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Between Traditionalism & Neo-Traditionalism: A Closer Look at Two Schools of Western Islam and their Critique of Modernity

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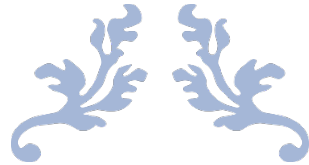
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BETWEEN TRADITIONALISM & NEO-TRADITIONALISM

A Closer Look at Two Schools of Western Islam and their Critique of Modernity

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Introduction

Since the second half of the 20th century there has lived a large minority of Muslims in what is commonly known as the Western world. Even though since then multiple generations of Muslims have grown up in the contemporary West, there has been a persistent view in the West of Islam being a foreign religion.¹

This has coincided with calls for a more local form of Islam. Usually, the idea behind such calls is that Muslims in Western countries should reshape their Islamic beliefs to a form that is more in line with the “modern” values prevalent in the Western world. In some cases, leaders of Western countries have begun to outline plans for the creation of such a Western form of Islam, such as the French President Emmanuel Macron who in November of 2022 outlined how he wanted to establish a “French Islam” that was subservient to the values of the French republic.²

Several academics have looked at the concept of Western Islam in a more scrutinous way and describe that such a Western Islam is in fact already being created by Western Muslims. Adis Durderija and Halim Rane describe Western Islam as a contemporary phenomenon ‘based on a comprehensive yet reasonable doctrine that embraces values of modernity and legitimises them both theologically and politically’.³

Masooda Bano points out that there are ongoing attempts to create a “Western Islam”, which she describes as a contemporary trend spearheaded by a new generation of Muslim scholars living in the West who are aware of the realities and challenges of living there and are attempting to create local forms of Islam by integrating modern thought with Islam.⁴ While Durderija, Hale and Bano move beyond the political calls of “Muslims should be more Western”, we can see that these articles still largely understand Western Islam as something that is currently happening and that is in some way capable to fuse itself with contemporary “Western” or “modern” ideas.

As such, they seem to keep alive a dichotomy in which Muslims have to adapt their Islam to modern Western values to truly become Western. In this thesis I will attempt to scrutinize these prevailing notions about Western Islam to show that Muslims can be authentically Western without being modern and that such a non-modern Western Islam in fact already finds its roots in the early 20th century.

I will try to show that this is the case by comparing the intellectual ideas of a school of thought Bano names in her research: the Neo-Traditionalist school, to a school going back to the 1920’s: René Guénon’s “Traditionalist” school.⁵ For those familiar with these schools, this might come as a surprise. While their names suggest a connection, at first glance the Neo-Traditionalist and Traditionalist school seem to have little to do with one another. The Neo-

¹ Jackleen M. Salem. “Citizenship and Religious Expression in the West: A Comparative Analysis of Experiences of Muslims in France, Germany, and the USA.” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 33, no. 1 (2013): 77–78.

² Rayan Freschi. “Macron’s French Islam echoes repressive policies of Gulf regimes”. *Middle East Eye*, 2019

³ Adis Durderija & Halim Rane, “Introduction” In *Islam and Muslims in the West: Major Issues and Debates*, (Palgrave Macmillan: 2018), 8

⁴ Masooda Bano. “Islamic Authority and Centres of Knowledge Production in Europe.” *Journal of Muslims in Europe* (2022): 20-22

⁵ Mark Sedgwick, “René Guénon and Traditionalism” In *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*, (Cambridge University Press: 2016), 308

Traditionalists are described as orthodox Sunni,⁶ while Traditionalism is often described as believing in the validity of all the world's religions a concept which is known as "Perennialism".⁷

But as we will come to see, both schools share an essential element: a strong criticism of modernity. Using this shared element as a lens, I will attempt to argue that there exists an intricate relationship between the ideas of these two schools and that the development of these ideas from one school to another can be better understood considering their shared criticism of modernity. By exploring the development between these two schools this thesis will attempt to make the case for its hypothesis, which states that: *There is an evolved understanding of Western Islam between the Traditionalists and the Neo-Traditionalists that undermines prevailing notions of Western Islam as something necessarily modern and contemporary*".

As of late, there has been an increasing interest in the contemporary Traditionalist school, how it has evolved and its critique of modernity, a phenomenon which Mark Sedgwick describes in his book on "Post-Traditionalism", in which he focuses on the influence of Traditionalist ideas on various political figures.⁸ Likewise, Walaa Quisay focuses on the Neo-Traditionalist school in her book "Neo-traditionalism in Islam in the West", in which she, alongside other matters, describes Neo-Traditionalism's flirtation with anti-modern thought.⁹

What this research attempts to add on to this discussion is give a greater overview by looking at both these schools and attempting to trace an intellectual evolution between these two schools of Western Islam. By connecting this evolution to the specific concept of a Western Islam, it hopes to gain new insights into the relation between Western Islam and the critique of modernity. We will attempt to do so by conducting a comparative research between the two schools.

Comparative research offers the opportunity to gain an understanding of their individual views on Western Islam and the opportunity to juxtapose these views to make a case for this intellectual development. I will argue that their contradictions dissolve upon closer diachronic examination, and that by overcoming these contradictions we can start to see a narrative of continuity instead of contradiction between these two schools.

This narrative of continuity will attempt to describe, explain and interpret the development of their ideas on Western Islam from one school to the other. As we assume their shared critique of modernity as a lens, we gain an understanding of what Western Islam means for these two schools, how it might have developed and why it developed it in this way, by relating it back to this shared critique. With the culminative result of these findings we will try to broaden the current understanding of what Western Islam is.

⁶ Kasper Mathiesen, "Anglo-American 'Traditional Islam' and Its Discourse of Orthodoxy". *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, 191.

⁷ William Rory Dickson, René Guénon and Traditionalism in "*Handbook of Islamic Sects and movements*", (Brill: 2021), 589-611

⁸ Mark Sedgwick, *Traditionalism: The Radical Project for Restoring Sacred Order*, (Penguin Books Ltd: 2023)

⁹ Walaa Quisay, *Neo-traditionalism in Islam in the West: Orthodoxy, Spirituality and Politics*. (Edinburgh University Press: 2023)

Before this research can begin, it is necessary to engage with the current conceptualizations of Western Islam to make clear what we mean by “Western” and by “Western Islam” in this research. Subsequently, we need to review the existing literature to get a better overview of which contradictions and gaps in the literature need to be tackled to draw the connection between these two schools. After identifying these gaps, the research process will be discussed in more detail in the theory and methodology section, in which the scope of this research, the methodological framework for comparison and the theoretical framework for analysis will be expounded upon.

The comparative process itself will be conducted along the lines of their views on Western Islam, guided by the gaps found in the literature review. Describing their individual positions and juxtaposing these positions, I will use a hermeneutical reading of the available primary material to give a holistic overview of these positions, relating their differences and similarities back to their critique of modernity to see whether a development in their views can be understood through this critique.

In the analysis part of this research, we will use the comprehensive findings on their understandings of Western Islam to paint a narrative of intellectual evolution and influence between the two schools. Here we will attempt to show how Guénon’s ideas on Western Islam were formed along the lines of his critique of modernity, evolved over time and were eventually taken up in this evolved sense by the Neo-Traditionalists. Lastly, in the conclusion we will return to our hypothesis and conclude how an understanding of these two schools can lead to a renewed and broader understanding of what Western Islam is.

Western Islam

While the term “the West” is contentious, we use this term as pertaining to those countries who are part of what Samuel Huntington called “Western Civilization”.¹⁰ Furthermore, of those countries, we only count those that in the cold war were that were in the cold war part of the Western Bloc. In this way, we avoid the idea that we might be speaking about Japan (not part of Huntington’s definition of Western Civilization) or Poland (not historically part of the Western Bloc). Now that we have defined which countries we mean by “the West”, we can begin looking at the idea of Western Islam.

