

16 Re-examining the decline narrative

Cambridge Muslim College and the changing face of imam training in Britain

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Abstract

The Cambridge Muslim College was established in 2011 with the purpose of giving a contextual ‘update’ to the heavily text-based training of British Muslim seminary graduates. It has been called a ‘finishing school’ that provides a higher education experience for graduates of the traditional Indian-style Darul Ulooms in the United Kingdom. The college offers a one-year programme for both men and women with a curriculum emphasizing citizenship, political and cultural awareness, interfaith understanding, community building, counselling, and other pastoral skills. This chapter discusses the Cambridge Muslim College programme and how it relates to earlier, more traditional imam-training programmes in the United Kingdom.

Keywords: Cambridge Muslim College, Darul Ulooms, imam training in the United Kingdom, Deobandi school

1 Introduction

It is graduation day at the Cambridge Muslim College,¹ marking the end of a year of intense intellectual growth and personal introspection for the cohort of students receiving diplomas in Contextual Islamic Studies. Like other graduation ceremonies held every year in Cambridge, this one is marked by grandeur and solemnity; unlike the other ceremonies held in

¹ This chapter is based on fieldwork undertaken in the United Kingdom in 2015. My methodological approach was primarily participant observation, supplemented by interviews.

this scholarly city for centuries, however, the graduating students mounting the stage to receive their certificates are all bearded Muslim men wearing *topi* and *jubba* and Muslim women wearing *niqāb* or *jilbāb*.²

'I have been pleasantly surprised over this year, in my engagement with the graduates' a research fellow of the college commented in his speech. 'The Darul Uloom [religious seminaries] have taught their students *adab* ['good etiquette'] and it's important not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. This institution is not here to correct or replace the Darul Uloom learning, it is here to augment and to take it further.'

To 'throw the baby out with the bathwater' suggests discarding what is valuable along with what is no longer useful. This is a theme that has preoccupied attempts at institutional and religious reform in the Muslim world over the last one-and-a-half centuries. But what exactly is considered to be the 'baby' and what constitutes superfluous 'bathwater' is subject to constant debate. In the context of Islamic higher education in Britain, the changing roles of imams and ulama have been central to this debate.

Since Muslims began settling in the United Kingdom in significant numbers, the training of religious leaders has been a hurried but necessary process. The first Islamic seminary was established in 1975 in Bury, near Manchester in northern England. According to one survey, there are currently 24 Islamic seminaries in the United Kingdom (Birt and Lewis, 2010).³ The survey authors reveal that

A sectarian analysis immediately reveals the domination of the Deobandi movement – sixteen Deobandi seminaries, five Barelwi, one Azhari, one Nadwi, one Shiite, and one Ikhwani (Muslim Brotherhood) – and the list as a whole largely reflects the predominance of Muslims in Britain with roots in South Asia, 74 per cent of the total in the Census of 2001. The seminaries reflecting traditions other than the main South Asian ones have smaller constituencies and therefore struggle to find broader acceptance. (Birt and Lewis, 2010, p. 92)⁴

2 The *topi* is the name common in South Asian languages for the short, round cap often worn by Muslim men. *Jubba* and *jilbāb* are Arabic names for the long loose gown commonly worn by men and women in the Arab and Muslim world. The *niqāb* is the face veil.

3 However, they assert: 'This is a conservative estimate mostly compiled from seminaries that are formally registered as they provide statutory education up to sixteen years of age. However, there is no requirement of registration for those that only provide formal seminary studies for students older than 16' (Birt and Lewis, 2010, p. 93).

4 The proportion of South-Asian Muslims as a percentage of all British Muslims has gone down to 68 per cent in the 2011 census, but the older statistic better illustrates the influence of

The Darul Ulooms in the United Kingdom represent a particular model of Indian Islamic higher education.⁵ 21 of the United Kingdom's 26 Islamic higher education institutions follow this Indian seminary tradition. The institution of the Darul Uloom garners considerable controversy within the Muslim community in Britain.⁶ At worst, the tradition is described as an alien, outdated institution that has been transplanted into Britain with the arrival of post-colonial migration. It follows a syllabus calcified in Victorian India and is severely limited by conditions and assumptions that are both archaic and irrelevant to modern Britain. It is in desperate need of reform but is dragging its feet at the prospect of change.⁷

At best, the Darul Uloom tradition is seen as an intellectually empowering feature of the British Muslim educational scene. According to this view, British Darul Ulooms provide rigorous traditional training that has credibility not only in Islamic South Asia, but weight in other parts of the Muslim world. It democratizes religious knowledge, making it accessible to a generation of diaspora Muslims who might otherwise have lost touch with their textual religious heritage. It enriches the community with *‘ālims* and *‘ālimas* (‘male and female religious scholars’) who are licensed to teach Islamic studies – that is, by studying at a Darul Uloom they receive a verifiable intellectual lineage. In an age of an international crisis of authority in the Sunni Muslim world, the Darul Uloom is a much-needed connection to the past. In this chapter I do not take either ‘side’ in the debate on the Darul Ulooms, instead aiming to show that the reality is far more complex than indicated by these two extremes.⁸

In Sophie Gilliat-Ray's study of this phenomenon, one of her interviewees suggests that Darul Uloom graduates are disenfranchised and need some kind of ‘rehab’ after their experience of studying. She writes: ‘There are a number of initiatives outside of the Darul Uloom that are attempting to address that, but they’re like sticking plaster’ (Gilliat-Ray, 2006, p. 71). This begs the question, why does a ‘traditional’ education need to be remedied? Across Western Europe there have been a number of initiatives to train imams (see Martikainen and Latvio, Part II), which have attracted more attention since 9/11 for ‘reasons of both security and integration policy’ (Van Bruinessen, 2010, p. 9). But beyond

the Indian subcontinent on Islamic institutional life in Britain.

