Islamic and Qur’anic studies. In the second and third terms, courses on astronomy, British politics and religious pluralism (second term) as well as explicit modern perspectives on Muslim history, ethics and gender (third term) are offered. From the first through to the third term, the courses develop from introductory and general to more British and modern in orientation. Apart from discussions of Shakespearean plots, gender in contemporary theatre traditions and astronomy, the
programme includes visits to police stations, hospitals and other public offices and institutions, whereby their Muslim students have the opportunity of familiarizing themselves with central institutions and norms of the British society that are necessary to manoeuvre as professional representatives of Muslim citizens; knowledge and experience of both academic and practical nature. Besides combining academic and practical content in the programme, the college also explicitly expresses a vision of what types of careers, graduates may aspire to as reflected in courses such as “Islamic Counselling” and “Effective Community Leadership”. Graduates are expected to use the Diploma to work for the Muslim community; i.e. they are expected to combine their religious background and experiences from the programme as moral and working subjects. According to Shaykh Abdal Hakim, education in terms of preparation for professional functions in the British society and education in terms of strengthening awareness of the authentic content of Islam are of equal importance to the college, and in a conversation at the college, he described the aim of the diploma course as a matter of working with the Muslim community and of “giving back to the community”.9

The Deobandi background of the majority of students is important in order to understand what kind of community is referred to.10 In other words, where the students come from in terms of educational principles and traditions and the kind of decision they make when coming to Cambridge Muslim College.

The Deobandi tradition sprung from two strong sentiments: anti-colonialism and theological puritanism. The aim was to secure an independent Muslim identity separated both from the British/Western influence and from the surrounding Hindu majority by turning towards Shari’a and shying away from local customs (Pieri 2015: 33-35, Reetz 2007:140-41). Behind the first educational institute was the persuasion that Islam was a source of both superiority and of identity formation taking the shape of political pan-Islam thus forming a break with the past (Reetz 2007:142). Some scholars even argue that it was the ambition of one of the founders, Shaykh al-Hind (aka. Mahmud al-Hasan), to overthrow the Empire militantly (Hartung 2016:350). Deobandis

---

9 Shaykh Abdal Hakim, interview, Nov. 2014.
10 Today, the composition of students is closer to 50-50 between Deobandi and Barelwi according to Dr. Atif (email correspondence in June 2018).
started arriving to Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, and especially Indian Gujaratis were instrumental in establishing mosques in cities such as Bradford and Birmingham. Alongside mosques, the first dar ul-uloom institutions were opened in this period in order to secure the education and training of a “new generation of British-born’Ulama” (Gilli-Ray 2010:87). By 2005, still building on the idea of securing and protecting Islam from colonial powers and still following curricula and puritan lines of thought from the 1860s, approximately 17 dar ul-uloom were dominating the Islamic educational scene in Britain (Gilli-Ray 2010:88). Seemingly, this ideal marks a clear contrast to the teaching and thinking at Cambridge Muslim College.

The College as Practice

At Cambridge Muslim College, the comprehensive approach to education is supplemented by the contributions and personal experiences of guest lecturers adding practical elements to the programme. During their year at Cambridge, students receive a wide range of lecturers from individuals holding important and influential jobs in the British society. They are lectured on Shakespearean drama by a lecturer from Cambridge University, they have the opportunity to discuss British engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan with a high-ranking individual from the British army and they visit local hospitals. In this manner, they experience a wide range of successful individuals’ take on societal debates and personal career choices and they are directly and indirectly informed by illustrative examples of what one might strive for in life. Added to this is the comprehensive approach to life as illustrated by a focus on health, diet and physical exercise in everyday conversation and as part of the daily routine at the college.

Another example of how the college offers practical knowledge is the two annual excursions offered to the students. Every year, the students are taken on a bus trip to Norfolk, UK, and a visit to Rome, Italy. The trip to Norfolk includes visits at Grime’s Graves, Castle Rising, Holkham Bay and Walsingham, and the idea behind the bus trip is to introduce the students to “old, Christian England” by visiting a prehistoric flint

---

11 In email correspondence in June 2018, Dr. Atif pointed out that today Gujarati Muslims tend to predominate in Leicester and Blackburn, rather than Birmingham and Bradford.
mine, a fortification from 1138 and a village and pilgrimage site known for its shrines honouring the Virgin Mary. The first two stops demonstrating the age of civilization on the British Isles, the latter the integral part of religion and religiosity. In other words: To show the devout Muslim students that Britain has a past which is both long and religious. The trip to Rome, which includes meeting the Pope if he is in, has the purpose of showing students at the college that Europe’s relationship with religion is not merely historic but also, in places other than Britain, practiced in contemporary and visible manners.