Western Islam as something distinct:

In the past few decades, we have seen calls for local form of Islam in several Western countries. The French president Emmanuel Macron was the latest in a line of global figures to do so, when he in a speech in October 2020, after the death of Samuel Paty, called for a “French form of Islam” and to “free it from foreign influences”.¹¹ This French Islam, Macron explained, adhered to “French values” such as liberty, secularism and freedom of speech. Similarly, there have been calls for other local forms of Islam in the West, such as the call for a German Islam by Finance Minister Wolfgang Schaeuble in 2016, who said that such a German Islam should be based around values of Liberalism.¹²

Often, the call for such forms of Islam come as a reaction to a perceived rise in Islamic extremism as we can see in Macron’s case. The idea seems to be that if Muslims would adapt country and understand their Islam within the framework of those local values they would start posing less of a threat.

But what are these so-called local values? Although these politicians call for specifically local forms of Islam; “French” “German”, when we compare the call from Macron to that of Schaeuble, the values they call for seem to be roughly the same. It is a call for Muslims to accept values such as the separation of state and church, democracy, religious freedom etc. Instead of particularly local values then, it seems mostly a call for Muslims to adhere their Islam to the contemporary or “modern” Western values of the West such as we have defined it here. Calls for local forms of Islam thus become calls for a broadly Western form of Islam, an Islam that adheres to values that are seen as Western and modern.

Adis Durderija and Halim Rane have shown that this is something that is already going on and that Western Muslim intellectuals have shown a willingness to ‘engender new discourses which would religiously justify and promote the social, cultural, and political integration of Western Muslims without the loss of their religious identity’.¹³ They continue by saying that while there is a number of contrasting views on how to go about this, all of them share the belief in the viability of a Western Muslim identity.¹⁴

¹⁰ Samuel P. Huntington, “The New Era in World Politics” In *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, (Simon & Schuster: 1996), 19-39

¹¹ Emmanuel Macron, “La République en actes: discours du Président de la République sur le thème de la lutte contre les séparatismes.” October 2, 2020, accessed via <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/10/02/la-republique-en-actes-discours-du-president-de-la-republique-sur-le-theme-de-la-lutte-contre-les-separatismes>

¹² Reuters “Germany’s finance minister urges Muslim residents to develop a liberal, tolerant, ‘German Islam’”, The Express Tribune, 2016

¹³ Adis Durderija & Halim Rane, “An Emerging Western Islam” In *Islam and Muslims in the West: Major Issues and Debates*, (Palgrave Macmillan: 2018), 237-238

¹⁴ Ibid

Masooda Bano in her research also shows this diversity of interpretations. She describes Western Islam as a largely contemporary phenomenon spearheaded by a group of Muslim scholars from the West who are interpreting Islamic texts in light of the realities of living in Europe.¹⁵ She points out that Muslims who are attempting to do so, are not always “liberal” in the modern Western sense but can just as likely be conservative. These more conservatively inclined scholars do not agree with the idea of abandoning Islamic *fiqh* to establish a more modern or enlightened Western form of Islam.¹⁶

But there is a problem with Bano’s definition of Western Islam as merely the interpretation of Islam by Western Muslims in light of their local realities. Bano assesses that in the West there have been Muslim scholars not properly understanding the Western context and that this is a reason for the rising call for a Western form of Islam. But merely taking a local context in mind when providing fatwa’s does not seem to be enough to speak of a Western Islam as truly distinct from other forms of Islam.

Durderija and Rane underline this and point out that certain Western Muslim intellectuals propose a creation of a Western Islam that is distinct in a religio-cultural sense, differentiated from other interpretations of Islam, as they believe Islam has historically adapted itself to the cultural environment.¹⁷ We agree with this understanding. Only those who are actively trying to integrate a certain “Westernness” with Islam - and whose Islamic ideas are in turn shaped by this Westernness - can be said to be actively part of a Western Islam. In this definition of Western Islam, it becomes intermittently linked with the West, not just as a form of Islam that is aware of the West, but a form of Islam that is in some ways Western in and of itself and particular to the West.

Understood in this manner Western Islam becomes fundamentally linked to the West, akin to an “Andalusian Islam” or a “Indonesian Islam”. When using those localities as a prefix, we are not only describing very specific practices but rather an overarching idea of Islam and how it developed within a distinct geospatial location and/or among a particular people. This form of Islam is particular to a location/people whose ideas (and in turn their practices) on Islam have developed in a way that stems from their locality. When it comes to Westernness then, this thesis agrees more with the sense of Western Islam by the likes of Macron: If Islam wants to be Western (or local, depending on the specific country) it should indeed take on a local form.

Adapting to modernity:

Durderija and Rane discuss two Western Muslim scholars; Tariq Ramadan and Bassam Tibi. Both of these scholars agree with the idea of a distinct Western Islam as we have defined it here and, although much of their methodologies differ, agree on one important thing. As Durderija and Rane mention ‘both Tibi and Ramadan promote the idea of a Western Islam as a culturally distinct and authentic expression and manifestation of universal Islamic teachings that sits comfortably with the political theory underpinnings of Western liberal democracies’¹⁸

¹⁵ Bano. “Islamic Authority”, 20-22

¹⁶ Ibid, 31-33

¹⁷ Durderija & Rane, “An Emerging Western”, 237

¹⁸ Ibid, 247

Similarly, in the definition of Macron, his French Islam, while focused on French Laïcité, is largely in line with the values of Western liberal democracies broadly. Bano partly overcomes this with the discussion of conservatives in her research but retains much of the focus on modernity and contemporary Western values. There remains thus an element of Islam needing to overcome a paradox between its values and the modern values of the contemporary West. In this sense, both in Academic research and in the words of Macron, Islam in Western countries only becomes localized when it can adapt itself to modern values.

This observation leads us to what we think is a problem with the current definitions of Western Islam. It is seen as something that either should be established in some near-future (in Macron's definition), or as a contemporary phenomenon (in Bano's definition). This idea of Western Islam being something contemporary or of the future is then tied to a fusion between Islam and contemporary (and often relatively global) Western values instead of focusing on older "traditional" values of the locality of specific countries.

Western Islam in this way becomes a contemporary or potential future phenomenon, established by Muslims in the West to be able to overcome the dichotomy between modern Western values and Islamic values. But does a local form of Islam have to necessarily be in line with modern Western values? We will attempt to show that the answer to that question is no. Instead, we will argue that Muslims in the West can establish a Western Islam that is both distinct in a religio-cultural sense and that this is a process that is not only contemporary but one that has begun a century ago.

Bano mentions the Neo-Traditionalists as one group of Muslims who are attempting to create a Western Islam and who adhere to a more conservative understanding of Islam.¹⁹ As we will see in the literature review, connections have been drawn between the Neo-Traditionalist school and the Traditionalist school of René Guénon, claiming that the former has been of influence on the latter.

With the Traditionalist school going back to the 1920's and both of them being known as critical of modernity, there is an opportunity to give an updated understanding of the historicity of Western Islam and of Western Islam having to conform itself to modern Western values to be Western. If the Traditionalist school is indeed critical of modernity but also a school founded by Westerners and aimed at the West, then analyzing whether the connections drawn between the Traditionalist school and the later Neo-Traditionalist school show that these ideas remain prominent within the Neo-Traditionalist school would invalidate both these notions.

If we can investigate the connections between these schools in light of their views on Western Islam and how these views pertain to their criticism of modernity we might arrive at an updated understanding of Western Islam, both in a temporal sense and with regards to its necessary characteristics. What stands in the way of drawing these connections is that these two schools, while having similar names, are often described in very different ways. In the next chapter we will analyze the literature on these both schools and on their connections to find out which problems need to be overcome to draw these connections and get a broad overview of their understanding of Western Islam.

¹⁹ Bano., "Islamic Authority", 20-22

Literature Review and discussion of the Neo-Traditionalists and the Traditionalists

This literature review will be somewhat out of the ordinary as I will not only expound on the literature that compares the two relevant schools, but also provide an overview of the two individual schools. By finding out how the schools are individually described we can then compare this with the current research that deals with their connection, to see where the relevant gaps in the literature are. I will begin this chapter by describing the beliefs of Neo-Traditionalism through the relevant literature and do the same for the Traditionalist school. After that I will investigate what has been written about the similarities and differences between both schools.