5 Darul Uloom translates from Arabic as ‘house of sciences’.

6 There is a strong academic argument that there is no such thing as a singular ‘Muslim community’ in Britain. Though I am wary of the dangers of essentialism in this case, I use the label ‘Muslim community’ in this chapter as it is used by my research participants.

7 See Birt and Lewis (2010), Geaves (2012), and Gilliat-Ray (2005, 2006).

8 See Robinson (2009).

state concerns, there is an increasingly vocal discontent within the British Muslim community. Many Muslims are demanding better-trained imams who are more equipped to deal with the challenges posed by modern British society and to serve a quickly changing and overwhelmingly young community.

2 The decline narrative

Once upon a time, Islamic scholars were innovative pioneers in the fields of science, mathematics, and linguistics. Now they are arguing about beard lengths and the like. This is a crude caricature, but one that can be heard regularly in British mosques, at Muslim civil society meetings, and over dinner tables. The state – or lack – of a highly educated religious elite to match the polymaths of the so-called Muslim ‘glory days’ is a common lament of many a second-generation Western Muslims, and one that feeds into ideas of identity and communal self-esteem. Whatever happened to the ulama?

The ulama have historically taken up the role of Islam’s ‘guardians of literary memory’ (Waines, 1995). However, a narrative of decline has dominated the history of Islam’s religious elite. The narrative begins at the height of Islamic civilization and intellectual achievement, with the likes of Al-Ghazali and Ibn Sina.⁹ As Muslim empires flourished, so did intellectual and cultural production. As Muslim empires receded and European colonial encroachment increased, particularly from the eighteenth century onward, Muslim rulers became disempowered, as did the centres of religious learning.

During the colonial period, traditional systems of learning were devalued in favour of European-style schooling. This led to an inevitable change in the perceived hierarchy of vocations and valuable knowledge in the Muslim world.¹⁰ Subjects that were once collectively taught in ostensibly religious institutions (such as history, medicine, mathematics, and geometry), went through a division into sacred and secular learning. The education and subjects offered in ‘secular’ institutions became more sought after and prized by socially mobile and able students. The establishment of secular education also created a space for a new breed of moral authority: the ‘Islamic intellectual’.

9 There is no room here for a full appreciation of the complexity and development of medieval Muslim education and knowledge transmission; this has been adequately dealt with elsewhere (see Berkey, 1992; Makdisi, 1981).

10 There are a number of assumptions underlying this historic narrative that require deconstructing. Normative/lived Islam, traditional/modern, conservative/‘progressive’, etc. are not mutually exclusive categories, nor are they static, consistent terms. I reference them here as they appear in the literature and discourse surrounding these narratives of Islamic history.

Meanwhile, the *waqf* or endowment system that ensured the financial independence of Muslim civil society and scholars was dissolved; the decreasing resources and poorer student intake of the institutions added to their fall in status.¹¹ This, in turn, led to a change in the values and aspirations of Muslim elites. During the postcolonial independence period, newly independent nationalist secular governments continued the process of disempowering the religious class, which was often seen as a threat to state power. In many Muslim countries, the historic institutions of Islamic learning became nationalized and thus under the tutelage of temporal power.

The above is a brief synopsis of the key overarching themes surrounding the changing status of the ulama; it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss it in greater historic detail or regional variation. Suffice it to say that during the last century and a half there have been numerous threats to and competitors for the roles of Islamic religious leaders and scholars throughout the Muslim world. Is this narrative of decline simply about Muslims losing temporal power? To the contrary, there are many cultural and social forces that can explain this so-called decline.¹²

The apparent demise of Muslim worldly power and intellectual leadership has often been laid at the feet of the traditionally trained religious elites. A common trope among Muslim reformists over the last century has been the need to bypass the last thousand years of accumulated legal and literary canon and return to the key sources. Carol Kersten and Susanne Olsson (2013, p. 2) point out that two influential movements on opposite ends of the spectrum have contested established or 'traditional' authority: the Salafi movement and the university-educated Muslim intellectuals. One of the reasons for the decline of the ulama is the rise of new 'Muslim intellectuals' who directly challenged the ulama and their monopoly on Islamic interpretation – causing what some have termed a 'fragmentation of authority' (Kersten and Olssen, 2013, p. 11). The literature tends to pit 'Muslim intellectuals' with no formal religious training against the 'traditional ulama'. But the example of the Cambridge Muslim College, as I detail later, may help to disturb this neat dichotomy.

11 In some contexts this was even added to with occasions of 'eliticide', in which Islamic scholars were assassinated along with other educated elites as a result of colonialism, coups, or political upheaval (i.e., during the 1920s 'Kemalisation' in Turkey, 1880s British India, and the Bangladeshi War of Independence). It is worth noting that these historic incidents are not restricted to the Muslim world. There are similar patterns of discrediting the literate 'knowledge' elites within the Buddhist and Jewish traditions that are worthy of further study.

