

## SPECIAL SECTION REPORT ON THE MODERN MUSLIM SUBJECTIVITIES PROJECT

### “Liberal Arts are an Islamic Idea”: Subjectivity Formation at Islamic Universities in The West\*

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#### Abstract

The aim of this project is to discuss how Islamic universities in the West facilitate and condition the formation of modern Muslim subjectivities. The central question of the study is: How is the formation of modern forms of subjectivities tied together with the reinterpretation of Islamic traditions? The paper provides analysis of the curricula, and institution background, values and aims of two universities—Zaytuna College in Berkeley, California, the first Muslim liberal arts college in the U.S.; and Cambridge Muslim College, the first to offer a Diploma in Muslim community leadership in Britain. Alongside the textually founded analysis, interviews conducted with leadership, faculty and students, and participatory observation inform the discussion. Analysis demonstrates that both institutions see themselves as mediators between Islamic traditions and modern Muslims in the West, and as having a responsibility to engage in the development of both Muslim minorities and the wider societies within which they operate.

**Key Words:** Islamic universities, subjectivity formation, modernity, university education, Muslims in the West

**T**he aim of this project is to discuss how Islamic universities in the West facilitate and condition the subjectivity formation of modern Muslims. This is done by examining the self-representation of two such institutions: Cambridge Muslim College, UK; and Zaytuna College, California, U.S. This report takes as its point of departure the following question: What role do Islamic universities in the West play in shaping modern Muslim subjectivities? The question addresses the specific role of Islamic universities in Muslim communities outside the Middle East. The

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study examines how Zaytuna and Cambridge Muslim Colleges point to notions of Islamic authenticity in their descriptions of aims and values, in curricula, and in their communication of expectations to students and graduates.

In theoretical terms, research on modern subjectivity formation draws on recent sociological debates about modern selfhoods emphasizing the hybrid and socially constructed nature of modern subjectivities as contingent and temporary results of competing and sometimes even contradicting orders of social and discursive practices (see Jung's introduction to this special section for an elaboration), just as it draws on discussions of cultural theories of modernity expressed in the formation of working and moral subjects (see, for instance, Taylor 1995). 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 center 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, namely: "Nothing is impossible and nothing is necessary" (Frick 1988, 18; Luhmann 1992, 96; Wagner 2001; Jung and Sinclair 2015). As explained in Jung's introduction on the theoretical framework for all sub-projects under "The Modern Muslim Subjectivity Project," with Reckwitz (2006), we understand modern subjectivities to be collectively shared but contested cultural types. This dominant understanding of modernity emphasizes the difference in attitudes toward modernity found at Zaytuna College and Cambridge Muslim College. At both institutions, modernity is to some degree understood as forming an opposition to traditions and traditional ways of life which can be deselected by the individual.

Zaytuna is the first Muslim liberal arts college in the U.S., receiving its formal accreditation in March 2015 (Zaytuna, "First Accredited"). Likewise, Cambridge Muslim College is accredited by the British Accreditation Council for Independent Further and Higher Education and is the first to offer a Diploma in Muslim community leadership in Britain entitled: Diploma in Contextual Islamic Studies & Leadership. Both institutions see themselves as mediators between Islamic traditions and Western modernity. They also see themselves as responsible agents in the development of Muslim minorities as well as the wider societies within which they operate.

Adding to the overall sociological point of departure, this contribution also draws on cultural geography and the importance of place and context. Combining these perspectives, we can analyze the subjectivity-relevant functions of the two universities in terms of place, tool, and ideal.

## Methodology

The proposed research methodology for this study included: Two visits to both institutions, the first to meet administrative and academic staff; the second to meet with students and observe classes. Reality derailed those plans. The field research for this study instead was undertaken as follows:

The first visit to Zaytuna took place in August 2014 and involved conversations with administrative staff, a tour of the premises, and a preliminary interview with faculty professor, Shaykh Abdullah bin Hamid Ali. However, the second visit, scheduled to take place in February 2015, was cancelled on short notice due to changes in the college's research cooperation policy.

The first visit to Cambridge Muslim College took place over two days in November 2014 and involved conversations with staff members, a preliminary interview with the academic director, Dr. Atif Imtiaz, and participation in classes and conversations with students. The second visit in May 2015 was longer; the research participated in classes over three days, took part in an afternoon Tai Chi class with female students, and went along on the annual excursion to "Britain's Nazareth" in Walsingham and Holkham Bay, Norfolk.