Neo-Traditionalism and its beliefs

While Neo-Traditionalism's origins can be traced back to Islamic scholars in the Arab world it has become prominent in the West with the school's most famous contemporary scholars and institutions located in the UK and the US.²⁰ Neo-Traditionalism has been described as: "an inclination towards and participating in the movement to return to the classical adherence to the schools of Islamic law, the study and contextualization of mainstream Sunni doctrine and the study and practice of traditional Islamic spirituality (historically referred to as Sufism)".²¹

This inclination towards traditional understandings of Islam is reflected both in thought but also in practice. According to Brendan Newlon, Neo-Traditionalists do not merely look back at the Islamic golden age longingly but believe that the ways things were done in the past are also the best ways to tackle modern challenges.²² This call for a return to the past does not mean that there is no leeway for change or dissenting opinions. Newlon refers to Neo-Traditionalists scholars such as Hamza Yusuf who believe that plurality is an important part of traditional Islamic thought. As such Neo-Traditionalists like Yusuf oppose the "exclusive" interpretation of Salafist scholars as well as the "lax" interpretation of Islamic Modernists.²³ Newlon continues by saying that Neo-Traditionalists are not opposed to change but believe that this should always build upon essential unchanging Islamic teachings.²⁴

Christopher Razavian mentions another important figurehead of Neo-Traditionalism: The British scholar Abdul Hakim Murad.²⁵ Like Hamza Yusuf, Murad follows a similar opinion on plurality. According to Murad "to be authentically Islamic...is to acknowledge that there are multiple understandings of the Islamic text".²⁶ In another article, Razavian describes "The Cambridge Muslim College", an institution headed by Murad. While primarily a center for Islamic education, Razavian points out that the College does not focus merely on Islam, but

²⁰ Masooda Bano, "Part I- Neo-Traditionalism, Introduction" in: *Modern Islamic Authority and Social Change, Volume 2*, (Cambridge University Press: 2021), 37-38

²¹ Abdullah Ali, "'Neo-Traditionalism' Vs 'Traditionalism'", n.d., accessed on March 12, 2023 via: <https://lamppostedu.org/neo-traditionalism-vs-traditionalism-shaykh-abdullah-bin-hamid-ali>

²² Brendan Newlon, "American Muslim Networks and Neotraditionalism". Dissertation, UC Santa Barbara. 2017.

²³ Ibid, 76-85

²⁴ Ibid, 63-66

²⁵ Christopher Pooya Razavian, "The Neo-Traditionalism of Tim Winter", in: "Modern Islamic Authority and Social Change, Volume 2: Evolving Debates in the West", (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 78

²⁶ Ibid

on “British Islam”. That is to say, its curriculum includes a strong emphasis on having its students understand contemporary British society.²⁷

Similarly, Zaytuna college, an institute headed by Hamza Yusuf, is described as primarily occupied with creating an American Muslim identity.²⁸ It seems that for Neo-Traditionalists, understanding the Western societies they live in is important. With this also seems to come an opposition to anti-colonialist and anti-racist thought, something that has been mentioned by other researchers such as Jason Sparkes²⁹ and Kasper Mathiesen.³⁰

Mathiesen mentions the Neo-Traditionalist Murad as broadly part of the same strand of what he calls “Anglo-American traditional Islam” as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who he says continues to be an influence on the Neo-Traditionalists.³¹ This is interesting because Nasr is part of the Traditionalist school of René Guénon. This school is usually described as “Perennialist”, which seems to be a far cry from the orthodox Sunnism of the Neo-Traditionalists. In the next chapter the difference between these schools will become clearer as I will describe what has been written about the beliefs of the Traditionalist school.

²⁷ Ibid, 87-88

²⁸ Nathan Spannaus and Christophe Pooya Razavian, “Zaytuna College and the Construction of an American Muslim Identity” in: “Modern Islamic Authority and Social Change, Volume 2: Evolving Debates in the West”, (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 39

²⁹ Jason Sparkes, “Tradition as Flow: Decolonial Currents in the Muslim Atlantic”, Laurier, (2020): 1-17

³⁰ Mathiesen “Traditional Islam”, 191-219

³¹ Ibid, 198

Traditionalism and its beliefs

In the early 20th century, a French scholar of metaphysics by the name of René Guénon developed his ideas and quickly gained a following. Guénon can be seen as the founder of what would later be called the Traditionalist school.³² Traditionalism as a term is widely used for all kinds of strands, both by practitioners and by academics. In this research, Traditionalism will specifically refer to the school of thought of the same name as established by Guénon. In this I will follow Mark Sedgwick who distinguishes Traditionalism with a capital T as the school that grew out of Guénon's ideas - sometimes called "Guénonian Traditionalism" - ³³ while traditionalism (uncapitalized) can denote many strands.³⁴

Despite the similar name, there is seemingly no direct connection between the Traditionalists and the Neo-Traditionalists. As a matter of fact, at first glance the Traditionalists might not seem Islamic at all. Often described as Perennialist, the core of Traditionalism is the belief in a perennial metaphysical essence that is shared by all the world's religions.³⁵ Their critique is largely aimed at the modern West, which they claim has lost access to this metaphysical truth, as modernity has corrupted the Western religious Traditions.³⁶ It is as such often seen as part of Western Occultism.

Mark Sedgwick's, 2004 book *Against the Modern World* gives a broader overview of the school its influence, its doctrine and its history and is till this day by far the most complete study on Traditionalism, although the book received strong criticism from Traditionalists themselves.³⁷ Sedgwick is of the view that Traditionalism is in many ways incompatible with mainstream Islam and that it would not be seen by Orthodox Muslims as part of Islam.³⁸ In a 2016 article, featured in the handbook of Western esotericism and Mysticism, Sedgwick describes Traditionalism as a "development of Western and Non-Western esotericism that ultimately produced a new definition of the esoteric as the primordial religion".³⁹

Some researchers have studied Traditionalism as an Islamic sect, mainly because Guénon eventually converted to Islam. Rory Dickson's article on the school is included in Brill's Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements. He describes the school of René Guénon as "having played a significant role in the transmission of Islam within Europe and North America".⁴⁰ It further describes several of the school's most prominent adherents, such as Frithjof Schuon, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Michel Valsan, who all converted to Islam. Just as Guénon, these students of his would be staunch critics of modernity.⁴¹

³² Mark Sedgwick, "René Guénon and Traditionalism" in: "The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism", (Cambridge University Press: 2016), 308

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Mark Sedgwick, "Traditionalism" In *Against the Modern World : Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge University Press: 2016), 21-22

³⁵ William Rory Dickson, "René Guénon and Traditionalism" in *Handbook of Islamic Sects and movements*, (Brill: 2021), 589-611

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Róbert Horváth, "Book Review: 'Against The Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century'", *Studies in Comparative Religion*, (2009)

³⁸ Sedgwick, "Traditionalism", 21-38

³⁹ Sedgwick, "René Guénon", 320

⁴⁰ Dickson, "René Guénon", 589

⁴¹ Ibid, 589-609

On the other hand, Dickson says that at the center of this critique was not an Islamic argument but the believe in a single metaphysical truth. This truth, they believe, was carried by a primordial Tradition, with Islam just being one of the forms to access the ultimate metaphysical truth. Throughout the article we can see that the school was at least as much, if not more, influenced by Hinduism and Gnosticism.⁴² Patrick Laude in his “Pathways to an Inner Islam”: gives perhaps one of the most Islamic centered overviews of the Traditionalists. We find that several Traditionalists followed Guénon in his conversion to Islam and that through this Sufism became important for the school,⁴³ especially because they saw Sufism as an esoteric form of Islam which could help them access the eternal truth.⁴⁴

Judging from the above there seem to be some similarities between the Neo-Traditionalists and the Traditionalists. Both are generally skeptical of modernity and are looking to traditions for more universal and eternal (or: metaphysical) truths. They believe in a return to past traditions, concurring on topics such as the importance of Sufism and of pluralism.

