

THE NEO-TRADITIONALISM OF TIM WINTER

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Timothy John Winter, or Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad, is a university lecturer, a religious leader, and an influential speaker on Muslim affairs. Tim Winter has developed a neo-traditionalist understanding of Islam that values diversity and spirituality. His neo-traditionalism is grounded in his understanding of a balanced rationality and the pluralism of Islamic tradition. This understanding of Islam is also seen as a natural progression of British values. Thus, while Islam's origins may be foreign, its values are not. Winter also sees Wahhabism as being a threat to this understanding of Islam. A major focus of Winter's works is on describing the difference between this neo-traditionalist approach and the modern materialistic secular imaginary. His neo-traditionalist approach combines a traditional *madhhab* approach to Islamic law with spirituality in a way that has a deep respect for diversity.

Winter's multiple academic duties include being the Shaykh Zayed lecturer in Islamic Studies at the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, the Director of Studies at Wolfson College, and the Dean of the Cambridge Muslim College.¹ He is an alumnus of the University of Cambridge where he studied Arabic as an undergraduate in 1983. He subsequently moved to Cairo to study at al-Azhar for three years, and then moved to Jeddah to study for another three years. In 1989, after returning to England, he attended the University of London to learn Turkish and Persian.

Although Winter is a lecturer at the University of Cambridge he is more of a public intellectual than a traditional academic. His works are mostly reflections—some academic, some more general—about various issues about Islam and Muslim life in the modern world. Winter has written seven books; however, most of these books are printed editions of essays available online and not necessarily academic in nature. For example, his *Understanding the Four Madhhabs: The Facts about Ijtihad and Taqlid* is a printed version of his essay

“Understanding the Four Madhhabs: The Problem with Anti-Madhhabism.” His book *Bombing without Moonlight: The Origins of Suicidal Terrorism* is a reprint of an essay by the same name.²

A part of Winter’s project is to make Islam accessible to non-Muslim audiences. For example, he has co-authored an introductory book about Islam titled *Understanding Islam and the Muslims: The Muslim Family, Islam and World Peace* published in 2002.³ This book is written in a question-and-answer format and covers the basic fundamentals of Islam. It covers introductory questions related to Muslim beliefs and how one becomes a Muslim, as well as several social issues, such as the importance of family to Muslim life.

In an interview on BBC with Joan Bakewell, Winter describes the events that led to his conversion to Islam as a teenager.⁴ He states that his conversion was in part due to the religious climate in England during the 1970s that no longer saw Anglicanism as being the default option. He himself had difficulty understanding the concept of the trinity within Christian thought, and this was exacerbated by John Hick’s publication of *The Myth of God Incarnate*. John Hick (d. 2012) was an English philosopher of religion who had put forward a progressive understanding of theology. In *The Myth of God Incarnate*, as the title suggests, he critiques the conception of Jesus as God incarnate.⁵ In a radio interview with Joan Bakewell, Winter states that this book:

sort of pushed me in the direction of knowing that I really wanted to believe in God, that was the only explanation that could possibly suit my mind . . . but I could never with fullness of heart accept the classic doctrines of the Christianity with which I had been raised, so I started to look for alternatives.⁶

Initially, Winter had no intention of studying the religion of Islam in any great depth. He had enrolled in evening classes in Arabic with the “intention being not to learn about God, but to do Economics at Cambridge with Arabic, so that I could go and make a killing in the Gulf.”⁷ It was through this Arabic course that he was introduced to Islam. The theology of Islam “ticked all the boxes that my inherent Christianity had left vacant.”⁸ Islam had answered the theological questions that plagued Winter. It answered not only the monotheism that Winter was moving toward, but it also allowed Winter to still consider Jesus as part of his religious vision.

Neo-traditionalism

Winter can be described as a neo-traditionalist. Abdullah bin Hamid Ali, an American self-styled neo-traditionalist also associated with Zaytuna College (see Chapter 1), describes neo-traditionalism as having the following characteristics: a return to the classical schools of law, contextualization of mainstream Sunni doctrine, the practice of text-based Islamic spirituality, and an

understanding that the past cannot be recreated today.⁹ Tim Winter aptly fits this profile. He calls for a return to the classical schools of law, teaches and translates works in mainstream Islamic doctrine, values Sufism, and all this while trying to bring these classical teachings in coherence with modernity.

Winter is a strong defender of the classical schools of law. He believes that the classical schools of law, *madhhabs*, have developed an internal cohesion and a method that helps to minimise mistakes in deriving Islamic law. This defence of the *madhhab* is also a critique of the anti-*madhhab* approach of Salafism. Winter criticizes the Salafis for threatening the cohesion that has been established by the *madhhabs*, creating conflict, and ultimately threatening the existence of Islam itself.

Winter is quite clear about the necessity of following a tradition when it comes to understanding Islamic texts. In his article “What is Scriptural Reasoning?” Winter lays out the way that Muslims can approach “Scriptural Reasoning.” Scriptural Reasoning is a modern interfaith movement where adherents of different religions come together to discuss common themes through the various holy texts.¹⁰ Winter is quick to note that Muslims have “formal restraints on the reflections they are likely to offer.”¹¹ These restraints come in the form of traditional authorization:

Properly speaking, a Muslim may only interpret scripture after authorisation (*ijāzah*) from traditional masters, who have themselves been authorised as part of an unbroken succession (*isnād*) stretching back to the Prophet himself.¹²

One should not assume that Winter is calling for a single understanding of Islamic text. As will be shown below, Winter in fact believes that the difficulties of understanding Islamic text leads to various interpretations. What he is arguing for, however, is that Muslims are not as free as their religious counterparts to understand the text as they see fit. They are bound to a certain tradition. This necessity of being within the tradition is also reflected in Winter’s writings on Islamic law.