The pages that follow include an analysis of the interview and research materials as they relate to three aspects—University as place, University as tool, and University as ideal—exploring the roles of geographic location, authenticity, and authority in the subjectivity formation of the Modern Muslim, culminating in a conclusion illustrating the strengths and limitations of this study.

## University as Place

Zaytuna College was founded in 2009. Before it achieved college status, however, it was an educational institute offering courses in Arabic and Islamic Studies located in Hayward, California, under the leadership of Hamza Yusuf and Hesham Alalusi. Between 1996 and 2009, the co-founders worked to establish educational programs and output in the shape of publications and lectures that gradually secured for the institution an international reputation, if not a brand. Today, Zaytuna and its founders—Hamza Yusuf especially—are widely known and recognized for efforts to revive Islam in a Western context and to "popularize traditional learning among Western Muslims" as stated on the college's homepage (Zaytuna, about). The first bachelor students were admitted in the autumn of 2010 and graduated in 2013. As of the writing of this study, five students have graduated with an enrollment of approximately sixty.

Cambridge Muslim College was also founded in 2009. The institution offers a one-year diploma, primarily directed at graduates of *dar al-Ulum* colleges in Britain.<sup>1</sup> *Dar al-Ulum* institutions derive from India where, in 1866, a school in Deoband, Uttar Pradesh, became the starting point of the Deoband movement. The core of the curriculum consists of Qur'an exegesis, hadith, fiqh, and Arabic language. These graduates 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 foundation. The diploma course, then, provides introductions to a broad selection of academic disciplines and provides opportunities to study British history and society empirically. The current class has fifteen students while the total number of graduates since 2009 exceeds fifty (Dr. Atif Imtiaz interview, November 2014).

When I visited Zaytuna (August 2014) and Cambridge Muslim College (November 2014), representatives of the institutions emphasized the importance of the physical nearness to other educational institutes, specifically, the University of California, Berkeley (UCB) and Cambridge University (CU) respectively, in terms of student recruitment and daily study practices. As well-established and recognized educational institutions, UCB and CU attract thousands of local, national and international students; their reputations rub off on new institutions through associations of shared locality and place names. The dean of Cambridge Muslim college, Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad, explained that when talking to students and parents at *Dar al-Ulum* schools throughout Britain, it is easier to explain the serious intentions of Cambridge Muslim College when one is able to stress the connection with CU in the form of lecturers—including Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad himself—teaching at both institutions (Murad interview, November 2014). The homepage of Cambridge Muslim College reads:

The University of Cambridge is one of the leading educational institutions in the world. Although not part of the University, the Cambridge Muslim College has been established in Cambridge in order to benefit from its excellent educational resources, and to add to them. Many professors, lecturers and researchers have come to teach at the Cambridge Muslim College. Our aim therefore is to connect the best students from British *dar al-ulums* [institutes for advanced Islamic learning] with some of the world's best academics and thereby introduce young British *ulama* to a whole new world of learning. (CMC, "Cambridge the University").

At Zaytuna, Islamic Law lecturer Abdullah Hamid Ali expressed in similar terms that prospective students automatically associate serious academic practice with Zaytuna due to its geographical setting, just five minutes from UCB's campus (Ali interview, August 2014). It would seem that UCB incarnates liberal arts, which in combination with Berkeley's history as the birth place of the 1968 youth revolt creates expectations of liberal attitudes toward life and human interaction and a corresponding degree of tolerance of religious differences. Thus, the geographical setting provides benefits in the shape of a student-friendly environment conducive to good academic practice by virtue of a quality that implies awareness of civil liberties and tolerance and functions as the basis for subjectivity formation.

In practical terms, being situated so close to world-renowned, well-established and wealthy institutions means that students of the colleges have easy access to well-established libraries, reading rooms, and other facilities. Furthermore, the towns of Berkeley and Cambridge and their locations close to the metropolises of San Francisco and London have many student relevant social offers—regardless of preferences and orientation. Thus, Zaytuna and Cambridge Muslim College achieve authority and prestige by association just as they benefit from the practicalities and physical facilities.

Benefiting from proximity, Zaytuna has established strong relations with the Graduate Theology Union and other church-related initiatives located in the area of Berkeley known as “Holy Hill.” Yet, the extent of cooperation between Zaytuna and UCB directly is quite limited; according to Ali, UCB is uninterested in direct cooperation with Zaytuna as they “don't need to” (Ali interview, August 2014), which emphasizes the influence of proximity that exists without the need for direct interaction.