Shaykh Abdal Hakim is the mind and engine behind both curricular and extra-curricular activities. Having authored a number of books, functioned as commentator in radio and other media, and being active and visible through various profiles on social media platforms, Abdal Hakim is commonly referred to as the most influential Muslim in Britain (The Independent 2010). Due to his educational background (Cambridge and al-Azhar), his public appearances and his personal style, he personifies the ideal of bridging two worlds, bringing together tradition and modernity, as well as showing profound respect and understanding of the needs of their Muslim communities. His eloquence and ability to talk directly to his students and other young Muslims in Britain about their conditions and experiences is enough to attract ever growing audiences. This alone makes him appear as a trustworthy role model to his students.

A concrete example of this social position was seen as we boarded the bus outside the college in May 2015, to go on the annual excursion to Walsingham. The college bus seated approximately 30 persons, and female students automatically went to the back where I joined them. Apart from four female students, two female administrators and I in the back were 12 male students and a male visitor from Dubai. The Shaykh was the last person to board the bus, and as the male students were expecting him to sit in the front, they had left the first row of seats available and placed themselves on rows two, three and four. Then, when the Shaykh entered and saw me, the visitor sitting in the back of the bus, he passed by the empty row and the male students in rows two, three and four and chose a seat in the row in front of me. As a result, the male students were sitting quite far from him, and they reacted instantly by moving down the rows of the
bus and turning around to face the Shaykh rather than the front of the bus. Thus, for the entirety of the trip, the majority of male passengers were facing away from the direction of travel. The movement of the male students was reminiscent of sunflowers following the sun from east to west as the day progresses.

After departure, the male students then started asking the Shaykh questions such as: “Can you elaborate on clinical psychology, Shaykh? I have heard that many young Muslims struggle with mental health issues.” The Shaykh gave thorough answers explaining what a psychology degree would entail in terms of academic content and investment of time and money (fees and other expenses), and they agreed that although the Muslim minority in Britain would benefit from more trained psychologists with Muslim background, for this particular student expanding his student years with such a comprehensive course would not be feasible. Other questions concerned course material, British history, war developments in the Middle East and the British army (“Do you think we need more Muslims in the army?”) and translations of concepts from Arabic to English.

At one point, a student asked the Shaykh to sing, which he did, and before long most passengers had joined in. The song lyrics were *Gleams from the Garden of the Martyrs* translated from Arabic (*Rawdat al-Shuhada’*) by Husayn Vaiz Kashifi) to English by the Shaykh and put to Medieval, i.e. traditional English, tunes. The effort made to translate and prepare such material for recital and singing in English, and to find suitable tunes bears witness to the ambition and self-perception of Shaykh Abdal Hakim: He connects historical epochs, traditions, geographies and individuals. Hereby, the Shaykh demonstrates the flexibility of Islam (& himself) and the everlasting relevance of history, tradition and Islam regardless of national context. The point made indirectly and thus ever more elegantly is this: Islam does not need to change to fit the British context, if one looks to tradition, the fit is perfect always already.

To the students, Shaykh Abdal Hakim he is more than lecturer and dean; he is also chief advisor and lodestar to the individual student and his opinions and assessments are recognised as authoritative and rewarded with great respect and loyalty. Thus, it would
seem that the Shaykh himself establishes the link between the wider society, Muslim minorities, the students and their efforts to create coherent identities within the given expectations and frames provided. The Shaykh, thus, practices what he preaches, and he demonstrates to the students that college and education is practice and lifestyle as much as it is place and degree.

**Notions of Authenticity**

The references to authenticity are many and diverse at the college. During my visits, I came across at least three interdepending and somewhat overlapping understandings: the innate, the experienced, and the everyday. The innate is seen in the college’s ambition to prepare *dar al-ulum* students for professional life in the British society as Chaplains, Imams and Muslim Community leaders. Here, the college sees itself as performing an important part in securing a more prosperous future for Islam and Muslims in Britain. This is clearly expressed by Abdal Hakim when he described the college’s aim as giving back to the Muslim community. The aim of the college is not an alteration of Islam as practiced and interpreted at *dar al-ulum* institutions or any other type of adjustment or reinterpretation, but rather a strengthening of Muslim communities through education of future community leaders. In doing so, the founder sees the role of college activities as restoring tradition and securing authenticity. The students are perceived as always already authentic due to their Islamic schooling and knowledge of Qur’an and scripture from the *dar al-ulum*, so authentic Islam is not something the college seeks to create, but something the students carry with them to the institution and which can be recovered and harnessed for modern life.