If we however delve deeper into this, there seems to be little actual similarity between the Perennialist Traditionalists and the orthodox Sunni Neo-Traditionalists. Despite this, several researchers have investigated some of these, sometimes even resulting in the conclusion of there being a connection between the two schools. In the next chapter we will look at what the literature has said about these similarities and see how new questions arise while others remain unanswered.

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Patrick Laude, “Introduction” In: *Pathways to an Inner Islam: Massignon, Corbin, Guénon and Schuon*, (New York State University Press: 2010), 1-32

⁴⁴ Patrick Laude, Sufism, Shi’ism, and the definition of inner Islam In: *Pathways to an Inner Islam: Massignon, Corbin, Guénon and Schuon*, (New York State University Press: 2010), 33-60

Previous comparisons between the two schools in the literature

As we have seen Traditionalism seems relatively distinct to mainstream Islam with Sedgwick even describing it as a different religion altogether. It is then interesting to note that Sedgwick himself has drawn a connection between Neo-Traditionalism and Traditionalism.⁴⁵ He points out that Neo-Traditionalism's focus on the past results in an opposition to modernity that is strongly akin to that of the Traditionalists. This shared aversion towards modernity results in a desire to return to the traditions of earlier times.⁴⁶ Sedgwick also describes the shared affinity for Sufism between both schools and the relations of members of both schools to established Sufi Tariqat.⁴⁷

Sedgwick mentions that while Abdul Hakim Murad seems to “disavow the religious pluralism” of the Traditionalists he is nonetheless strongly influenced by them.⁴⁸ He does not mention whether other Neo-Traditionalists likewise disavow this pluralism. Similarly, Mathiesen remarks in his article that Nasr's form of Traditionalism has some differences with that of Murad and Yusuf but, like Sedgwick, gives little elaboration.⁴⁹

Jason Sparkes also mentions several scholars from both the Neo-Traditionalist and the Traditionalist school and describes them both as part of a larger western traditionalist current⁵⁰, only briefly balancing this with the statement that ‘*Certain Traditional Muslims inspired by Guénon believe in soteriological pluralism*’.⁵¹ Unlike Sedgwick, who only named Murad's disavowal of this pluralism, Sparkes mentions Yusuf's praise of the Traditionalists and cites him as saying that “they have done some of the finest work on Islamic Materials”.⁵²

We thus see that while the individual literature on the school seems to indicate that their understanding of Islam is completely different, the comparative literature barely discusses these differences and instead discusses them as broadly part of the same strand. Sedgwick even describes a network of Neo-Traditionalist and Traditionalist figures who do not only influence each other's ideas but who are also intimately familiar with one another,⁵³ indicating that there is indeed more to a connection between the two schools.

The literature also mentions the importance of the West and the idea of living in the West for both schools and on first sight this seems to be the case. But when we zoom in, we once again stumble upon a conflict. We saw that Mathiesen mentioned the importance of anti-racist thought for the Neo-Traditionalists, but the literature on the Traditionalist school paints a very different picture.

⁴⁵ Mark Sedgwick, “The Modernity of Neo-Traditionalism” In: *Muslim Subjectivities in Global Modernity: Islamic Traditions and the Construction of Modern Muslim Identities*, (Brill: 2016), 121-147

⁴⁶ Ibid, 130-139

⁴⁷ Ibid, 130-147

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Mathiesen “*Traditional Islam*”, 191-219

⁵⁰ Jason Sparkes, “Morocco as a Hub of Globalised Traditional Islam”, *Religions*. (2022): 1-23

⁵¹ Ibid, 9

⁵² Ibid, 9

⁵³ Sedgwick, “The Modernity” 124-130

Sedgwick mentions in his book “Against the Modern World” that Traditionalist thought contains racist elements and was of tremendous influence on the far-right, specifically through the figure of Julius Evola who was a close associate of Guénon.⁵⁴ Evola worked for the SS during World War Two⁵⁵ and would after the war become one of the most important influences for various Far-Right groups.⁵⁶ Sedgwick mentions a 2-hour lecture Murad gave at Cambridge Muslim College in which he discusses, mostly positively, Julius Evola’s book (and concept): “Ride the Tiger”⁵⁷.

This has not gone unnoticed. Yahya Birt strongly criticizes the Neo-Traditionalist’s engagement with Traditionalist thinkers. He does so not because of the unorthodox views of Traditionalists but because of their ties to the far-right. Birt specifically criticizes their engagement with Guénon and Evola and what he sees as Neo-Traditionalist copying of the “nativist” approach of these thinkers.⁵⁸ These accusations and this engagement seem to clash with the findings of Mathiesen and Sparkes who we saw emphasize the importance of anti-racism and anti-colonialism for Neo-Traditionalists.

Conclusion of the literature:

We thus have two schools who are nominally part of Islam, whose figures seem familiar with one another and who share a lot of ideas but who, despite this, seem in many ways to be almost polar opposites. While both schools are strongly critical of modernity and seem to desire a return to the past (hence both receiving the “traditionalist” moniker), their understanding of many of these “traditional” ideas seems to be completely opposed to one another.

But how does this fit in with the seemingly conflicting idea of Neo-Traditionalism’s Sunnism and Traditionalism’s supposed heterodoxy? Here Sedgwick does not provide a satisfactory answer. He briefly touches upon the Perennialism of the Traditionalist school and mentions that it is somewhat different from the Sunnism of the Neo-Traditionalists but does not go into detail how exactly these differ.⁵⁹

The literature affirms some of our previous ideas. Both schools are in some way Western and focused on the West, they strongly criticize modernity and have an affinity for past solutions to contemporary problems. Simultaneously, the discrepancies between their understanding of Westernness and between their core beliefs seems to stand in the way of simply drawing a connection past any surface level understanding.

One thing that seems lacking in the comparative literature is that it mostly focuses on relations between contemporary Traditionalists and the Neo-Traditionalists, with Sedgwick alone very briefly touching upon any form of actual influence. But as we have seen, the Traditionalist school started with Guénon in the 1920’s. Perhaps then, we should use the difficulties that

⁵⁴ Matthew Rose, “The Fantasist” In: *Muslim Subjectivities in Global Modernity: Islamic Traditions and the Construction of Modern Muslim Identities*, (Yale University Press: 2021), 39-62

⁵⁵ Mark Sedgwick, “Fascism” In: *Against the Modern World*, (Oxford University Press: 2004), 104-109

⁵⁶ Mark Sedgwick, “Terror in Italy” in: *Against the Modern World*, (Oxford University Press: 2004), 180-187

⁵⁷ Sedgwick, “The Modernity”, 137-139

⁵⁸ Yahya Birt, “*The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: Convert Leaders in the West and the New Ethno-Nationalism*”, The Long View Volume 4 Issue 3; web edition, (2022), accessed on March 18, 2023 via: <https://www.ihrc.org.uk/the-unbearable-whiteness-of-being-convert-leaders-in-the-west-and-the-new-ethno-nationalism/>

⁵⁹ Ibid, 130-139

arise here and attempt to analyze them in a diachronical manner, to see whether the connection between the two schools can be understood in light of an evolution of ideas.

In this way, we can use the discrepancies as a roadmap and overcome the problem of their apparent dissimilarity while keeping the overarching topic of Western Islam in mind. As Western Islam in our definition has to do both with a specific Westernness and with a specific Islamicness, exploring the discrepancies with regards to their views on the West and their views on Islam in a diachronic manner can be used to analyze how understandings of Western Islam might have evolved from Guénon to the Neo-Traditionalists. In the methodological chapter we will lay out the framework for how we will approach this in the research.

Methodology

This chapter attempts to describe the complex processes of this research by providing a detailed overview of the methodological framework this research is founded on, the theoretical implications that this research attempts to deal with and the specific steps that will be taken throughout the research process. Starting with a discussion of our hypothesis and main question, we will continue with a discussion on the comparative process and the specific scope of this research. After this we will discuss the subquestions and the importance of hermeneutics, followed by an overview of the way the rest of this research is set up.