### **University as Tool**

Both Zaytuna and Cambridge Muslim Colleges stress authenticity as an important aspect of their educational programs. Under the headline, “Supporting authentic scholarship in the British context,” Cambridge Muslim College expresses a self-perception of bridging academic practice and an authentic basis for Islam:

The College is committed to promoting the highest standards of academic excellence in Islamic studies in the contemporary context while maintaining respect for the religion's authentic traditions and sources. (CMC “Aims”)

In November, college founder and dean, Abdal Hakim Murad, explained during a lunch interview that the two elements—education in terms of

preparation for professional functions in British society, and education in terms of strengthening awareness of the authentic content of Islam—are of equal importance to the college. This we can understand as preparing students for life both as working and moral subjects. According to Murad, the aim of the diploma course is to work with the Muslim community—or, as Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad phrased it: “Giving back to the community” (Murad interview, November 2014). Islam is a gift and by preparing *Dar al-Ulum* students for professional life in British society as Chaplains, Imams, and Muslim Community leaders, Cambridge Muslim College sees itself as playing an important part in securing a more prosperous future for Islam and Muslims in Britain. Thus, 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 the education of future community leaders.

Similarly, on Zaytuna’s homepage the goal of the college is stated as follows:

Zaytuna College aims to educate and prepare morally committed professional, intellectual and spiritual leaders who are grounded in the Islamic scholarly tradition and conversant with cultural currents and critical ideas shaping modern society. (Zaytuna “About”)

Thus, like Cambridge Muslim College, Zaytuna sees itself as constituting a bridge between Islamic scholarly tradition and the challenges of modern society. It prepares students for life in terms of both education and morality in facilitating the formation of intellectual and spiritual minds. Again we see a combination of elements aiming at the formation of both working and moral subjects. In the college catalogue from 2013–14, Hamza Yusuf elaborates the connection between non-Western and Western scholarly traditions and explains how Zaytuna plays an important part in restoring something valuable:

“Zaytuna is restoring a lost Western tradition by bringing it back home again. Islamic tradition is part of the Western tradition. It is evident in the Arabic numerals that we calculate with, and in the names of the stars we behold at night. We are part of the Western intellectual and spiritual family.” (Zaytuna “Catalogue”)

According to Hamza Yusuf, the West lost touch with its tradition and hence lost the connection between intellect and spirituality, and Zaytuna is partaking in a necessary recovery and restoration of awareness of Islamic

traditions in the States. Elsewhere in Zaytuna's material, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, professor of Islamic Studies at the George Washington University, praises Zaytuna for "creating an authentic Islamic education institution" and for playing an important part in the "preservation of Islamic thought and culture in the context of American society" (Zaytuna "About"). Thus, Hamza Yusuf and Nasr describe the symbiotic relationship between liberal arts and Islamic scholarly traditions as a two-sided tool: Liberal arts education can protect Islamic traditions in a Western minority setting, and authentic Islam can revive Western liberal arts education.

During an interview, Islamic Law lecturer at Zaytuna, Ali, explained in more detail:

Classical Islamic education was rooted in liberal arts. Liberal arts are an Islamic idea. Think of Ibn Khaldoun and his distinction between tool sciences and goal sciences, for instance. Liberal art colleges teach tool sciences and that is also what we do here.

Muslims re-introduced liberal arts to Europe after the Greeks. It disappeared for a while and came back with Muslims thinkers.

In the world today, people have lost the tools to analyze the world systems in their societies. Young people understand less and less about the world around them, and without this understanding, they are unable to free themselves and critically assess ideas from politicians or the media. Politicians and the media are very persuasive, and liberal arts provide a key to open or to access society in a critical manner.

Often, Islamic programs are closed around themselves and thus provid[e] no key. And young people often come across ideologies that are equally closed. (Ali interview, 2014)

Based on their own material, Zaytuna and Cambridge Muslim Colleges wish to bring together two worlds and a long list of apparent dichotomies: tradition/modernity, West/non-West, Islam/non-Islam, science/Quran, liberal arts/religion. Furthermore, Zaytuna and Cambridge Muslim Colleges are not only building bridges but also seeking to restore and preserve relationships between minority and majority communities in the US and UK with authentic Islam as their essential bridge building tool.