The second notion of authenticity is experience based and communicated through the two annual excursions to Norfolk and Rome. Here, the students experience that religion is as central to the history and present of their home country – Britain and Europe – as it was and is to the home countries of their parents. These excursions serve as a demonstration of British and European history as intrinsically tied to religion and religious practice, and at the same time, they serve as a reminder to the students of the

---

12 Interview, Murad, November 2014, also referred to earlier in this article (page 9).
need for them to relate to their actual and practical context as Muslim minorities in Britain and Europe. In conversations with students after their trip to Rome in the spring of 2015, their surprise at experiencing spirituality and practiced religion in contemporary Europe was apparent. One explained how she would characterise it as a spiritual experience in itself watching Catholics in prayer and being moved by prayer.\(^{13}\) Thus, experiencing religiosity as part and parcel of both past and present of their contemporary surroundings reflects on the students’ own religiosity and may create the basis for increased confidence when practicing Islam in a minority context. Connected to this second notion is the everyday experiences at the college. Behind the course work and the schedule by which the students’ everyday lives are organised while attending the college lies a principle of universality. Shaykh Abdal Hakim is opposed to university education organised according to faculty and disciplinary divisions, as these are regarded false and unnatural, which explains why courses on astronomy have the same status as a course entitled “Islam and Religious Pluralism”. Thus, the educational ideal behind the college involves an understanding of knowledge as whole and undivided and thereby avoidance of the distinction between arts and science. This all-encompassing approach to knowledge and education goes beyond the academic content and views the students as whole beings with offers of exercise for body as well as for the mind communicated through the integration of physical exercise for female students taking place at the college after classes in the afternoon and lengthy conversations about health, herbal tea and fresh air during breaks initiated by staff members. Thereby, the college introduces perspectives and practices suggesting guidelines for a good and healthy life.

Finally, one can point to a third understanding of authenticity at play at Cambridge Muslim College, namely a more instrumental notion which will be developed in the following.

**Authenticity as tool**

\(^{13}\) Interview with female student, Cambridge, May 2015
The different kinds of authenticity recognized and practiced at Cambridge Muslim College result in a layered and complex palimpsest. The Deoband seminary tradition is brought to the college by the students, the programme itself emphasises the British context – history, religious background and contemporary society – and above or beyond is an all-encompassing or universal approach to education and wholesome living. As discussed above, to the students the Shaykh is a role model, a living example of the interplay between education and religion, respect for tradition and the needs of the contemporary British Muslim community.

According to Shaykh Abdal Hakim, Islam is a discursive tradition undergoing constant challenges and developments (Asad 1986, Mathiesen 2013). Rather than promoting an anti-modern narrative, he understands Islam as challenged by deterioration of tradition and in need of constant efforts to protect and restore what was (Mathiesen 2013:201). Abdal Hakim’s Traditional Islam does not stand in the way of recruiting students from Deobandi dar ul-ulum despite the apparent dichotomy between the orthodox Deobandi thinking and Sufism because emphasis is put on the recognition of all contributions to the discursive tradition. Also, at the college emphasis is on the challenges faced by the conditions for minority Islam in Britain, meaning restoring and protecting the faith for all its followers.

Shaykh Abdal Hakim’s thinking revolves around criticism of modernity which gives his notions of authenticity special evidence and credibility. His understanding of the potential of religion, religion as source and core of what it means to be a decent human being is presented as a powerful counterweight to contemporary British, Western, modern and secular society. In his writings, he presents opposition to what he understands as British monoculture. This is seen in his Commentary on the Eleventh Contentions where he explains the role of Islam vis-à-vis culture and contemporary Britain (Abdal Hakim 2012). Here, Abdal Hakim challenges what he understands as the monoculture behind “roots” thinking. He himself thinks along the lines of “roots” but understands roots as the core of the individual’s mind and belief, not the foundation for a society or a national culture. Within cultural studies and cultural geography, “roots” is a metaphor used to describe the understanding of culture as something that ties an individual to a certain geographical area. According to this understanding, culture is
something you are born into and something of a quite static nature. Should you move to a different location, you are uprooted, and you should not expect to set roots in your new location.