12 There is much scholarship on the dwindling credibility of traditional Islamic elites. See Eickelman and Piscatori (1996); for a focus on Syria, see Pierret (2013); and for a more global perspective, see Kersten and Olsson (2013).

Much of the scholarship from both the East and the West on the role of the ulama has sidelined the former guardians of Islamic literary heritage. Khaled El-Rouayheb's (2015) recent work on the intellectual history of the Ottoman Empire and North Africa has done much to question the narrative of decline.¹³ He argues that three independent critiques of decline – the Ottomanist, the Arabist, and the Islamist – have together aggravated a harsh historic narrative that assumes the period after Islamic intellectual florescence and before colonial encroachment (i.e., the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) to have been barren in terms of cultural and intellectual output. Many of the reformist and revivalist movements of the modern period see this age as 'marked by unthinking scholarly imitation (*taqlid*), crude Sufi pantheism, and "syncretic" and idolatrous popular religious practices' (El-Rouayheb, 2015, p. 2). I would add that the ever-present elevation of the Muslim past as 'ideal' has further accentuated these damning assessments of the ulama, as well as the current moral health of the umma in the modern Muslim imaginary.¹⁴

One of the key historians of Islam's scholarly class, Muhammad Qasim Zaman, argues that generalizations about the adverse impact of modernity on the ulama's influence and authority are suspect (2002, p. 58). There can be little doubt that the ulama's authority has come under 'severe pressure and unprecedented challenges' in the age of mass education and new technologies, but the ulama also have a lot to gain. For example, Zaman explores how Muslim scholars in the Indian subcontinent, before and after independence, rose to the challenge of the print media by producing more works for both learned and lay audiences. But the critical question, for Zaman, is not whether the ulama's authority has increased or decreased, but how that authority is constructed, argued, displayed, and constantly defended.

I draw on El-Rouayheb and Zaman's analyses to argue that the decline narrative, although very real on a structural level, is more complex and fluid than a simple linear sequence of events. What counts as 'normative', 'traditional' Islam is not a static fixed entity, but rather a process. This can also be said for notions of religious authority. My research with the

13 I am grateful to Yakoob Ahmed, Ottoman historian at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, for helpful discussions and critique of the 'decline narrative'.

14 Idealization of the past is a common trope that is not restricted to the Muslim historical imagination. What period 'the past' refers to depends very much on which Muslims are speaking. I use it here to refer to the 'golden age' so often held up to contrast with the present in contemporary Muslim discourse. However, the 'golden age' for other groups (such as Salafis) would be considerably earlier.

Cambridge Muslim College and other examples shows how the discursive process of defining what constitutes 'normative Islam' is both continuing and incrementally eroding the historic divide between 'intellectuals' and the 'ulama'.

3 The Indian experience

The historic narrative of the rise of seminaries in South Asia is key to understanding the Muslim institutional (as well as civil society and mosque) landscape in the United Kingdom. These seminaries grew in a climate of encroaching colonialism, widespread perceived syncretism, and the decadence of indigenous rulers. As a result, many of their teachings speak to these concerns.

Because the Deobandi school (and its missionary offshoot the Tablighi Jamaat) dominates the scene of advanced Islamic religious training in the United Kingdom, it requires special attention here. The Islamic currents that originated in the Indian subcontinent are all based in the Hanafi *madhhab* ('school of thought'), one of the four major schools of legal thought in the Sunni Muslim world. The genealogy of Deobandism descends from the Hanafi School and its unique development in India under the Mughal Empire. In the literature on Islamic movements, it is often described as 'revivalist', 'reformist', or 'puritanical' (and by the less nuanced as 'fundamentalist'). It can rightly come under these broad categories, but in its original manifestation it was more a 'readjustment to political disempowerment' and a movement against syncretism.

The movement was concerned with the moral reform of the Muslim individual – a personalization of religion that is consistent with 'modernity'. The combination of mass education and a cosmology of self-reliance and defiance are fused together in the Deobandi worldview (Metcalf, 1996). Its origins and the historic circumstances of its development have a considerable influence on the way Islam is taught and learned in Britain. Partly due to their emphasis on right knowledge and strengthening normative Islam in India in the British context, the Deobandi are the sect that has most emphasized the importance of social reproduction through the formal apparatus of schooling.¹⁵

15 I use 'sect' here only for convenience. My research participants would often use the Christian term 'denomination', or sometimes *maslak*, which is more common to South Asian Islamic understandings of movements and sectarian differences.

Deobandi seminaries were designed for mass education, borrowing selectively from Western educational models (Birt and Lewis, 2010, p. 92). Though 'traditional' in their educational aims, they were thoroughly modern in their methods, and they used the example of British educational institutions and missionary societies as sources of organizational inspiration (Gilliat-Ray, 2006, p. 56). The curriculum of most of the South Asian Darul Ulooms, both in India and in the United Kingdom, owes its origins to the work of the eighteenth century Farangi Mahall scholars who trace their lineage to Lucknow, India. The genius of this scholarly movement was its ability to draw from the rationalist tradition of scholarship associated with Persia (and characterized by an emphasis on logic and philosophy) and combine it with the traditional Islamic sciences of Quran, hadith, and fiqh. The resulting syllabus was known as Dars-i Nizami (see also Ali, Part II).