Winter begins his article “Understanding the Four Madhhabs: The Problem with Anti-Madhhabism” by stating that “the ummah’s greatest achievement over the past millennium has undoubtedly been its internal intellectual cohesion,” and writes that “Sunni Muslims have maintained an almost unfailing attitude of religious respect and brotherhood among themselves.” He praises Sunnism for this “unusual outcome” and for bucking the trend of violence and factionalism, and it is for this very reason that Sunni cohesion “demands careful analysis.”¹³

Winter admits that there are “painful exceptions” to this trend, but limits these exceptions to the “earliest phase of our history.” This early period of Islam is the period immediately after the Prophet until the establishment of the four schools of law. He writes that there was “disunity and fitnas” that “divided the early Muslims despite their superior piety,” but there was

“solidity and cohesiveness of Sunnism after the final codification of the *sharīʿah* in the four Schools of the great Imams.”¹⁴ The “disunity and fitnas” of the early period consist of the revolt against ʿUthmān, and the wars during the caliphate of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib. The schisms that formed after these conflicts led Sunni Islam to occupy the “middle ground between the two extremes of egalitarian Kharijism and hierarchical Shiʿism.”¹⁵ For Sunni thought, authority was “vested in the Quran and Sunnah.” Yet, the number of sources that Muslim scholars had to reference were too great and their apparent contradictions too complex to interpret. This led to the development of certain rudimentary hermeneutics, such as *naskh* (abrogation), but it was not until al-Shāfiʿī’s systematization of *uṣūl al-fiqh* that any consistent methodology was formed.¹⁶

Al-Shāfiʿī’s approach to law was soon incorporated by the other schools of law. Thereafter, Muslim scholars, Winter notes, recognized the brilliance of the four great *imāms*, and the various schools of law began to take shape. Winter argues that it was at this time that “the attitude of toleration and good opinion between the Schools became universally accepted.”¹⁷ Thus, while “it was necessary for the Muslim to follow a recognised madhhab in order to avert the lethal danger of misinterpreting the sources, he must never fall into the trap of considering his own school categorically superior to the others.” The *madhhab* methodology was necessary to correctly interpret religion, but should not itself become a source of conflict.

This inter-Muslim conflict in his view, however, is being flamed by the Salafis and their utter disregard for classical schools of law. This is due to Salafi claims that individuals can derive Islamic law for themselves. Winter states that this belief that “ordinary Muslims, even if they know Arabic, are qualified to derive rulings of the Shariah for themselves, is an example of this egoism running wild.” He states that “Western-influenced global culture” urges individuals to challenge authority and to adhere to their own rationality and this makes it difficult to recognize that one simply does not have the hermeneutical tools to decipher Islamic law. Ultimately, the “danger of less-qualified individuals misunderstanding the sources and hence damaging the Shariah is a very real one.”

He gives examples of the “Pharisaic atmosphere” created by the Salafis. He writes that it is common to see young Arabs hoarding collections of *ḥadīth*, trying to decipher Islamic law, and then forcing their own understanding on others. These young Arabs are “prowling the mosques” in order to critique Muslims for actions and beliefs that they believe to be deviant. This in turn has discouraged many from attending the mosque in general. Moreover, “No-one now recalls the view of the early *ʿulamāʾ*, which was that Muslims should tolerate divergent interpretations of the Sunnah as long as these interpretations have been held by reputable scholars.”¹⁸ Winter also implies that the Salafis are, in essence, doing the work of the enemies of Islam. He writes that the reason Salafis are well funded is because they are detrimental to Islam.

This is not to suggest in any way that those who attack the great madhhabs are the conscious tools of Islam's enemies. But it may go some way to explaining why they will continue to be well-publicised and well-funded, while the orthodox alternative is starved of resources.¹⁹

Another cornerstone of Winter's neo-traditionalism is the conception of a balanced reason. It is a middle way between pure rationality and pure religious experience expressed in Sufism. In a paper titled "Reason as Balance: The Evolution of 'aql'" Winter argues that very few Muslim thinkers have tried to find a balance between these two paths. He follows Sachiko Murata and William Chittick in their description about the two dimensions of Islamic thought: the *tanzīh* (God as Transcendence) and the *tashbīh* (God as Immanence). Chittick and Murata, husband and wife, are renowned authors on Islamic philosophy and Sufism; they have co-authored *The Vision of Islam*, a book that has found traction among neo-traditionalist thinkers. Hamza Yusuf has highly praised this book, and as discussed in the previous chapter, has even dedicated a series of lectures to its study.²⁰ Winter himself references this book in relation to the concept of balanced rationality. Winter summarises the two approaches of the *tanzīh* and the *tashbīh* as thus:

Sachiko Murata and William Chittick have reflected extensively on this inner Islamic metabolism, identifying kalām with the principle of drawing inferences about God as Transcendence (*tanzīh*); and Sufism with the principle of experiencing God as Immanence (*tashbīh*); the dyadic categorisation of divine names as Names of Rigour and Names of Beauty is one outcome. Their conclusion is that these two inexorable consequences of the postulate of monotheism run like twin constants through Islamic religious history. Each is allocated its own realm, form of discourse, and even, on occasion, ritual life and structured authority.²¹

This quote catches the essence of Winter's conception of balanced reason. It is a commitment to both approaches of Islamic understanding. The rational discussion of the philosophers and theologians is to be balanced by the spiritual approaches of the mystics. In the same paper, Winter compares the variety of ways that Muslim thinkers have approached this issue, and ultimately presents Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1111)—the famous mystic, theologian, jurist, and philosopher—as the model thinker that synthesized both approaches.