Hypothesis and Main question:

Central to our study is the overarching theme of the evolution of ideas between the Traditionalist and Neo-Traditionalist schools. When we discussed the topic of Western Islam, we explained that we wish to do so to critique the prevailing notions on what Western Islam is. From this we arrive at our hypothesis, which states that: *“There is an evolved understanding of Western Islam between the Traditionalists and the Neo-Traditionalists that undermines prevailing notions of Western Islam as necessarily something modern and contemporary”*.

The literature showed us that to be able to trace such an evolution we must overcome the discrepancies between the two schools. As such, this thesis will consist of both a hypothesis and a main question. The main question will deal with answering the questions (and overcoming the difficulties) necessary to affirm our hypothesis.

From the hypothesis we can deduce that our main question is: *“How do the Traditionalists and Neo-Traditionalists understand Western Islam and how similar are these understandings to one another”*?

To answer the main question, we must research the similarities between their understanding of Western Islam. Because we focused on questions relating to their views on Islam and on the West while discussing the literature, conducting our research in a comparative manner will allow us to do two things at once. On the one hand, by comparing them we can find out how similar their understanding of Western Islam is, on the other hand; by conducting it on the basis of the gaps in the literature we overcome the problem of their dissimilarity that stands in the way of drawing a connection between the two schools.

Comparative research and comparands:

Oliver Freiberger, a leading scholar in the study of religion argues that comparison is inevitable for research in the study of religion, even if comparative methods have fallen out of fashion. He says that we should not stop comparative forms of research but that we should instead reform our ways of comparing, offering a methodology for doing so.⁶⁰ I will largely base my research on this methodology in his book, “Considering Comparison”.

As Freiberger mentions, comparative research often involves a multilayered, complex and non-linear process.⁶¹ I have attempted to take the reader through my thought process as much as possible in this chapter, which will hopefully result in a proper understanding of what elements of both schools I will attempt to compare and how I attempt to go about this comparison. I will first lay out the comparative approach and subsequently explain my scope and methodology.

The first step of a comparative research is deciding the objects to compare - the “comparands”.⁶² The main comparands are of course the religion(s) one wants to compare, but from this flow more specifically defined comparands that are part of these religion(s).⁶³ Based on our analysis of the literature we can establish the following comparands:

- Their views on Western identity
- Their views on the importance of understanding the West
- Racism and nativism
- Their views on Islamic metaphysics.
- Their views on Sufism and Sufist practices
- Perennialism and pluralism

As Western Islam is our main topic, we could roughly further group these comparands into two different groups:

1. Their views on the West, under which fall:
 - Their views on Western identity
 - Their views on the importance of understanding the West
 - Racism and nativism
2. Their Islamic ideas, under which fall:
 - Their views on Islamic metaphysics.
 - Their views on Sufism and Sufist practices
 - Perennialism and pluralism

Within these two groups of comparands we see that within each group answering the first two comparands provides us with their overall overview on the West/Islam, while the third comparand stands in the way of ultimately drawing the connection. Since previous literature has thoroughly described the personal relationships between figures of the two schools, clearing up their views on these issues provides us the opportunity to bridge the differences

⁶⁰ Oliver Freiberger, “Introduction” In: *Considering Comparison: A Method for Religious Studies*, (Oxford University Press: 2019), 1

⁶¹ Oliver Freiberger, “Comparison in Theory: A Scholar-Centered Approach” In: *Considering Comparison: A Method for Religious Studies*, (Oxford University Press: 2019), 81

⁶² Ibid, 81-83

⁶³ Ibid, 83-85

between these two schools by and provide a possible argument for their similarity. Doing this on the topics of the West and of Islam will then give us an understanding on how similar they are with regards to Western Islam.

Scope:

Our hypothesis does not only necessitate seeing similarities in their understanding of Western Islam, but also specifically posits that an evolution in thought can be seen in this understanding between the Traditionalists and the Neo-Traditionalists. This necessitates that our comparison of these two schools largely happens in a diachronical manner where the pre-assumption is that the older school has influenced the newer school (and as such that the newer Neo-Traditionalist school's understanding of Western Islam is an evolved understanding of that of the Traditionalist school).

Roughly I will conduct such a diachronical comparison in the following way: I will begin with a close reading of the available material of the Traditionalist school on a specific comparand, starting with Guénon. After this I will look at Traditionalists that came after Guénon and at the position of the Neo-Traditionalists, bringing both schools in dialectic and juxtaposing the findings with one another to describe their positions, describe how these compare and how these might have evolved from Guénon to the later Traditionalists and to the Neo-Traditionalists.

The attentive reader might have noticed that we did not include the topic of critique of modernity among the comparands. This is mainly because this concept seems somewhat overarching and does not fit neatly in either the Western or the Islamic group but rather seems to inform both of them and their opinions broadly. As such, it deserves a separate discussion as it takes on a special role in this research.

Critique of modernity and subquestions:

Unlike the other comparands, their shared affinity for the past and their criticism of modernity seems a more general and overarching sentiment that is related to their entire worldview. We saw for example that while the literature discussed a shared affinity for Sufism and pluralism, their understanding of these seemed remarkably different. However, what was consistent for both schools was that these views seemed to be based on a more general critique of modernity.

The centrality of this topic makes it an incredibly important topic for this research. Rather than discussing it as merely another comparand, we can attempt to trace our discussions of the various other comparands back to this topic, because it seems to inform them all. In this way, we can attempt to explain and interpret the potential evolution between the comparands via this topic. As such, it deserves its own chapter within the comparison and, because it informs the rest of the comparands, should be discussed before discussing the two subquestions on Islam and the West.

The overarching topic of modernity and the two groups of comparands can thus be further rephrased as three subquestions we need to answer

1. How do their views on modernity compare?
2. How do their views on the West compare (based on the comparands mentioned)?
3. How do their views on Islamic ideas compare (based on the comparands mentioned)?

After understanding their view on modernity, we can relate our discussion of the other two subquestions back to this topic, to get a better understanding of how this overarching topic informs their views on Western Islam. Doing so provides the opportunity to analyze how the school's specific views on Western Islam and its potential development is related to their criticism of modernity. This allows us to interpret the school's ideas through their own lens while also allowing for an analysis that goes beyond a mere descriptive summary by interpreting their views on Western Islam and a potential evolution in light of their critique of modernity.

Conducting the research in this way is exemplary for the way in which we will attempt to conduct the entirety of the research. We aim not to critique the views of these two schools but rather to utilize their views to gain new insights on the intellectual development between these two schools and use those findings to offer a critique of the existent literature on Western Islam. This means that we want to stay as close as possible to the views of the two schools and want to refrain from interpreting them through any lens but their own. In the next section we will discuss how this idea will inform our approach towards the available material.

Hermeneutical reading:

We are attempting to provide an overview of these school's ideas on Western Islam as a way of critically engaging with the existing understanding of what this term means and what these schools stand for. Because of this, we want to refrain from utilizing any external theory as this would lead to an episteme that is not based upon the views of these schools themselves. We already saw that we will explicitly understand the comparands in light of their criticisms of modernity.

But in turn, understanding these comparands can also further enlighten our insights on their criticisms of modernity. While when discussing their views on The West and on Islam we will mostly relate the development back to their critique of modernity, in our concluding analysis we can then integrate a holistic understanding of their views on the West and on Islam with their views on modernity to arrive at a deeper understanding of these two schools and their understanding of Western Islam.

Approaching the subquestions in this manner makes a hermeneutical approach towards the available material evident. Of special importance is the idea of the hermeneutic circle which posits that one cannot grasp the entirety of any structured whole without understanding its individual parts. Similarly, one cannot fully comprehend its parts without an understanding of the whole. The hermeneutic circle thus represents a dialectical relationship between the parts and the whole that when looked at holistically 'renders clear what seemed unclear'.⁶⁴ This is akin to what Freibergger calls the importance of Discourse.⁶⁵

Keeping ideas of specific individuals in dialectic with the broader research offers and combining this with a diachronic scope offers the opportunity to see how ideas might have evolved both within a certain school from individual to individual and ultimately from one school to another.