This syllabus was an ideal educational training ground for the production of legal professionals to serve in the public institutions of the Mughal Empire. However, with the collapse of the Mughals and the influence of colonialism, the nature of the Dars-i Nizami curriculum changed. The tradition of combining rational sciences with Islamic sciences, along with a growing emphasis on a contextual understanding of the Islamic texts was 'eroded in favour of a renewed emphasis on the Quran and hadith and the preservation of the core Islamic sciences in what they viewed as a hostile climate' (Birt and Lewis, 2010, p. 111). A curriculum and educational philosophy that had been interdisciplinary and interpretive, and that provided training in the skills of reasoning and understanding, gradually mutated into 'a curriculum which focused on the acquisition of information, and the ability to commit this information to memory' (Gilliat-Ray, 2006, pp. 64-65). It is not surprising to find that the curriculum of many Deobandi seminaries in Britain involves the study of commentaries; while it is still called 'Dars-i Nizami', what is actually studied is a shortened and adapted form of the curriculum (Gilliat-Ray, 2006, p. 65).

Different sectarian groupings and movements always exist within communities of a single national origin, and this is quite marked among Britain's South Asian Muslims. The core support for the Deobandi movement, whether for its ulama or lay preachers, comes from the Indian Muslim communities (Gujaratis, East African Asians, and some North Indians), who form only a fraction of the British Muslim community as a whole, less than 9 per cent – although it also has support from Bangladeshis and, to a much lesser extent, Pakistanis (Birt and Lewis, 2010, p. 109). Geographically, the centres of Deobandi influence in the United Kingdom are the post-industrial mill-towns of the North West, Bolton, Preston, and Blackburn; Leicester in the East Midlands; and West Yorkshire (Dewsbury and Batley in particular). Today these towns have

become centres of learning and nodes for the dissemination of the Deobandi message nationally and even abroad; the ulama are at the centre of the Gujarati community and are able to determine the scope and direction of the further Islamization of these communities (Birt and Lewis, 2010, p. 111).

4 The British context

As mentioned earlier, the Indian Deobandi tradition has established more Islamic seminaries in Britain than any other sect. However, Jonathan Birt and Philip Lewis argue that the graduates produced by these seminaries far outnumber the imam positions available, and that most Darul Uloom graduates do not find employment in mosques or other sectors where they can apply their knowledge base (Birt and Lewis, 2010, p. 97).¹⁶ As one former Darul Uloom student told me, many of his peers ended up 'packing bananas or stacking shop shelves'. Gilliat-Ray (2005, 2006) points out that there are vast differences in the level, type, depth, and school of education offered by various Deobandi Darul Ulooms in the United Kingdom. The ones she surveyed have a curriculum and teaching staff that are bound very closely to their institutional and school origins in the Indian subcontinent, and in particular Gujarat. By contrast, the Muslim College in Ealing, West London (related to the Al-Azhar tradition) and Hawza Illmiya (a Shia institution)¹⁷, also in London, are both non-South Asian Islamic colleges, and both are seeking or have acquired validation from established secular universities – a process that involves an overhaul of curriculum and teaching methods.¹⁸ They attempt to combine theoretical and practical experience and show an appreciation of religious diversity and sources of knowledge outside of the Islamic tradition (Gilliat-Ray, 2006, p. 64).

What explains the differences between the 'South Asian' Darul Ulooms and the others? Is it related to a die-hard devotion to an outdated and anachronistic curriculum, or something deeper? According to Gilliat-Ray, the crucial difference is in their attitudes towards the need for training to have external validation from other Higher Education institutions and for

16 Ironically we have a similar situation in British academia, which has an over-emphasis on Ph.D. funding opportunities and very few post-doctoral and other academic opportunities for early career researchers.

17 Shia institutions produce more academically competent individuals. For more on this see Van den Bos (2015).

18 For a thorough exploration of the process and politics of the university validation of UK Islamic higher education institutions, see Scott-Bauman and Cheruvallil-Contractor (2015).

contextualization. Islamic colleges such as the Muslim College and Hawza Illmiya have thus 'met some of the challenges that South Asian *dar ul-ulooms* are now facing, though the extent to which this challenge is recognized differs' (Gilliat-Ray, 2006, p. 74).

Gilliat-Ray argues that Darul Uloom in the United Kingdom are inadequate, anachronistic, and, in essence, backward. This portrait links to her key argument that times are changing too fast for the calcified Darul Uloom:

The traditional role of the imam in Britain is in many cases expanding beyond mosques, to include more pastoral and youth work, chaplaincy, and involvement in local community projects. The curriculum of the *dar ul-uloom* is barely adapting to meet this changing role; the emphasis in the curriculum remains on inherited knowledge and textual study, and any modification of the curriculum would necessarily involve revision of a syllabus that has been actively preserved over generations. (Gilliat-Ray, 2006, p. 67)

Despite this strong critique, Gilliat-Ray was unable to gain fieldwork access to the Darul Uloom she writes about. These remain shrouded in mystery for, and thus often forgotten by, many British Muslims – let alone the wider British public. This is, however, changing with recent media and government interest in Deobandi chaplains and how they are educated.