Winter cites thinkers such as the modernist Egyptian reformer Rashid Rida (d. 1935) as an example of a scholar that went too far towards the rational camp.²² Winter argues that these modernist polemics were "reactive against a European belief in 'Oriental unreason'."²³ On the other end of the spectrum are thinkers such as the celebrated poet and mystic Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (d. 1273). Winter quotes a few verses from Rūmī's poetry that highlight the degree to which Rūmī valued love and spiritual experience over reason and

rationality. He summarizes Rūmī's opinion as such: "Reason, the steed of the formal theologians, is a noble part of God's creation, but is desperately slow and limited."²⁴ Winter finds it surprising that very few scholars try to bring about a synthesis between these two viewpoints:

It is striking that only in a few texts do we observe an attempt to provide a grand synthesis of the two approaches, which we might, to borrow European terminology, describe as the logical and the passional [*sic*]. Ghazālī (d.1111) is the most obvious, and successful, example.²⁵

Winter goes on to cite other thinkers that also take up this task, namely the famous Sufi Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240), the Ottoman *Shakhyh al-Islām* Ibn Kamāl (d. 940/1534), the influential Indian thinker Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī (d. 1176/1762), and the Turkish religious leader Said Nursi (d. 1960). It is however, Ghazālī that takes centre stage. This is not surprising given Winter's numerous speeches about Ghazālī and his translations of a few sections of Ghazālī's multivolume book on Islamic ethics the *Iḥyā' al-'Ulūm*.²⁶

The final aspect of Winter's neo-traditionalism is the role he gives to spirituality. Winter writes about the necessity of spirituality in relation to increasing radicalization. He writes that Islam is in need of a spiritual revival. He criticizes current Islamic movements for forgetting spirituality and pushing a line of activism that pushes towards burnout. He labels this "salafi burnout", and blames "neo-Kharijite" Wahhabism as being a major source of the problem. The solution is for Muslims to "improve the state of our hearts, and fill them with the Islamic virtues of affection, respect, tolerance and reconciliation."²⁷

In a talk given in Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam titled "Is Orthodox Islam Possible Without Sufism?" Winter discusses the centrality that Sufism should play within Sunni thought.²⁸ He argues that the classical Azhari scholarly opinion is that it is not possible to be an orthodox Muslim without incorporating Sufism. He makes this argument by quoting the famous didactic poem *Jawharah al-Tawḥīd*, by the Ash'arī theologian Ibrāhīm al-Laqqānī (d. 1041/1632). The *Jawharah al-Tawḥīd* is considered as a standard work of Ash'arī theology, and it is widely read in many traditional Islamic educational institutions, including al-Alzhar. Hassan al-Banna memorised this text,²⁹ and many influential Azhari scholars, such as Ibrahim al-Bajuri (d. 1860), have written extensive commentaries on the text.³⁰ The section that Winter quotes roughly constitutes two verses from the poem indicating the need to follow the *imāms* of Islamic law and also the spiritual *imāms*. Al-Laqqānī names Abū al-Qasim, which is in reference to the famous Persian mystic Abū al-Qasim ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Junayd (d. 298/910), as one such example.

Winter uses this poem to mention that the standard traditionalist reply to the question at hand is that no, it is not possible to have orthodox religious belief without Sufism. He adds that Sufism has always been a part of traditional Islamic understanding, and that for thousands of years there were no real debates about this. Moreover, he argues that "Sufism" as a category was only

invented 200 years ago. Sufism was never an “ism”, he argues it was rather a verb “*taṣawwuf*.” It was something that one did rather than something one joins. He asked the audience to not use orientalist categories when Muslims are trying to define themselves but to rather use indigenous vocabulary. Thus, it would be more relevant to ask if a Muslim performs *taṣawwuf* rather than if one is a Sufi. The essence of *taṣawwuf* is to have an inward detachment from the world and an eye to find humans who might be in service.³¹ “The indigenous definition is simply transcending yourself and applying that inner dimension of the sunnah.”³²

Tied in to his discussions of Sufism and rationality is his understanding of pluralism. In the same speech titled “Is Orthodox Islam Possible Without Sufism?” Winter spends more time explaining the concept of orthodoxy than he does explaining Sufism. He emphasizes the point that there has always been pluralism within Islamic thought. There is no orthodoxy in Islam, one correct teaching, rather Islam is a conversation. A conversation that has been ongoing between scholars and laypersons for thousands of years:

It is a much more diverse tradition. And this has always been a sign of Islamic authenticity that it is of the *jamā'a*, in other words it is of conversation. An ongoing accumulated wisdom based on discussions and arguments and polemic and fraternal remarks discussed in commentaries and amongst Muslims in their meetings for hundreds of years. And that is what it is to be a part of the *ahl al-sunnah wa-al-jamā'a*.³³

Thus, there is a type of pluralism that is innate to Islamic thinking. The difficulty in understanding the text itself leads to various scholarly positions. To be authentically Islamic is not to be dogmatic about an understanding of the text, but to acknowledge that there are multiple understandings of the Islamic text. He also states that it has been the establishment of plural-vocal religious cultures that has made Muslim civilisations great in the past: “It’s always been a sign of the strength of the *ummah* that this necessary diversity within this large grab bag category of orthodox Islam has underpinned the moment of greatness in our civilisation and the florescence of a wide range of different perspectives.”³⁴

Opposing this Islamic pluralism, however, is our more modern attempt to find a single voice for Islamic understanding. Winter attributes this to modernity and the rapidly changing context. He believes that in times like these, people tend to feel threatened and seek refuge within singular understandings of religion. In comparison, when the *ummah* feels strong then it welcomes a pluralism of different voices:

In times of turbulence and rapid change people tend to move away from an understanding that the umma is defined in terms of multiple voices and towards a fearful anxiety about a possibility of an internal Islamic pluralism.³⁵

Gender, Science, and British Muslim Identity

This understanding of neo-traditionalism has an impact on how Winter approaches real life issues. The website that hosts most of his essays (masud.co.uk) has marked that the two major themes of Winter's works are British Muslim identity and gender. However, a major sub-theme that develops under gender issues is science. The reason is that Winter uses biology to support his claims of "difference feminism". Winter has tackled the issue of gender in a few of his writings. He argues that early forms of feminism that called for complete equality have failed, and this failure has given rise to a new strand of feminism that recognizes the differences between males and females leading to rise of "difference feminism" as opposed to earlier efforts at "equality feminism".