⁶⁴ Jonas Debesay, Dagfinn Näden & Åshild Slettebø, "How do we close the hermeneutic circle? A Gadamerian approach to justification in interpretation in qualitative studies", *Nursing Inquiry*, Volume 15, Issue 1, (2008): 58

⁶⁵ Oliver Freibergger, "Discourse Comparison: An Approach and a Case Study" In: *Considering Comparison: A Method for Religious Studies*, (Oxford University Press: 2019), 167-198

Method:

Now that we have spoken about our framework we can provide an overview of the steps we will take throughout the rest of this research. To be able to use our findings to assess whether our hypothesis is correct, we need to conduct the research in such a manner that understanding an evolution in their ideas on modernity, the West and Islam can eventually lead to a better understanding about Western Islam.

To be able to trace and better understand such an evolution in ideas, we need to start with showing how these ideas came about. Understanding the origins of the Traditionalist school provides us with the starting point of our narrative and with important names and ideas. Describing the Traditionalist school's history also serves another purpose. In the literature review we found that the Traditionalist school is often not seen as a school of Islam. While eventually the goal of describing a connection between the two schools necessitates a comparison along the lines of the subquestions, a start can be made by describing Traditionalism's historical ties to Islam.

Freiberger points out that one must first analyze the comparands individually for each school before one can juxtapose the two.⁶⁶ For the comparative process, I will use the described hermeneutical reading to analyze and describe the available material on the individual schools, followed by a juxtaposition between the views of the several figures, starting with Guénon and moving towards the Neo-Traditionalists. When discussing their views on the West and on Islam in subquestions 2 and 3, a potential development between their views will then be pointed out and analyzed along the lines of their critique of modernity.

The material that I will use will consist largely of primary source material such as interviews, books, archived texts, public talks, correspondence and audio recordings. Where necessary I will refer to secondary sources to gain a more complete picture of the situation. I will mostly focus on three particular groups in this research:

- Guénon as the beginning of Traditionalism
- Later Traditionalists such as Michel Valsan, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Julius Evola
- The Neo-Traditionalists Abdul Hakim Murad and Hamza Yusuf and their institutions the Cambridge Muslim College and Zaytuna College. As this thesis aims to understand the two schools broadly, I will however discuss names outside of those mentioned above if this helps the research process.

I will start by analyzing subquestion 1 and compare the views of the two schools on modernity. After this I will look at subquestion 2 and analyze their views of the West (not to be confused with Western Islam⁶⁷); first describing the importance of the West and a Western identity in relation to modernity and then attempting to overcome the problem of nativism and racism we saw in the literature. Then, I will tackle subquestion 3 in which I will compare their Islamic ideas, beginning with their more exoteric beliefs on Sufism, moving on to the topic of metaphysics and ending with an attempt to overcome what is perhaps their most important difference by comparing their views on plurality and Perennialism.

⁶⁶ Oliver Freiberger, "Comparison in Practice" In: *Considering Comparison: A Method for Religious Studies*, (Oxford University Press: 2019), 150-158

⁶⁷ As mentioned before Western Islam in this research denotes a form of Islam which is particular to the West (consisting of multiple strands therein which consist of multiple schools). The views of these schools on the West are naturally a part of the particular way in which this strand experiences Western Islam but this is not all that makes up their version of Western Islam. Rather it is, alongside their view on the West, their other specific practices, Islamic beliefs etc. which together makeup their particular school of Western Islam.

Subsequently, in the analysis chapter we will attempt to use our findings on the three subquestions to provide a comprehensive overview of how these two schools understand Western Islam and interpret what the findings might tell us about a potential evolution in thought between these two schools. In this we will answer our main question but also go beyond it. We will not only give an overview of their similarities and potential intellectual evolution but also seek to show how the topics discussed in this research are all interconnected and related to their understanding of Western Islam.

Lastly, in the conclusion I will engage in what Freiburger has called rectification.⁶⁸ Here I will return to the prevailing ideas of Western Islam and, depending on the results, “rectify” the current notions of Western Islam and describe how these two schools give us new insights into what Western Islam looks like.

⁶⁸ Freiburger, “Comparison in Practice”, 159

History of the Traditionalist school

Guénon's search for Tradition

Any research on the Traditionalist school must start with the figure of René Jean-Marie Joseph Guénon. Born in 1886,⁶⁹ already in his late teens Guénon would feel a strong attraction to occult groups, in search of higher truths. His interests eventually led him to groups like the Theosophical society⁷⁰ and “Eastern religions”, most notably Hinduism. During the first decade of the 1900's he joined several occult organizations in search of a Tradition that would offer him access to the sacred.⁷¹

Within a decade Guénon turned his back on these occult organizations as he became increasingly convinced that they were shams which could not offer proper access to the ‘one, universal metaphysical truth’.⁷² This truth, he argued, was the essence of all religions, while their forms were merely different expressions of this same truth.⁷³ According to Guénon, the modern West was in a state of crisis, which could only be diverted by accessing this truth, which in turn was only accessible by strictly following an “authentic religion” and thus not via these occult organizations.⁷⁴ It was this belief that remained central to Guénon's thought and Traditionalism in general.⁷⁵

He argued that it were the “Eastern” religions that had remained authentic.⁷⁶ In his aptly named 1922 book *East and West* he described his view on this dichotomy more extensively. He writes that what keeps the West remote from the East today is that ‘it is opposed to true intellectuality, which the East has kept in its fullness, while the West has removed all notion of it’.⁷⁷ The goal for Guénon was not to blatantly take on Eastern traditions in the West but to learn from them and apply their teachings in the West so as to obvert the societal destruction that he saw coming with the loss of these doctrines in modernity.⁷⁸

As in many of his other books, Hinduism is the doctrine he most frequently discusses, describing it as ‘the most balanced of the three main eastern traditions’. But with this strong focus on the Hinduism where exactly do we find Islam in Guénon's writings? And how would Islam come to have such a strong influence on the Traditionalist school?

⁶⁹ Paul Chacornac, “Childhood and Adolescence” In: *The Simple Life of René Guénon*, (Sophia Perennis: 1958), 6-19

⁷⁰ The Theosophical society is an esoteric new-age movement founded by Madame Blavatsky. Part of the Spiritualist boom of the 19th century, the Theosophists attempted to create a universal brotherhood that transcended religions by studying occultism, ancient religions and “eastern” mystical practices.

⁷¹ Robin Waterfield, “Searching” In: *René Guénon and the Future of the West* (Sophia Perennis: 1987), 19-27

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ René Guénon, “The Opposition between East and West” In: *The Crisis of the Modern World* (Sophia Perennis: 1927), 30

⁷⁴ René Guénon, “Western Encroachment” In: *The Crisis of the Modern World* (Sophia Perennis: 1927), 102-104

⁷⁵ René Guénon, “Against Mixing Traditional Forms” In: *Perspectives on Initiation* (Sophia Perennis: 1946), 43-47

⁷⁶ Robin Waterfield, “Cutting the Ties” in: *René Guénon and the Future of the West* (Sophia Perennis: 1987), 32-37

⁷⁷ René Guénon, “Conclusion” In: *East and West* (Sophia Perennis: 1924), 156

⁷⁸ René Guénon, “Constitution of the Elite & the Part to be Played by It” In: *East and West* (Sophia Perennis: 1924), 128-131

Beginning with Islam and living in Cairo

In 1910, Guénon met the Swedish painter Ivan Aguéli⁷⁹. Aguéli moved to Paris in 1890⁸⁰ and converted to Islam somewhere during the same decade. He moved to Cairo in 1902 where he studied at the Azhar university and where he also became a member of the Shadhili tariqah.⁸¹ Aguéli would be instructed in Sufism by the Egyptian sheikh ‘Abd al-Rahman Ilyash al-Kabir who based his views on those of the Andalusian mystic Muhyiddin ibn ‘Arabi.⁸² Somewhere around 1908, Aguéli returned to Paris where he mingled within the occult milieu which Guénon also frequented.⁸³

In 1911 Aguéli established the Akbariyyah Shadhili Sufi order in Paris. It was through Aguéli that Guénon would become initiated into Sufism, during which he would take on the name Abd al-Wahid Yahya.⁸⁴ It would, however, be a stretch to call Guénon a Muslim at the time, and he probably did not see himself as such, nor would he practice Islam for another 20 years. In his search for access to metaphysical truth, Guénon joined all kinds of schools and orders. It may be assumed that at first, this Sufi order was one among several initiations into yet another religious practice.