Gilliat-Ray did, however, conduct extensive interviews with community leaders and activists about their opinions about and relationships with these institutions – and her findings tell us a lot about how they are perceived within Muslim circles. She demonstrates that many in the wider Muslim community are (or should be) stakeholders in the project of building advanced religious training colleges, and how the Deobandi Darul Uloom have not reached out to the majority Muslim community. Gilliat-Ray attempts an interesting democratization of critique by asking the Muslim civil society interviewees how they would like to see Darul Uloom training. Her survey shows that many Muslims want Darul Uloom to connect more with the realities faced by the community and to include a practical placement in their training (Gilliat-Ray, 2006, p. 71). Many of the criticisms offered by those interviewed coincided with the linguistic and citizenship demands of the British government.¹⁹ However, these issues can sometimes be 'red herrings', because imams trained in the United Kingdom are not necessarily 'better' educated than those trained abroad.

19 These include the expectation of English language proficiency and legal residency.

The studies by Gilliat-Ray and by Birt and Lewis both agree that the forms which the Darul Uloom model has taken in Britain are broadly out of touch with modern Britain and the current challenges facing the Muslim community. There is little research on the Darul Uloom tradition in Britain, but other analyses generally correspond with the above (see Bowen, 2014, and Geaves, 2012, both of whom are somewhat more critical).²⁰

5 Religious leaders' challenges

From the production of imams, we now turn to the challenges these religious leaders face. The role and expectations of the imam have changed drastically through the process of immigration and mass settlement in Western Europe. For many, the once-humble position of prayer-leader has been plunged into the status of community representative and problem-solver by both congregations and state authorities. At Regents Park Mosque, one of London's largest and most famous mosques, an imam forum was held in 2015 to connect and share experiences among imams.²¹ A sense of heavy responsibility was in the air, tinged with the sound of desperation. Serving mosque imams from all over Greater London were present, from a kaleidoscope of backgrounds – Nigerian, Somali, Palestinian, Egyptian, Sierra Leonean, Moroccan, and the usual Pakistani and Bangladeshi – all, however, foreign-born and foreign-trained. Amongst the proceedings there were theological treatises and service delivery advice, and in between were questions and comments from attendee imams. Many complained about undemocratic mosque management committees, increasing demands for time and services with no extra support, as well as the constant piling-up of new legislation and calls for accountability. The message coming from the floor was a strong feeling of being under-resourced, under-paid, and over-burdened, as well as ill equipped and under-trained for the challenges laid at their feet.

As one prominent imam told me, most of his fellow imams are oblivious to the degree to which problems like drugs, teenage pregnancy, and domestic abuse are rampant in the Muslim community. Considering that the seminars ban all use of social media within their grounds, it is not surprising there is a lack of awareness of these issues. At one lecture I attended, the speaker,

20 There is a dire need for more research on the topic of the UK's Darul Ulooms, particularly from the perspective of their enduring significance and influence.

21 This is based on participant observation at the event held on 15 March 2015.

a prominent and learned British-born Islamic scholar, lamented about the number of young men who come to the mosque and yet also have girlfriends. He stated that he tries to encourage them to marry. 'He's really out of touch,' a young activist told me afterward. 'This imam doesn't realize that most of the audience here are probably also in non-marital relationships.'

6 The Cambridge Muslim College

In 2011, the Cambridge Muslim College (CMC) was established to deal with precisely these challenges by giving a *contextual* 'update' to the heavily *textual* training of British Muslim seminary graduates. It has been called a 'finishing school' that was established to provide a higher education experience for graduates of the traditional Indian-style Darul Uloom in the United Kingdom. The college offers a one-year programme for both men and women with a curriculum emphasizing citizenship, political and cultural awareness, interfaith understanding, community building, counselling, and other pastoral skills.

Cambridge Muslim College recruits the crème de la crème of the United Kingdom's Darul Uloom, those who should go on to become religious leaders and scholars, but who often find their legitimacy questioned by their peers on the 'streets' and by the more educated members of the Muslim community.²² Many Muslims regard these graduates as ill equipped by the archaic curriculum offered at the Darul Uloom, which are famously insular and closed institutions. All of the enrolled students are *ʿālims* and *ʿālimas* (male and female scholars) who have graduated from Darul Uloom seminaries and completed the Dars-i Nizami curriculum.

The Darul Uloom graduates have been trained mainly in the Deobandi or Bareilwi traditions in institutions arguably more conservative, both culturally and religiously, than that offered by the CMC and its staff, who are part of Cambridge's relatively liberal and Sufi-inclined Muslim scene. The college is therefore in a position where it teaches mainly students from one particular denominational background, but does not necessarily share or promote that particular school of thought. This demonstrates an impressive degree of credibility and stakeholder relations with the 'feeder' seminaries – something that much of British Muslim civil society has been unable to achieve; in a highly fragmented and embattled Muslim community, this cannot be underestimated.

22 For more on contestations of authority in the UK Muslim community, see Ahmad and Evergetti (2010) and Jones et al. (2014).

Cambridge itself has a small but burgeoning Muslim community with a relatively high educational and Islamic literacy level. They are linked through Sufi networks to other communities in the United Kingdom and internationally. The ethnic, regional, and class origins of the CMC students differ markedly from most of those in the wider Cambridge Muslim community, the majority of whom are connected in some way to the university, or to Cambridge's growing hospitals and science parks.

The culture of the college is decidedly English, and middle-class. The building itself is a converted vicarage, which has been islamized with *wuḍūʿ* washrooms, a prayer room, and gender-specific common rooms. It is heavily influenced by the vision of its founder and dean Timothy Winter, Chair of Islamic Studies at the Faculty of Divinity in Cambridge University. Winter, also known as sheikh Abdal Hakim Murad, is, outside the ivory tower, a well-known and respected British Islamic scholar who appeals to a considerable audience in the British Muslim community and wider Anglophone Muslim world.