One of Winter's more popular essays on this subject is "Boys Will Be Boys," which Hamza Yusuf has also referenced in one of his own talks on gender.³⁶ Winter argues that many debates about gender from Muslim intellectuals are limited to the classical issues of *fiqh*. While he does not deny that there is great importance to understanding the *fiqh* background to these issues, he argues that this approach has been too apologetic. What he wishes to do is "construct a language of gender which offers not a defence or mitigation of current Muslim attitudes and establishments, but a credible strategy for resolving dilemmas which the Western thinkers and commentators around us are now meticulously examining."³⁷

Thus, Winter is trying to move past a dichotomy where Muslims are trying to defend their positions on gender difference to a Western audience, and is trying to reframe the issue in dialogue with the new gender paradigm being debated in the Western academic circles. This is precisely why Winter begins his article with Germaine Greer's *The Whole Woman* as her work personifies the "ways in which the social and also scientific context of Western gender discourse has shifted over this period."³⁸

Greer authored an influential book in 1970 titled *The Female Eunuch*. She argued that the typical suburban nuclear family rendered females as eunuchs. Yet, in a book written in 1999, *The Whole Women*, Greer became critical of what earlier feminism had achieved leading to a shift from "equality feminism" to "difference feminism". Winter describes "equality feminism" as "committed to the breakdown of gender disparities as social constructs amenable to changes in education and media generalisation." On the other hand "difference feminism" is "rooted in the growing conviction that nature is at least as important as nurture in shaping the behavioural traits of men and women."³⁹

Winter states that Greer's position is that sexual liberation has harmed women. The sexuality that has been liberated is male sexuality, and promiscuity harms women more than men. There has been an increase in infidelity, and a rise in divorce and single parenthood. Moreover, pornography has led to an increased "dehumanisation and objectification of women."⁴⁰ The fashion industry is seen as "a major contributor to the contemporary enslavement of women."⁴¹ Women now lead unhappier lives than before with increased

levels of depression. Thus women have not been liberated, but have exchanged one type of dependence, on the husband, for another, on the pharmaceutical industry.

In order to add weight to difference feminism, Winter appeals to science. He cites how women are physically weaker than men, that men are biologically more aggressive and competitive so they can be more successful reproductively, that the nature of their intellect is different, and that men seek novelty. Ultimately, Winter concludes that the *sharī'ah* "upholds the dignity and the worth of women more reliably than secularity ever can."⁴² Materialism, here equated with secularism and capitalism, measures human worth in terms of wealth and sex, and this will "inexorably glorify the male."⁴³ He adds that: "Materialistic civilisations will, in the longer term, favour and revere male traits."⁴⁴ Yet, "[a]s Muslims, we refuse such a favouritism."⁴⁵ Islam is about absolute justice. Thus while the *sharī'ah* might "favour the male in functional, material terms" Muslims are "able to insist on the worth of women in a way that is not possible outside a religious context."

He develops this approach to gender by drawing on the understanding of the ninety-nine names of Allah, and the polarity in the name of majesty (*jalāl*) and the name of beauty (*jamāl*). Although Winter does not go into depth about the meanings of these names of Allah, he references an early written article on the subject, "Islam, Irigaray, and the Retrieval of Gender," where he delves into the significance of the names of majesty (*jalāl*) and the names of beauty (*jamāl*). Winter's appeal to the image of God in order to understand problems of gender follows a line of thinking put forward by the feminist theologian Rosemary Reuther. Reuther, in her book *Sexism and God-Talk*, argues that the way that we understand the image of God affects how we understand gender relations.⁴⁶ From this premise, Winter build his argument that the image of God in the Islamic thought can bring about a balance between the genders. In order to argue this Winter uses the concept of *jalāl* and *jamāl* as developed by the feminist Sufism of Sachiko Murata.

Sachiko Murata is a Professor of Religion and Asian Studies at Stony Brook University, where she conducts research into the interrelationship of Islam and Far Eastern thought. In 1971, she was the first woman and the first non-Muslim to study at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Tehran.⁴⁷ Murata has authored a book about Islam and gender, *The Tao of Islam*, and it can be described as a work of feminist Sufism. Her goal in this book is to push the reader to look beyond Islamic law and to understand gender in terms of Islamic spirituality. She argues that the balance between genders will become apparent if gender is viewed from this perspective. However, she is not stating that this is how Muslims are living in Muslim-majority countries. She is in fact critical of the treatment of women in many Muslim countries, and clearly states that what she has written in this book is unfortunately not put in the practice.⁴⁸

The way that Murata shows the balance between the genders in Islamic thought is through the concepts of the divine names of God (*al-asmā'*

al-ḥusnā), Considered to be 99 in number, these names of God⁴⁹ have been invoked by some Sufi scholars to develop a distinction between the names of majesty (*jalāl*) and the names of beauty (*jamāl*). The names of majesty are seen as pre-eminently masculine, whereas the names of beauty were seen as feminine.⁵⁰ The names of majesty include names such as the Mighty, the Great, the Majestic, and the names of beauty include names such the Near, the Compassionate, the Forgiving. Murata labels the names of majesty as “yang names” and the names of beauty as “yin names”.⁵¹ These two names together create the “Tao of Islam”, the yin and the yang. Murata argues that the legalistic approach to Islam puts greater emphasis on the “yang names” where as a spiritual approach emphasizes the “yin names”. She is not trying to give greater weight to one over the other but tries to show the two must come to balance.