### **University as Ideal**

"Why do students come to Zaytuna?" I asked faculty member and coordinator of Zaytuna's Islamic Law program Shaykh Abdullah bin Hamid Ali. He responded: Students come because of the popularity of the founders, the

aesthetics of the place (the architecture and decor is influenced by Muslim Arab style), effective marketing, the fact that the college accepts both men and women (this is highly appreciated among especially women as Zaytuna provides a possibility for further education in a protected environment), and, finally, alumni have a good reputation and female alumni especially are role models. But above all, Sheykh Abdullah bin Hamid Ali emphasized: “Most of our students have a better idea of their Muslim identity than the implications of liberal arts when they come here” (Ali interview, August 2014). Among many good reasons for students to join Zaytuna, receiving a liberal arts education is not a top priority according to this lecturer. Rather the Islamic content and expectations of finding help to tackle Muslim minority reality and identity issues is. Students come searching for tools to better understand their religion and how to balance religiosity in non-Muslim contexts.

It is a different story with Cambridge Muslim College as the vast majority of their students come from *Dar al-Ulum* 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 they introduce Western philosophy and history, and visit police stations and hospitals, thereby offering their Muslim students the knowledge of British society necessary to maneuver as professional representatives of Muslim citizens. Perhaps it could be argued that by establishing Cambridge Muslim College and targeting *Dar al-Ulum* students, Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad is suggesting his students build on their Madrasa-style education with modules introducing critical thinking and providing a basis for individual career choices. In inviting these students to Cambridge Muslim College’s diploma course, Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad is asking students to consider his ideal of their future role as British Muslims.

Authenticity and authority are both closely connected to the role of the founding fathers. As both colleges are young institutions, springing from charismatic and prominent individuals, this makes a lot of sense. According to Ali’s assessment, the reputation of Hamza Yusuf is a primary attraction for students coming to Zaytuna. At the writing of this study, Hamza Yusuf is number 35 on the “Muslim 500” list of influential Muslims (Muslim500), and Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad, receiving honorable mention just outside of the top 50 on the list, is commonly referred to as the most influential Muslim in Britain (Peck 2010). Both are converts and widely respected for their scholarly backgrounds (Hamza Yusuf from Shaykh Murabit al-Hajj in Mauritania and Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad from Cambridge University and al-Azhar); to young Muslims in the West—including our students in Denmark—they personify the ideal of bridging two worlds, bringing together tradition and



modernity, as well as showing profound respect for and understanding of the needs of their Muslim communities.

### **Conclusion: The Role of the Founding Fathers**

This study starts with the question: What role do Cambridge Muslim College and Zaytuna College play in shaping modern Muslim subjectivities? That led to an examination of the colleges through the lenses of place, tool, and ideal, and central to the preliminary discussion here are conceptualizations of authenticity and authority and of the ideal subjectivity formation, combining the professional and the moral subject.

While profiting from their locations close to established and world renowned universities, these two colleges seek to do more than provide the frames and content of the scholarly development of their students. The two institutions are more concerned with the personal development of their students as moral subjects, and use Islam and references to authentic Islamic traditions to meet this end. Both claim that authentic Islam forms the basis of their academic credibility and the basis for the ability of graduates to balance professional lives as Muslims in minority settings.

But to the students, seemingly, it is the founding fathers rather than Islam which form the bridge between identity, education, and future career. The founding fathers are role models, who have successfully created a link between scholarship, Muslim minority identity and the wider Muslim communities, and thus the students look to them for guidance in their development as both working and moral subjects. This is the impression I was left with after my first two visits to Cambridge Muslim College and something I hope to get a better understanding of as a result of future research.

All the while, the continued success of the institutions depends on the ability of the founding fathers to confer authority from themselves to their institutions.

In the meantime, the success of this sub-project within the umbrella of the wider Modern Muslim subjectivity project cannot be established as the comparative analysis between Zaytuna and Cambridge Muslim College is challenged by Zaytuna's continued closure to research visits. However, the material gathered at Cambridge Muslim College may be used in comparison with empirical material from another sub-project, Gry Hvass Pedersen's visits to Islamic universities in India and Malaysia. Also, the material is compelling and illustrative in connection with continued theoretical discussions on subjectivity formation related to young Muslims in a European context.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup>During a visit in November 2014, Academic Director Dr. Atif Imtiaz explained that in 2013 and 2014 all of the accepted students (15–20) came from *Dar al-Ulum* institutions, however, the college aims to enroll one or two students from ordinary university Islamic studies courses each year.

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