7 Transforming Islamic education

Cambridge Muslim College is modelled on the example of the Cambridge University colleges, but has no formal affiliation to the university. Students each have a tutor with one-to-one supervision sessions every week. The college employs a handful of staff and appoints two research fellows annually. This feature makes the college drastically different from its Darul Uloom forebears. The research fellows are usually postdoctoral or other early career researchers who have completed PhDs in Islamic Studies or related disciplines in universities in the United Kingdom, and who spend a year at the college working on their own research as well as providing occasional lecturing and supervisory duties. With these fellows the college positions itself as an aspiring higher education institution, with research output and the legitimacy to compete with universities in what constitutes 'Islamic Studies' in the academy.

Another key pedagogical difference is the emphasis on skills acquisition, as opposed to solely knowledge acquisition as taught by the Darul Ulooms. Students are expected to give presentations, have mock counselling sessions, and even produce creative work as part of their Art and Architecture module. A more holistic approach to educating the 'whole' student is also evident with the inclusion of Tai Chi and other martial arts as an obligatory part of the weekly timetable for all students. This is supplemented further with

college trips to historic landmarks, museums, and even churches – a new experience for most of the seminary graduates.

The CMC is a small institution with a capacity of twenty students in the annual programme, although most years there are approximately ten men and five female students enrolled. The majority of these students are British nationals, but most years they also accept one to three students from overseas. For the majority of the students, their secondary education was boarding in a seminary for four to seven years. Unlike CMC, the seminaries were located outside an urban centre and allowed little to no contact with the wider community during their training. Almost all the enrolled students were from a South Asian ethnic background at the time of my fieldwork, and most of them came from suburbs or attended primary schools that were dominated by their own ethnic group. For many, it is likely that until their CMC experience they had very little educational or professional fraternization with people outside their own immediate communities.

One seminar I attended on medical ethics was particularly illustrative of the evolving pedagogical paradigm evident at the CMC. The visiting lecturer looked and sounded like a Darul Uloom graduate – he studied in Dewsbury and Karachi – and sported a white *shalwar kameez*, turban, and a long beard.²³ However, he also had several years of experience as a hospital chaplain and in offering counsel to Muslims and non-Muslims in difficult medical and ethical situations, setting him apart from the students.

A number of key ethical questions were discussed concerning organ donation, infertility treatments, and euthanasia. The teacher asked the students a series of hypothetical questions, positing a scenario and asking whether it would be acceptable to: (a) the sharia; (b) to their local mosque communities; and (c) to the wider British public. Example scenarios included: a Muslim woman being examined by a male medical practitioner, the routine use of contraception within marriage, taking a second wife, and leading a congregational prayer dressed in Western dress rather than ‘traditional’ or ethnic dress.

It became clear that most of the opposition lay in having new or unfamiliar interpretations and rulings accepted by the ‘community’. The ‘community’ in many of the students’ case meant their mosque congregations, the congregations who had supported them to study for so many years and which were invariably dominated by community ‘elders’. Considering the fact that most British mosque committees are run by men over the age of 50, for many

23 Dewsbury has the oldest and largest Islamic seminary in the UK and is Europe’s key centre of Tablighi Jamaat preaching.

of them this is the audience they would ultimately be accountable to. For many of these leaders-in-training, the ‘community’ may oppose a fatwa allowing contraception without ‘valid reason’ – even if it could be justified in Islamic jurisprudence.

‘These are all aspects of *urf* [custom]’ said the teacher, ‘if norms change then so can the *hukm* [ruling]. Just because the *ṣaḥāba* [companions of the prophet] didn’t practice something, doesn’t mean we can’t practice by default,’ he continued. ‘But Mufti Saab’, one of the students asked, ‘what if we have different norms in the same society due to immigration and multiculturalism?’ The students buzzed with tentative legal solutions. The mufti continued:

Then we have to ask, what reasons make something permissible. Why do we need a reason to use contraception? Why are we so strict about it? Everybody is doing it. Otherwise you’d all have twenty siblings! Did the *ṣaḥāba* practice family planning? No very much, but they needed numbers for honour and protection. Just because they didn’t do something, doesn’t mean we can’t do it today.

The teacher pushed them further: ‘What if a woman wants to have an abortion just to keep her figure?’ Discussion ensued, suggestions, giggles. ‘Surely that is a cosmetic and superficial concern?’ protested one of the students. ‘But Maulana so-and-so has permitted it,’ the teacher said, ‘Are you stricter than our pious predecessors?’ This was a rhetorical question not meant to be answered, and rightly so. No one is going to position themselves as superior, because part of the narrative of decline that exists internally within Muslim discourse is that the piety and spiritual insight of the umma is continually diminishing. A deep sense of humility is ingrained into the students of the Darul Uloom tradition, a humility so pervasive that it can sometimes make students hesitate to unsettle perceived norms. This fear of departing from what is acceptable is in part addressed pedagogically by having teachers from positions of authority in the Islamic tradition and/or who are practicing Muslims themselves. The teacher in this case had achieved the rank of mufti, an Islamic scholar licensed to use independent reasoning to offer new legal opinions – the highest rank in Islamic scholarship. He upholds the sharia and applies it every day in his work. He speaks the technical language of Islamic jurisprudence and is not overtly pushing a ‘liberal’ agenda, which is often perceived by self-conscious upholders of the tradition as compromising their integrity and authenticity as Islamic scholars. This is tension no doubt common among many religious traditions today, but one that is particularly acute in this context.