According to this categorization there are many aspects of God that are considered feminine. And it is here that Winter makes use of Murata’s work. Winter mentions how *rahmah*, mercy, is seen as a feminine quality but is identified with creation: “Creation itself is the *nafas al-Rahman*, the Breath of the All-Compassionate.”⁵² This is contrast to Christian theology that sees God as the father. Islamic theology is, therefore, beyond gender.

Thus, while Winter agrees that there are differences in the two genders they are still equal. That equality, however, extends beyond material attributes and towards the metaphysical. Thus Islamic theology provides a gender-neutral context that helps one to value traditionally feminine attributes, attributes that are not valued in today’s materialistic consumerist culture.

Winter then uses this approach to rethink the meaning of some of the injunctions in Islamic law. He does not rethink the law itself, but what this law means. For example, he discusses the possibility of having female *imāms*. Rather than discussing legal aspects and the legal theory behind the permissibility or impermissibility of having female *imāms*, Winter focuses on the role that *imāms* play in Muslim life. Rather than changing the law he deemphasizes the importance of the *imām*. He writes that the role of the *imām* is merely a marker of time, and that it is possible to be a valuable Muslim leader without being an *imām*. It is for this reason that many women in the Muslim world have not tried to become *imāms*.⁵³

He also discusses issues of gender segregation. Again, he does not focus on the legal theory behind gender segregation. Rather, he focuses on the benefits that a segregated, dedicated space can have for women themselves. He quotes feminists such as Luce Irigaray, who similarly argue for such women’s spaces within the Western world.⁵⁴ Winter therefore believes that normative Islamic society is both patriarchal and matriarchal. It would be inappropriate to assume that Winter is simply being apologetic for traditional Islamic norms. His use of feminist theories has the potential to be more revolutionary than he himself has so far admitted; he is critical of the dominant Islamic legalistic approach towards gender norms. He writes that ignoring the spiritual aspects of religious law leads to a diminished respect for women:

This is why the contemporary Muslim interpretation of *shari'a* in ways which diminish *haqiqa* is so often accompanied by a diminished respect for women. The sexes are only regarded with equivalent esteem when *batin* and *zahir* are spoken of with equal frequency by believers.⁵⁵

The primary intent of these essays is not to reform Islamic law, but to make Islamic norms of gender difference understandable to a contemporary Western audience. His goal is to take a practice that is seen as alien, and show how it can have solidarity with contemporary Western thinkers. In doing so, however, there is an undertone of critique of current Muslim practices as is evident by the statement above. This undertone is even picked up by other neo-traditionalists such as Hamza Yusuf. In one of his lectures, Yusuf criticizes the myth that men are better than women, and he refers to Winter's paper "Boys will be Boys" as a critique of this myth.⁵⁶ For Yusuf, this essay is not simply trying to justify difference feminism, but it also tackles the myth of gender preference.

Thus, in the process of trying to define difference feminism, Winter develops an understanding of gender that critiques contemporary Muslim practices. Winter's appeal to spirituality enables him to move past the debate on gender in terms of Islamic law. In fact, he views the debate about gender as being solely framed by Islamic law and uses Sufism and Islamic spirituality as a means of bringing balance to the debate on gender. It should be noted however, that Winter never references any of the other Islamic feminists working in the field. It would be interesting to see what Islamic feminists think about Winter's approach to gender, although Winter's opinions on gender do not seem to have gained any attention outside of the neo-traditionalists discussed in this volume.

A major subtopic within Winter's discussion on difference feminism is the relationship between science and religion. As with many other neo-traditionalists, Winter tries to find a common ground between Islamic values and science. In the same essay, "Boys will be Boys," Winter strives to "show that an opposition to the Shari'ah is an opposition to science."⁵⁷ This search for common ground is aided by the fact that he lives in the West which he argues puts him "more in touch with contemporary trends in science and social theory"⁵⁸ compared to thinkers in Muslim-majority countries. The issues that he raises are the physical weakness of women, patterns of behaviour due to evolutionary biology, and difference in psychology.

The first issue that Winter raises is the physical weakness of women. Winter argues that the call for equality amongst the sexes has shown the limitations of such a strategy. One case in point is the United Kingdom's use of female recruits in the military. In 1998, "gender-free" selection procedures were adopted to ensure that men and women had identical tasks. Women were therefore required to perform more strenuous physical activities, which in turn led to more physical harm. Winter cites Ian Gemmell's study that showed that while stress fractures were at 1.5 per cent for males it was between 4.6 per cent and 11.1 per cent for females.⁵⁹ The same study also stated that because

of their different physical builds, there was 33–39 per cent more stress on the female skeleton. Winter concludes that the result is that “although social changes have eroded the traditional moral reasons for barring women from active combat roles, the medical evidence alone compels the British army to bar women from the infantry and the Royal Armoured Corps.”⁶⁰

The second issue that Winter raises is about evolutionary biology. According to Winter, evolutionary biology argues that “biological success amounts to one factor alone: the maximal propagation of an organism’s genetic material.”⁶¹ Since males and females have different reproductive strategies, they will also have different behaviours. One such example is “parental investment,” a term popularised by the foremost evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers.⁶² Females have nine months of pregnancy plus a period of weaning, whereas males are free of such commitments. Thus, sex becomes a limited resource, one in which males gain reproductive success through having multiple partners, and this explains the basis for competition and aggression amongst males. There is also a biological explanation for the strong nurturing instincts of women, due to estrogen and oxytocin, because women have “a far greater investment to lose if they neglect their children.”⁶³