Much of this changed in the late 1920’s, when several setbacks would compel Guénon to take a trip to Cairo where he lived for the rest of his life. In Cairo Guénon started to consistently practice the rituals of Islamic orthodoxy.⁸⁵ Regardless, Guénon did, at least early on, not describe this change as a conversion. In 1931 he wrote: ‘Contrary to what takes place in conversion, nothing here implies the attribution of the superiority of one traditional form over another. It is merely a question of what one might call reasons of spiritual expediency...’⁸⁶

While he did not declare Islam as superior, many of his followers took up his example and started to practice Sufi Islam.⁸⁷ From Cairo, Guénon would stay in contact with these students. He gave them permission to spread the Sufi order and its practices he had received from Aguéli further into Europe and also redirected several of his students to other Islamic scholars to receive an ijaza.⁸⁸ All the while Guénon continued his correspondence with his students and increasingly emphasized the necessity for them to adhere to the Islamic rituals if they were Muslims.⁸⁹ Guénon would continue strictly practicing these rituals himself, praying all 5 prayers in his local mosque in Cairo.⁹⁰ Simultaneously, Guénon would continue to emphasize his Traditionalist ideas. As late as 1950, Guénon wrote in a letter that ‘the goal of esotericism is to go beyond all [religious] forms’.⁹¹ Guénon died in 1951, reportedly with “Allah” being his last word.⁹²

⁷⁹ Although not successful during his life, Aguéli would become one of the most famous Swedish painters of the 20th century after his death

⁸⁰ Robin Waterfield, “Finding” In: *René Guénon and the Future of the West* (Sophia Perennis: 1987), 28-31

⁸¹ Paul Chacornac, “Ex Oriente Lux” In: *The Simple Life of René Guénon*, (Sophia Perennis: 1958), 32-34

⁸² Ibid

⁸³ Waterfield, “Finding”, 28-31

⁸⁴ Chacornac, “Ex Oriente Lux”, 33-35

⁸⁵ Mark Sedgwick, “Cairo, Mostaganem and Basel” In: *Against the Modern World*, (Oxford University Press: 2004), 75-76

⁸⁶ René Guénon, “Conversions” In: *Initiation and Spiritual Realization* (Sophia Perennis: 1952), 63

⁸⁷ Dickson, “*René Guénon*”, 598-608

⁸⁸ Ibid, 598-601

⁸⁹ Sedgwick, “Cairo”, 73-93

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹ René Guénon, “Letter to Goffredo Pistoni” In *Correspondence II*, Cairo, May 9, 1950, accessed via Archive.org on 12th of April 2023

⁹² Paul Chacornac, “The Messenger” In: *The Simple Life of René Guénon*, (Sophia Perennis: 1958), 89

Islam or syncretism: the establishment of the school

A few years before his death Guénon started harshly criticizing his most important pupil; Frithjof Schuon, for being increasingly lax with regards to Islamic practices. Three months before his death Guénon wrote regarding Schuon: ‘...in Lausanne, ritual observances have been reduced to a bare minimum, and most no longer even fast during Ramadan...soon it will no longer be a tariqah at all, but a vague syncretic organization’.⁹³ Schuon, a Swiss scholar, would become one of the most important figures within Traditionalism after Guénon’s death, and would further tone down the emphasis on Islamic practices after his death, despite Guénon’s remarks.⁹⁴ Several of Guénon’s followers, most notably Michel Valsan, harshly criticized this and instead emphasized the Islamic character of Guénon’s later teachings.⁹⁵

After Guénon’s death the Traditionalists split into two groups. On the one hand were the Schuonians who held to a more syncretic character, these would come to have the most influence on the Traditionalist school and includes names such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr⁹⁶ and Gai Eaton.⁹⁷ On the other hand the Valsanians emphasized the necessity of Islam and were adamant about the necessity of strictly adhering to the Sharia.⁹⁸ They remained more local to a French context and had their main influence within academia as students of Valsan such as Denis Gril, Charles-André Gilis and Michel Chodkiewicz would become prominent academics in the fields of Islamic Studies and mainly focused on the doctrinal thought of Ibn ‘Arabi.⁹⁹

Besides these two there were also the Evolans, followers of the Italian scholar Julius Evola, who remained mostly unaffiliated with either group. They were less connected to Islam but Evola himself is nonetheless important for this research as we came across his name in the literature review and will discuss him in detail for his far-right thought.¹⁰⁰

The Traditionalist school, while having declined in popularity, has had a lasting influence on Islam in the West,¹⁰¹ with much early translations and articles on Sufism coming from the hands of Traditionalists and with most Tariqahs in Europe having a direct link to the Traditionalist school.¹⁰² By understanding the beginnings of the school and how Islam came to play a role within it, we can start to unravel our narrative and see how their ideas on Western Islam might have evolved and might have influenced the Neo-Traditionalists.

⁹³ René Guénon, “Letter to an anonymous recipient” In: *Correspondence II*, Cairo, 9th of October 1950, accessed via Archive.org on 15th of April 2023

⁹⁴ Michael Oren Fitzgerald, *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, (Modern Wisdom: 2010)

⁹⁵ Michel Valsan, “Letter to Frithjof Schuon” November 1950, accessed via Archive.org on 28th of April 2023

⁹⁶ Huston Smith, “Introduction” In: *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, (World Wisdom: 2007), vii-ix

⁹⁷ Carl W. Ernst, “Traditionalism, the Perennial Philosophy and Islamic Studies” *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin Vol. 28, No. 2* (1994): 176-180

⁹⁸ David Bisson, *René Guénon : une politique de l'esprit*, (Oxford University Press: 2004), 357-363

⁹⁹ Suha Taji-Farouki, “Notes on Chapter 6” In: *Beshara and Ibn 'Arabi: A Movement of Sufi Spirituality in the Modern World*, (Anqa Publishing: 2010), 346

¹⁰⁰ Matthew Rose, *A World after Liberalism: Philosophers of the Radical Right*, (Yale University Press: 2021). 41–42

¹⁰¹ Here referring to Islam as a religion in the West and not as our more narrowly defined Western Islam.

¹⁰² Francesco Piraino. “L’héritage de René Guénon dans le soufisme du XXI^e siècle en France et en Italie” *Religiologiques 33*, (2016): 155-180

Subquestion 1: Criticizing modernity

As seen in the historical overview of the Traditionalist school, Guénon's search for Tradition and eventual turn to Islam was largely connected to a strong criticism of the West and an affinity for Eastern traditions and spirituality. Guénon believed that with the onset of modernity in the West, the West had lost access to the primordial Tradition. Taking this even further, according to Guénon, 'the modern outlook is in fact identical with the anti-Traditional outlook'.¹⁰³ In this chapter we will take a further look into the views of modernity of Guénon and compare them with those of the Traditionalist scholars that came after Guénon and those of the Neo-Traditionalists to see where their views coincide and where they differ.

As stated in the methodological chapter, the discussion of this topic will be of the utmost importance for our later research as the results of this chapter will regularly inform the later chapters as we find out how their view of modernity shapes their ideas on the West and their ideas on Islam.

A critique of modernity: an affinity for metaphysics

Criticism of modernity is of course plentiful among different religious groups and it is interesting to note that Guénon's criticism did not, like many other similar critiques, focus much on moral or social problems. Rather, Guénon's critique was largely based on metaphysics. When Guénon did speak of societal problems it was usually to emphasize his view that all modern problems stem from the disappearance of metaphysical truth and Tradition, something we extensively saw discussed in the historical overview of the Traditionalist school.