While Abdul Hakim does not refer to discussions of the usage of “roots” within cultural geography and cultural studies, it is worth noting that the oppositional metaphor within discussions in these academic fields is “routes” used to illustrate the understanding that culture is a matter of geographical and temporal trajectories which an individual carry with her regardless of where she goes. According to this understanding, culture is dynamic, changes over time and can include whoever joins in on certain characteristic practices, notions and values. Furthermore, all individuals combine many trajectories in the contexts they become a part of, just as they over a lifetime will pass, combine and intersect many such trajectories. According to this understanding, individuals cannot evade being placed and similarly places will always be the result of intersections of trajectories consisting of activities and things that went before (Massey 2005 and 1995, Cresswell 2004, Hall 1995). Abdul Hakim’s understanding of “roots” bears similarities to this concept, in that Islam is something the individual carries with her, however, he would maintain that it remains a constant rather than something in flux.

In Abdal Hakim’s work, “roots” has positive connotations as he understands the metaphor as connected to religion and belonging but not something which can be limited to national borders or territory. To Abdal Hakim, “roots” is a matter of identifying with certain traditions and history linked to religion and religious practice primarily. Thus, when liberal politicians talk about “interfaith” Abdal Hakim understands this as a challenge to the distinctive nature of certain roots – he understands this as somehow subduing or suppressing the possibilities of expressing Muslimness in a British context – as a watering down of Muslimness. A relativistic “anything goes” approach which he does not approve of. His argument is, essentially, that if any religion is as good as the other, none of them can be said to hold Truth.

Thus, the differentiation between roots and routes is challenged and redefined in Abdal Hakim ’s writings. Roots, to Abdal Hakim, are Islamic and transnational in essence.
Roots connect the individual believer to God, not to a nationally defined territory or a state. Monoculture in this understanding means reducing the diversity of roots to just one British culture, where all religions are of equal value which of course is in opposition with the belief that Islam contains and points to the Truth.

Abdal Hakim illustrates his understanding of roots in the older publication *Muslim Songs of The British Isles*, a songbook published for educational purposes with which the college students are familiar – hence the singing on the bus mentioned earlier. In the introduction, he explains:

> What of Islam’s growing presence in the West? In Europe, new Muslim communities may find themselves living beside local tradition which has already been deeply influenced by Islamic culture. (...) In the United Kingdom, by contrast [to Spain, Portugal, Poland, Russia and Ukraine], such ingredient are more elusive, despite hints of medieval or even older interactions between Celtic and North African cultures. The musical practice of British Muslims as it has developed since the late 19th Century has therefore tended to find its inspiration in fully ‘indigenous’ traditions of folk music (Abdal Hakim 2005:3).

The songs in the book have been arranged to be used in musical education in British Muslim schools so as to meet the requirements of the national curriculum. Besides the primary purpose of the publication which is a good illustration of Abdal Hakim’s roots thinking in that the new arrangements of traditional British folk songs with lyrics inspired by Islam and the holy scripture in English, demonstrate that the individual believer can combine any tradition or cultural practice with Islam as long as it is done without relativizing the latter. By combining folk tunes with Islamic lyrics, Abdal Hakim is reviving British traditional music for an audience of Muslims (children) in Britain – and as witnessed on the bus trip, the students are familiar with the arrangements – whereby he shows how Muslimness is in no way a contradiction to local 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, Abdal Hakim finds yet another way of illustrating the relevance and need for authenticity as a tool in the creation of meaningful selves.
The Modern Anti-Modern Shaykh and his Authentic College

Understanding Islam as the root of everything and Islamic (and all other) traditional ways of life as the key to sensemaking in the modern world is not necessarily equivalent to being anti-modern. Rather, the criticism of modernity found in Shaykh Abdal Hakim’s thinking and works is a tool providing coherence and meaning in a life dominated by contingency. Thus, the anti-modern principle invites to or facilitates accommodation to modernity in practice. The students at Cambridge Muslim College are invited to transform their religious knowledge and practice into a language comprehensible in British society. They are to do so, however, without experiencing or creating any type of hybridity, gap or “in-betweenness” as so often discussed in analyses of minority youth and integration.

Guiding this article and the study of Cambridge Muslim College were questions regarding Islamic education and subjectivity formation. I asked: What role do Islamic universities play in shaping modern Muslim subjectivities in the West? How does Cambridge Muslim College combine understandings authenticity with preparing their students for professional careers in Britain?