For males, reproductive success was determined by aggression and competitiveness. These are traits that we still see in males today. Winter cites studies that show that the drive for competitiveness is why males choose fields such as math and science. At Harvard the male/female ratio for in the science department is seven to one: “the conclusion is not that women are less intelligent than men—the new biology clearly rules that out—but that they prefer to exercise it in specific fields.”⁶⁴ Males also have a biological advantage to taking university examinations. The male endocrine system was designed to focus on a single task, like hunting, which gives males the edge in exams. Thus universities are looking for replacements to the examination system.⁶⁵

There are a series of psychological traits that Winter also appeals to. He argues that the nature of male and female intelligence is different. Girls play games that are collaborative with deeper levels of discourse, whereas boys play games that are more rule based. 65 per cent of boy’s games are rule based compared to 35 per cent of games played by girls.⁶⁶ Thus boys are more rule-oriented. Men are also more risk takers, due to reasons of biological survival: in order to attract and keep mates the men had to take risks. This is why, today, more men than women participate in high-risk sports. Women are better suited for chores at the home because male biology seeks out novelty with a dislike for repetitive tasks.

Winter also relies on the works of psychologists such as Carol Gilligan, who have argued that there are psychological differences between the genders. Many of these works were originally seen to be emancipatory; they were written so women could be understood as they are and not be made to conform to male standards. For example, Gilligan argues that the “objective” position taken by psychologist during the 1970s “was based on an inherent neutrality

which concealed power and falsified knowledge.”⁶⁷ Gilligan argues that men and women have different moral voices and approach moral problems from different angles. Winter uses Gilligan’s work to argue the reason women define themselves in terms of relationships is due to the fact that in the pre-modern world women were primarily involved in care.⁶⁸ Winter argues that the new science of difference feminism and the *sharī‘ah* vindicate each other: “Equality is no more envisaged by nature than it is by the law of God; indeed, the law of God, for us, is commensurate with natural law.”⁶⁹ Both the *sharī‘ah* and the science of difference feminism state that the concept of equality as sameness is not an effective approach to gender. They are also in agreement that it is better to approach the issue in terms of opportunity and respect: “We insist, therefore, that our revealed law, confirmed so magnificently in its assumptions by the new science, upholds the dignity and the worth of women more reliably than secularity ever can.”⁷⁰

Although Winter makes use of biology and evolutionary biology he is against the idea that humans evolved from pre-historic apes, even though he agrees with the concept of microevolution. Thus, animals can evolve to gain certain traits but they cannot evolve from one type of species into another. Winter touches on this topic in passing, while he is discussing the biological differences between men and women.

Winter states that the theory of evolution has come under attack from philosophers and physicists alike: “Darwinism and neo-Darwinism are of course under attack now, particularly by philosophers and physicists, rather more seriously than at any other time over the past hundred years.” However, he does not offer any references to support this view. The only critical engagement with the theory of evolution that he does cite is an article written by Shaykh Nuh Keller: “And as Shaykh Nuh Keller has shown, a thoroughgoing commitment to the theory of evolution is incompatible with the *Qur’ānic* account of the origins of humanity.”⁷¹ Following Keller, Winter accepts micro-evolution or the “perpetuation and reinforcement over time of genetically successful strategies for survival . . .”⁷²

The article that Winter is referencing is Keller’s *Islam and Evolution*. Keller’s article is not a denial of science or the scientific method, but instead reaches its conclusions by analysing the claims for evolution particularly through a philosophy of science. He references a variety of different Western scholars such as Charles Darwin, Charles Peirce, and Jürgen Habermas. Keller’s conclusion is that the claim “that man has evolved from a non-human species . . . is unbelief (kufr);”⁷³ this is diametrically opposed to the position of Yasir Qadhi, an American Salafi reformer (see Chapter 5) who believes that the theory of evolution is an established fact.

Nonetheless, Winter’s theory of difference feminism is well grounded in scientific research. He cites many of the top feminists, psychologists, and biologists that have worked on this topic. This does not mean that the scientists will necessarily agree with Winter’s interpretation of their research. This does, however, highlight how Winter believes science and Islamic thought overlap,

and that he is comfortable in coming to a dialogue with science. In a way, it shows how he is applying his theory of balanced rationality.

Creating British Islam

One of the other major topics that Winter discusses is British Muslim identity. The website that hosts many of Winter's essays (masud.co.uk) lists numerous essays under this category. As a British Muslim convert, it is a subject that is quite close to Winter. He writes that the issue of British Muslim identity will determine the future of Islam in the U.K.: "My own belief is that the future prosperity of the Anglo-Muslim movement will be determined largely by our ability to answer this question of identity."⁷⁴

Winter's understanding of the British Muslim identity is rather unique. He believes that Islam is the natural progression of Britishness. He sets up his argument on the premises that Islam is a universal religion, and that moral and religious temper of the British best match Islam. Islam "is the most suitable faith for the British."⁷⁵

Winter's first claim is that "Islam, as a universal religion, in fact as the only legitimately universal religion, also makes room for the particularities of the peoples who come into it." He illustrates this point by looking at the history of Islam. He draws attention to the fact that Muslims were able to "accommodate those aspects of local, pre-Islamic tradition which did not clash absolutely with the truths of revelation."⁷⁶ A striking example is the history of Islam in China. Winter writes how many of the leading mandarins of the Ming dynasty were Muslim, and that Chinese mosques look like traditional garden-temples without idols and with Qur'ānic calligraphy.

Winter also describes how converts have an initial period where they view everything that pious Muslims do as angelic and everything outside of that as demonic. He labels this as "convertitis." While it is difficult to deal with those who have been afflicted with "convertitis" the effects of it soon wear off. The majority of converts that came to Islam for spiritual and intellectual reasons continue on their journey, but those who sought Islam for identities remain in search of sects and factions. British Muslims must keep a positive view towards diversity alive:

Islam is, and will continue to be, even amid the miserable globalisation of modern culture, a faith that celebrates diversity. Our thinking about our own position as British Muslims should focus on that fact, and quietly but firmly ignore the protests both of the totalitarian fringe, and of the importers of other regional cultures, such as that of Pakistan, which they regard as the only legitimate Islamic ideal.⁷⁷

On the other side, Winter does not see Europe as having a history of diversity: "Only in Europe was there a consistent policy of enforcing religious uniformity."