Hierarchy is important in the Deobandi and Barelwi traditions (the two most dominant Islamic interpretational traditions in British Muslim civil society). Being instructed in some of the most controversial modern issues by a scholar who is recognizably senior in the hierarchy is significant. First, it gives the students a familiar and authoritative framework through which to question and push boundaries; second, it provides adequate continuity with the hierarchical tradition they come from. It is even more interesting to see how the British context is taken into account and how students are encouraged to use their learning, while also being able to question and think beyond the arguably inflexible framework inherited from their home institutions.

We have here unfolding a unique approach to higher Islamic education, one that weaves together authentic Islamic learning that is considered credible by both the students and their communities with the expectations and know-how that characterizes modern British society. To better appreciate this approach, the next section takes a closer look at the differences between the CMC and the Darul Uloom in Britain.

8 Comparison to the Darul Uloom

The curriculum taught at the Cambridge Muslim College is vastly different from the students' prior education in the Darul Uloom. In the seminary, the timetable starts after *fajr* ('dawn') prayer, and the morning and early afternoon are dominated by Islamic Sciences according to the Dars-i Nizami curriculum. In the mid-afternoon, usually after the *ʿaṣr* ('mid-afternoon') prayer, National Curriculum lessons commence until the evening.²⁴ CMC students' prior learning was primarily a strict and disciplined regimen of lessons in the Islamic sciences, prayer, and other devotional practices in addition to homework time.

In comparison to the Darul Uloom, 'worldly' knowledge is foregrounded though not necessarily prioritized at the CMC. At first glance, the timetable seems to show that explicitly religious learning is confined to the Quranic memorization class and *Ihya Uloomuddin* ('revival of religious sciences') session. From attending an average week of classes, however, I discovered that so permeating is the spiritual ethos of the institution that it is difficult

24 The National Curriculum is a common programme of study in schools that is designed to ensure a nationwide uniformity of content and standards in education in the United Kingdom. See: <https://www.gov.uk/national-curriculum/overview>.

to go from a lesson on community leadership to the ethics of stem cell research and forget that we are in an Islamic institution. The college day fits around prayer times, and the teachers, whatever their own confessional backgrounds, make a point of acknowledging and working with the students' prior religious training. Lessons taught by non-Muslim lecturers take the form familiar to any college or university in the United Kingdom, though many of them try to anchor new material in something familiar to the students, or inquire whether similar concepts exist in the Islamic tradition. This is another aspect of the 'bridging' approach that characterizes the college. The division between worldly and religious knowledge is almost irrelevant in this context, where subjects like biology and astronomy are taught by practising Muslims and the teachers are comfortable using different genres of inquiry and analysis. Islamic education can be seen, through the example of CMC, to have come full-circle: from an approach that originally offered 'sacred' and 'secular' sciences together, then to their separation in the post-colonial era, and to their unification once again.

Another key difference between CMC and the Darul Uloom is that all lessons, except the *hifẓ* ('memorization') class, are taught in a mixed-gender classroom. The significance of this arrangement in relation to the history of modern Islamic learning cannot be underestimated. Of the United Kingdom's 25 Darul Uloom, four are female-only institutions. In the Darul Uloom setting, male students are not taught by female *ʿālimas*. However, female Darul Uloom students *can* be taught by male *ʿālims*. To enable this they often wear *niqābs* in the male teacher's presence, or the teachers arrange an audio link to the classroom so that the students can hear the male *ʿālim* but he does not have to be present in the classroom. At CMC, the male and female students sit on parallel sides of the classroom, and both male and female teachers teach them. Even outside of the Darul Uloom tradition, it is very common to find that British Muslim civil society, charitable, and other community events are often segregated, whether explicitly by organizers or voluntarily by attendees. However, it would be misleading to assume that this gender segregation is always male-imposed. Even casual conversations with Muslim women in mosques and Islamic events around Britain show that there is widespread support for it. There is evidently also strong support for educational gender segregation among the potential applicants to CMC, as I was told that some female students felt discouraged from applying because it was a mixed classroom setting.

My interviews with CMC students showed that they value and are grateful for the opportunity to expand their skills and knowledge base. However, when asked whether they would be able to recommend these courses to

their *alma maters*, most believed that such constructive criticism would not be considered, though one student proposed going back and doing so after he moved up in the ranks of teaching staff.²⁵ Change is uncommon and very slow at the Darul Ulooms, and would need to happen from the top-down rather than the bottom-up. Despite mounting evidence of alumni disgruntlement and wider community criticism, the Darul Uloom model remains very much intact and even flourishing, because they have credibility within the communities that support them. There is evidence to show that some Darul Ulooms have incorporated courses on professional skills, but whether this is due to the feedback from former graduates is unclear.

It is important at this point to note that the students who have graduated from Darul Ulooms and undertaken the Dars-i Nizami syllabus have been instructed as trainee ulama, and not so adequately as imams. These are both key roles in Islamic religious authority – and they can coincide in the same person – but they are not the same. The ulama are a class of religious intellectuals who, historically at least, could also have legal, academic, or even political-administrative functions. The imam is more of a community figure, whose basic function is leading the prayers in the mosque. With the growth of mosques as civil society institutions in their own right, particularly in minority Western contexts, the role of the imam has become more demanding.