Starting with the latter, I argue that at the college, the students’ knowledge of Islam from Deoband seminaries is not questioned, rather they are taught to bring their knowledge to use for the wider Muslim community in Britain. Moreover, Shaykh Abdal Hakim functions as just that to his students: A Shaykh. With his comprehensive approach to religious traditions and education, Abdal Hakim provides guidance in terms of career choices and how to bridge the apparent gap between making individual choices and serving the community in a manner that not only supports but restores and revitalises Islam in contemporary Britain. During the diploma programme, this understanding is exemplified through the integration of spirituality, health and lifestyle. Chinese herbal tea and the practice of Tai Chi in the afternoon is seen as complimentary to the practice of Islam and the course’s aim of educating students capable of using their
religion as forces of good in their careers and as citizens in the British society; as moral and working subjects.

Shaykh Abdal Hakim teaches his students to understand different notions of authenticity without inventing anything. He points to practices and knowledge already present as the students bring it with them from their education at *dar ul-uloom* institutions and their parents’ religious upbringing. Abdal Hakim then proceeds to teach them how to apply it, hence, it becomes a tool for them to make themselves useful and their lives meaningful. Their acknowledgement of possessing authentic Islamic cores means they carry the key to success with them. In this sense, education at Cambridge Muslim College is both a matter of technology of domination and of technology of the self. Authenticity is a means to building self-awareness and self-esteem, just as it becomes a bridge between Islam as minority religion and non-Muslim majority Britain.

Modernity and authenticity are juxtaposed in the educational content of The Diploma and in the Shaykh’s writings, however if we look not at what the Diploma consists of (course content, excursions, discussion topics) but how it serves as higher education of students – its transformative potential – it helps overcome the modernity-authenticity-dichotomy. While emphasising different notions of authenticity, the innate, experienced and everyday varieties, the college and its founder demonstrate how challenges faced by individuals belonging to and practicing a minority religion in contemporary Britain can be met and dealt with constructively. Shaykh Abdal Hakim has placed his college right in the center of the modernity-authenticity-divide. Here his ambition with The Diploma and his underlying trust in higher education is bright and clear: With his all-encompassing approach to education and trust in academia, he aims at building bridges to overcome gaps and conflicts both in the mind of the individual student, within the Muslim community in Britain and in society as a whole.

The former question is of a different and more general nature; what role do Islamic universities play in shaping modern Muslim subjectivities in the West? In my attempt to answer this, two extraordinary circumstances must be taken into consideration: The role of the Shaykh and the background of the students. Shaykh Abdal Hakim ‘s role is
comparable only to that of Hamza Yusuf at Zaytuna College in Berkeley California, to my knowledge, but here the students enrol in a BA programme based on Islamic content in the shape and form of classes on Islamic history, tradition and scripture. The curriculum consists on material on specific schools and interpretative traditions, fiqh and the like. This is not the case at Cambridge. Hence, Cambridge Muslim College is in no way representative of Islamic education in the West or anywhere else. In fact, one may even ask if it qualifies as an Islamic college at all? I would argue that it is Muslim rather than Islamic. There is a lack of scriptural studies, but the Shaykh and the students identify as Muslim and the majority of references to authenticity and criticism of the surrounding modern society take Islam (or religiosity more generally) as its point of departure.

At Cambridge Muslim College notions of authenticity supplement scripture as a point of departure both in terms of academic content and practice. In introducing authenticity as a tool to create meaningful private and professional lives, the college also formulates expectations to the graduates: They are to find meaning and turn this into something beneficial to their Muslim community and the wider society. They are expected to give back to Islam by restoring it in a version suitable for their modern, British lifestyles, and this combination of providing a tool and communicating expectations is how the college facilitates subjectivity formation.

Behind this lies the understanding that religious practice in a minority setting demands something special; an ability to understand and use religion as positive source of identity formation and career choices. Headless or numb reproduction of religious traditions will jeopardize the graduates’ prospects of successful careers and lives, whereas reflecting on religion as an inner, positive source of identity and meaning making in social interaction marked by contingency and potential conflict may secure success. However, merely telling someone how to think or feel rarely works. Rather, you need to show the way, give examples of how it is done and leave time for reflection and transformation. This is the key to Cambridge Muslim College’s success (a BA programme has been launched since I last visited the college) – college is understood and practiced as both place, tool and feeling – and this is how an otherwise unique
educational institution tells us something about Islamic Universities in the West in general: In minority contexts, Islam needs to be taught as practice, identity and lifestyle in order to facilitate coherence and meaning for modern Muslims.

Bibliography


Cambridge Muslim College, Homepage: cambridgemuslimcollege.ac.uk (last accessed 1 February 2019).