The reason for this religious uniformity stems from Church theology where everyone was tainted by the original sin, and was seen as an instrument of the devil unless one believed in Christ's redemptive suffering. With such a set of beliefs "it was only natural that Europe constantly strove for religious uniformity."⁷⁸

Winter supports his claim that Islam is closer to the British moral and religious temper by citing the works of great British thinkers such as Henry Stubbe, Thomas Carlyle, and George Bernard Shaw. It was due to England's protestant past that England became the "the first country in Europe where medieval images of Islam could be challenged." He cites Stubbe as the "first European Christian to write favourably of Islam."⁷⁹ Stubbe was an English physician and scholar who trained in Oxford and Westminster and held radical religious and political views. He was eventually accused of heresy and died in prison. Winter states that Stubbe "constantly shows Islam to be a purer and more rational form of religion than Christianity,"⁸⁰ a stance that is also corroborated by other scholars, such as James Jacob, who have studied Stubbe's writings on Islam.⁸¹

Thomas Carlyle was considered as one of the most influential social commentators in the nineteenth century. In 1840 he presented a lecture on *The Hero as Prophet* which was a positive appreciation of the Prophet of Islam, and he used the example of the prophet of Islam as a warrior saint against Christian notions of pacifism. George Bernard Shaw, the famous twentieth-century playwright and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, was also impressed by this image of the prophet. Shaw had been thinking about writing a play about the prophet, but feared protests from the Turkish ambassador.⁸² It is, nonetheless, Stubbe's writings about Islam to which Winter gives the most weight. As Winter argues, Stubbe saw Islam as a pragmatic and practical religion. This is why Stubbe was attracted to Islam's view towards sex and polygamy, the practicality of Islamic practices, as well as the notion of jihad. Christianity in contrast, Stubbe believed, had a negative attitude towards sex, was cumbered with troublesome ceremonies, filled with abstruse notions, and its idea of pacifism was impractical.⁸³

According to Winter, Islam as a universal religion with its respect for diversity coupled with Britain's moral temper, its appreciation of pragmatic and practical moral norms, means that Islam "is the most suitable faith for the British. Its values are our values."⁸⁴ This overlap between Islam and British values is summarized by Winter as such:

Its moderate, undemonstrative style of piety, still waters running deep; its insistence on modesty and a certain reserve, and its insistence on common sense and on pragmatism, combine to furnish the most natural and easy religious option for our people.⁸⁵

On the other hand, "Christianity, formerly a Greek mystery religion advocating a moral code against the natural law, is in fact foreign to our national

temperament.”⁸⁶ The origin of Islam is no more foreign to the British than Christianity; yet its values are more British than those of Christianity.

The Cambridge Muslim College

Tied in to Winter’s endeavours to cultivate British Muslim identity is his work at the Cambridge Muslim College. The Cambridge Muslim College (CMC) is dedicated to teaching graduates from British Islamic seminaries, namely the *dār al-‘ulūms*, in order to augment their religious learning with a liberal arts training. The goal is to have these students better understand the realities of contemporary British society so that they can better serve their communities. Moreover, they have started to offer a four-year programme in Islamic Studies starting this year. The goal of this programme is to offer religious education to Muslims living in Britain.

The CMC was established in 2002 by three trustees of the Muslim Academic Trust. These trustees consisted of Yusuf Islam (the famous British convert singer-songwriter Cat Stevens), Shaykh Tijani Gahbiche, and Tim Winter. The CMC has made a slow but steady progression towards their goals. One of its stated goals is to be “a recognised centre of excellence offering a B.A. and M.A. in Islamic Studies, taught by a team of Islamic scholars in conjunction and collaboration with the expertise available at the University of Cambridge.”⁸⁷

The CMC’s curriculum for their four-year programme is based on the curriculum of the Al Fatih Islamic Institute (*Ma’had al-Fatih*) in Damascus.⁸⁸ Al Fatih was established by the late Syrian scholar Shaykh Muhammad Salih Farfour (d. 1986). It was an outgrowth of Farfour’s popular teaching circles that were held in the Umayyad Mosque.⁸⁹ The undergraduate department was established in 1971 and consisted of three specializations: Islamic Jurisprudence and its Foundations, Arabic Language and Literature, Sciences of *ḥadīth* and Sciences of the Qur’ān.⁹⁰ Al Fatih had established itself as being a stepping-stone towards al-Azhar. Three years of the B.A. programme was to be held at al Fatih but the fourth year was to be held at al-Azhar itself. Thus the al Fatih curriculum was based on al-Azhar’s curriculum but with slight modifications: its website describes the curriculum as being “almost the same as al-Azhar University with minor modification to cope with the social and structural differences of modern age [sic].”⁹¹ Initially graduates attained an “official international university degree signed by the head of al-Azhar University,” but starting from the 2005 academic year graduates obtained their degrees from the Syrian Minister of High Studies.⁹²

While Al Fatih had three departments and allowed for three separate specializations, the CMC has streamlined their curriculum into one general path. The aim of CMC’s four-year programme is to teach the fundamentals of the Islamic tradition as a coherent intellectual and spiritual body of knowledge,

and to examine the ways that contemporary life might “challenge, reinforce or reshape the Islamic tradition.”⁹³ It is hoped that these graduates will be able to better apply their knowledge and understanding of Islam to contemporary society.⁹⁴

The first year of the programme is to be held at the Qasid Arabic Institute, and this year is dedicated solely to Arabic. The Qasid Arabic Institute, based in Jordan, is one of the leading centres for study of the Arabic language, and it works in conjunction with various universities such as Harvard and Oxford.⁹⁵ The subsequent three years cover a variety of topics such as Qur’ān and *ḥadīth* studies, history, theology, and Islamic literature. A more detailed outline curriculum can be found in Table 2.1.