While the Darul Uloom model emphasizes the acquisition of and proficiency in the Islamic sciences, at the CMC the professional acumen and wider-world knowledge of graduates is a key priority, as evident from the role it plays in their curriculum. However, a background in seminary education is a prerequisite for entry to CMC, because they are trying to offer a ‘top-up’ course of sorts. Students partake in lessons such as communication skills, community leadership, and counselling. During the course all students gain work experience as teachers or preachers in the local Muslim community of Cambridge, and more formally through a work experience module as a trainee chaplain with Cambridge’s largest hospital. Students reported that the parts of the course that were based on direct contact with members of the public, such as chaplaincy and community placements, or that provided heavy pastoral skills training, such as counselling, were some of the most transformative in terms of personal growth and questioning their previously held assumptions.

Though there is an obvious emphasis on professional ‘polishing’, this is not to say that the diploma in Contextual Islamic Studies offered at CMC is a vocational course – quite the contrary. Over 60 per cent of the curriculum

25 Interviews with CMC students, July 2015.

consists of academic subjects such as British political history, world history, science, social sciences, and English literature, which is designed to update their academic knowledge and expose them to other disciplinary traditions. These modules are all examined through essays and exams, as they would be in a British secondary school or university. ‘We weren’t taught to write essays at Darul Uloom, we didn’t know how to order our thoughts and make an argument’ one of the students told me, somewhat perplexed, when several impending deadlines were looming. One of the explicit purposes of this is to refine and practice their written academic English, which is highlighted as a weakness by most Darul Uloom graduates.

CMC has fostered a relationship with the famously insular Darul Ulooms, which generally rely on personal networks rather than institutional alliances, and has attempted to cultivate a sense of trust where other parts of the British Muslim community have failed. This creates necessary tensions, as the CMC has to maintain a delicate balance between honouring the past and innovating for the present. One example of this delicate balance is gender segregation. The students come from institutions where they have no contact with the opposite sex. While the lecture hall and canteen of the CMC are mixed, the prayer and common rooms are segregated. The CMC pushes limits, but not too far. While the CMC relies on the Darul Ulooms to provide students, its existence implies that the work of the Darul Ulooms is unfinished; they have to find a balance between traditions and moving forward – but not too fast. This potentially puts limitations on the kind of work the CMC can do, but – as befits such an institution – it is self-consciously evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, in its approach.

9 Conclusion: The baby and the bathwater

In the midst of such substantial pedagogical and curriculum developments, how is the Cambridge Muslim College managing to keep the ‘baby’ and dispense with the ‘bathwater’? By emphasizing context while simultaneously upholding the traditional canon. The students’ prior learning is celebrated, valued, and expanded upon; though there is pedagogical innovation, book learning is still central, and the inclusion of memorization classes in the curriculum is a nod to more ‘traditional’ Islamic learning methods. The broad legal and doctrinal premises of the normative Islamic worldview as expounded by the Darul Ulooms is shared by the College, as is an impetus to ‘preserve’ and ‘protect’ the tradition in the modern

world. The College has undertaken extensive outreach efforts to connect with mosques and local communities around the country who send their children to, and support, the Darul Uloom. As an institution, the CMC is a unique and innovative model that has nevertheless gained considerable respect and credibility from some of the most conservative sections of the Muslim community.

So what makes the Cambridge Muslim College different from its 'feeder' colleges? Both represent essentially two different educational approaches, but with broadly similar aims. Both aim to create a religious elite, but the emphasis of the CMC is on the training of leaders who have the knowledge and skills to serve the community in the time and space they are in now (hence the pioneering qualification received by the graduates, the diploma in Contextual Islamic Studies). The existence of the CMC is an acknowledgment that the knowledge base inherited from the 'old world' – the homelands of the first generation of migrants – is not enough. The establishment of institutions of higher learning (in this case the Darul Uloom) is itself an acknowledgment that the migrant community has settled and no longer needs to send its religious trainees abroad. However, the establishment of a hybrid institution aimed at both 'raising the bar' and serving an increasingly younger, more educated, and professionalizing Muslim community is a further development in this direction. The relevance and implications of this difference can be numerous and consequential for both the Muslim minority experience in Britain and the wider Islamic narrative of religious expertise and leadership.

So are initiatives like the CMC stemming the narrative of decline that has so beleaguered Islamic religious leadership? It is too early to say. It is, however, possible to conclude that dramatic ruptures with the past do not seem to be favoured, but that there is enough support and willingness to give the traditionally trained ulama a chance to update and contextualize their knowledge and practice with an initiative like the CMC. A careful balance of affirming and upholding the old as well as valuing and promoting the new has shown the CMC to be a highly effective and quite unique bridging institution. Evidence suggests that the CMC is pragmatic about the changes it can bring about in one generation, but by pursuing such changes they will be more effective in the long run. If nothing else, it is clear from my research that the CMC has built up the confidence of this group of overlooked Muslim students and trainee religious leaders. In the process, it is also redressing the balance of the inverted education hierarchy – one that separates the sacred from the secular – and nurturing religious scholars' attempts to regain their rightful place in the Muslim imagination.

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