It is still unclear as to how this degree is accredited. The CMC website states that enrolment in the course is dependent upon “completion of an external validation agreement with a major U.K. university.”⁹⁶ There are no details about this university, and there are no specifics about the type of accreditation. Nonetheless, accreditation does take time and more details will probably be presented in the future. Absent from this curriculum are courses that are focused on British life and contemporary society. The reason for this is that the CMC also offers a Diploma in Contextual Islamic Studies and Leadership. This is their most active degree, and it currently defines CMC’s identity. This degree was established over a year-long effort by two Cambridge Ph.D. students, Mujadad Zaman and James (Abdul Aziz) Brown. The curriculum of this degree was an outgrowth of the “non-traditional” segment of the B.A. curriculum. This “non-traditional” segment consisted of courses that would help students better understand contemporary society.⁹⁷ In an interview Tim Winter describes the goal of this degree as such:

Here in the United Kingdom we’re blessed with the existence of at least 80 major Islamic intellectual institutions. These are the *dār al-‘ulūms*. Miniature Islamic universities that for years now have been turning out a great generation of young scholars. What we have at the Cambridge Muslim College is an opportunity for those graduates to remain fully faithful to what they’ve learned, to their scholars, to their teachers, to their professors, to their institutions and tradition, while augmenting that by exposing them in a sensitive but profound way to the realities of the modern British society in which they are going to be working.⁹⁸

The curriculum for the Diploma in Contextual Islamic Studies and Leadership has, as the title suggests, a mix of courses that introduce various topics within the liberal arts as well as courses designed to develop leadership skills. The first term consists of courses in British Islam Today, Introduction to the Social Sciences, the U.K. State, World History, World Religions, and Islamic Counselling. The second term consists of courses in Effective Community Leadership, Modern British Political History, Islam and Religious Pluralism, and introductory

Table 2.1 Curriculum of CMC

Year 1	Description
Intensive Arabic	Memorisation Requirement: <i>Juz' 30</i>
Year 2	Description
RF1 – The Revealed Foundations (I): Introduction to the <i>Qur'ān</i> and <i>ḥadīth</i>	General introduction to <i>Qur'ānic</i> and <i>Ḥadīth</i> studies. Includes studies on <i>maṭn</i> and <i>isnād</i> along with <i>tajwīd</i>
ID1 – Introduction to Islamic Doctrine: kalam, falsafa and Sufism	General history of <i>kalām</i> , <i>falsafah</i> and Sufism. Covers topics such as creation, free will, and the uncreated <i>Qur'ān</i>
IH1 – Introduction to Islamic History	Covers the life of the Prophet, general Islamic history to the present and Islam in the Indian Subcontinent
IL1 – Introduction to Islamic Law	Covers jurisprudence (<i>uṣūl al-fiqh</i>) along with rulings related to worship, personal status law, marriage and divorce
Year 3	Description
RF2 – The Revealed Foundations (II): Further Studies in the <i>Qur'ān</i> and <i>ḥadīth</i>	Covers a selection of <i>Qur'ānic</i> and <i>ḥadīth</i> commentators
ID2 – Intermediate Studies in Islamic Doctrine	A study of al-Bayjūrī's commentary on the <i>Jawharah al-Tawhīd</i>
IL2 – Intermediate Studies in Islamic Law	Covers contemporary issues in marriage, divorce and inheritance law as well as <i>iṭihād</i> and <i>iftā'</i> .
WL1 – Literatures of the Islamic World	A study of various types of Islamic literature including Arabic prose from the medieval period, Sufi poetry, and British Muslim literature
Memorisation Requirement: <i>Juz' 28 & Jawharah al-Tawhīd</i>	

Source: Cambridge Muslim College website

courses in Astronomy, Science and Western Intellectual History. The third term covers Islam and Gender, Modern British Intellectual History, Modern Muslim History, Modern Religious Thinkers, Religious Ethics in the Modern World, and Sacred Art and Architecture.

What differentiates this course from a traditional liberal arts course is that it is designed for the graduates of Islamic seminaries. Thus, the courses will usually present material in comparison to Islamic thinkers and concepts that students are already familiar with. For example, the course on Modern Religious Thinkers introduces various Christian religious thinkers and examines “the notion of a public theologian and how it differs from the Islamic classical roles of a scholar.”⁹⁹ The course on Western Intellectual History presents the main trends of “Western” thought with reference to “the points of convergence and divergence with the intellectual history of Islamic civilisations.”¹⁰⁰

CMC’s vision for the M.A. programme, on the other hand, is a two-year part-time research based qualification.¹⁰¹ The goal of the programme is to train students to “gain research skills necessary to enable them to apply for a Ph.D. in a major university; but the M.A. is also envisaged as a valuable terminal degree in its own right.”¹⁰² There is no official statement about when this M.A. programme will begin.

The CMC helps to provide a type of education that it believes can help the graduates from British Islamic seminaries apply their knowledge more effectively to the contemporary British context. It is an extension of the type of curriculum reform movements that have held sway in al-Azhar and various other Islamic institutions of learning. The difference is that the CMC has a specific focus on the British context, where as other Islamic institutions focus on Muslim-majority countries. It remains to be seen what type of effect this approach is having on the students.

Notes

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18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Hamza Yusuf, *Vision of Islam* [Audio CD] (Alhambra Publications, 2004).
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23. Ibid., 2.
24. Ibid., 6.
25. Ibid., 7.
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