This emphasis on metaphysics as the cause of modernity's problems at large might be best summarized by Guénon himself who in the introduction to his magnum opus *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times* opposes 'the insufficiency of merely denouncing errors'. He continues: 'Useful as that may be, it is still more instructive to investigate how and why they have come about; for everything that has any kind of existence, even error, has necessarily its reason for existence'.¹⁰⁴

Later Traditionalists did sometimes engage in a criticism of specific moral issues. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the student of Frithjof Schuon, in his book "*A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World*" criticizes what he sees as 'the attempt to break the traditional meaning of marriage as being between the opposite sexes'.¹⁰⁵ But as with Guénon, in the same book we see that all problems of the contemporary world for Nasr can be traced back to the loss of metaphysics and, with that, the loss of meaning.¹⁰⁶

This critique of modernity remains similar among the Neo-Traditionalists. For The Neo-Traditionalist scholar Abdul Hakim Murad, almost all problems that exists in the world can be traced to the fundamental problems of modernity. He claims that, beginning with the enlightenment, the values that arose out of this phenomenon lacked an essential kernel, as such, lacking any sort of epistemological clarity resulting in problems such as a loss of

¹⁰³ René Guénon. "The Dark Age" in *Crisis of the Modern World*, (Sophia Perennis: 1927), 18

¹⁰⁴ René Guénon. "Introduction" in *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, (Sophia Perennis: 1945), 3-5

¹⁰⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Modern Lifestyle" in: *A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World*, (KAZI Publications: 2003), 229-235

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 233-234

identity, existential crises, rampant individualism and other such problems.¹⁰⁷ A similar opinion is held by the American Neo-Traditionalist scholar Hamza Yusuf, who argues that modernity's lack of any metaphysical grounding is to blame for the sense of loss and the crisis that the modern world is facing.¹⁰⁸

The later Traditionalists and the Neo-Traditionalists, seem to be largely saying the same thing as Guénon: modernity causes a fundamental problem because it leads to an absence of clarity as it lacks any sort of essence one could derive truth and meaning out of. This results in all kinds of social problems, but those social problems can only be understood in light of the essential problem of modernity: the loss of traditional metaphysics and the sacred.

In his book on Islam in Europe, Murad preaches a return to traditional Islam as a response to the dangers of modernity. He says that this is 'not an anachronistic exercise in resurrecting medieval rulings and applying them uncritically in the modern world' but instead a 'return to the civilisation's time-honoured root-epistemology'.¹⁰⁹

Here we do see a divergence with the Traditionalists. While they diagnose the same problem, Murad sees a return to traditional Islam as equipped to tackle the problems of modernity. Guénon on the other hand saw Tradition (in his particular understanding of the term) more generally as the saving grace. This divergence between a focus on Traditional Islam and a focus on Tradition in general highlight the important discrepancy between Orthodox Sunnism and Perennialism that we saw in the literature.

A critique of modernity: fragmentation and universalization

While focusing more so on the overarching and fundamental problem of the absence of metaphysics and the sacred, Guénon did speak about broader historical phenomena and ideas that he saw as intrinsically connected with Western modernity. Indeed, much of the explanation of these larger historical phenomena and ideas and how they related to the fundamental problems of modernity was the focus of Guénon's earlier works.

He unabashedly criticized the knowledge production that grew out of the West past the Middle-Ages.¹¹⁰ Guénon claimed that this knowledge was insufficiently grounded in any sort of Tradition and, operating somewhat as a positive feedback loop, this knowledge was both influenced by modernity's move away from Tradition and in turn accelerated that move away further still. In this way he criticizes the entirety of modern science, tracing it back to the Humanism that took root in the Renaissance.¹¹¹ For Guénon this led to the rise of Individualism and the move away from the metaphysical, as humanity made itself the measure of all things, thus severing the link with the higher and opening the door up to all kinds of problems.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ Hermitix Podcast, "Islam, Modernity and Tradition", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68HOiflGoAA>

¹⁰⁸ Renovatio: The Journal of Zaytuna College. "The Roots of Our Crises - Hamza Yusuf", Uploaded on Youtube on the 2nd of June 2017. Accessed via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIAwkDzSdoo>

¹⁰⁹ Murad, "Introduction", 3

¹¹⁰ René Guénon, "Measure and Manifestation" In: *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times* (Sophia Perennis: 1945), 24-28

¹¹¹ Guénon, "The Dark Age", 7-20

¹¹² René Guénon, "Sacred and Profane Science" In: *The Crisis of the Modern World* (Sophia Perennis: 1927), 42-54

Murad's view strongly echoes that of Guénon. He criticizes modern phenomena such as the Enlightenment and the French revolution and claims that its goal of 'making man the measure of all things' (using the exact same words as Guénon) was soon realized to be a mistake.¹¹³

Similarly, he criticizes contemporary phenomena that either arose after Guénon's death or rapidly accelerated. One such accelerated process is that of Globalism. Murad argues that it is a direct outgrowth of modernity and, while often claiming to increase diversity in fact 'turns us into different variants of the same sort of thing' as it increasingly moves towards a global monoculture.¹¹⁴ Interestingly, this criticism of modernity focuses both on fragmentation, by arguing that modernity's move away from a metaphysical truth has put the individual human at the center; but also criticizes a form of universalization, by perceiving Globalization as a movement towards a universalization of values.

An article in *Renovatio*, the journal of Hamza Yusuf's institute Zaytuna College, contains an analysis of the internet by Esmé Partridge, that might explain this dichotomy. The article is based on a similar argument as that of Guénon and Murad, describing the internet as 'the culmination of the Enlightenment project'. The author goes on to state that 'far from fulfilling its promise of a united humanity, the internet's epistemological revolution has wrought hyper-individualism, severe polarization, and the utter fragmentation of knowledge. Instead of enabling us to attain universal truths, the internet has given us only a universal right to forge our own truths'.¹¹⁵

Describing the internet as the culmination of the Enlightenment project shows that Partridge believes that this fragmentation and hyper-individualism is the result of the processes of modernity that began with the Enlightenment. Simultaneously, she describes the internet as a universalizing force. It 'attempts to do away with the particularities of place and our own rootedness within communities' and instead replace it with a 'universalization of knowledge, uploaded into a cloud that floats above geography',¹¹⁶ leading to the deterritorialization of traditional knowledge and communities.

Partridge doesn't champion cultural relativism but instead 'universal truths conveyed through cultural mediums'.¹¹⁷ The internet (which she sees as merely a further step in the process of modernity) has in a sense done the opposite, 'instead of enabling us to attain universal truths, has given us only a universal right to forge our own truths'. This is in line with Guénon's understanding that the modern world is not only not-Traditional but anti-Traditional. The article cites Guénon to describe how with the onset of the internet, horizontal knowledge (flattened, egalitarian knowledge about things of this world) has replaced vertical knowledge (hierarchical knowledge about things beyond this world).¹¹⁸ This criticism of egalitarianism is another core critique of modernity for both schools that is prominent in Traditionalism.

One of the biggest problems with modernity for Guénon is that 'nothing and nobody is any longer in the right place, men no longer recognize any effective authority in the spiritual order

¹¹³ Hermetix Podcast, "Islam, Modernity and Tradition", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68HOiflGoAA>

¹¹⁴ Cambridge Muslim College. "Abdul Ghani bin Ismail al-Nablusi – Abdal Hakim Murad: Paradigms of Leadership", Uploaded on Youtube on the April 20, 2021. Accessed via: <https://youtu.be/BonYltAN7n8>

¹¹⁵ Esmé L.K. Partridge. "Rethinking the World Brain: Can We Preserve Traditional Forms of Knowledge in the Digital Age?" *Renovatio*, (2022)

¹¹⁶ Ibid

¹¹⁷ Ibid

¹¹⁸ Ibid

or any power in the temporal'¹¹⁹. Guénon emphasized that a break free of modernity and a return to a more Traditional world could only be initiated and led by a “spiritual elite”, those that were spiritually more capable than the masses and were able to resist going along with the mores of the modern and contemporary world.¹²⁰

As we will come to find out, this criticism regarding a globalized, individualistic and unstratified modern world, spurred on by Western modernity spreading throughout the world, is of utmost importance to their understanding of the West and to their creation of a specifically Western form of Islam. In the following chapter we will analyze their views on the West and see how these are influenced by their critiques of modernity described in this chapter.

¹¹⁹ René Guénon, “Individualism” In: *The Crisis of the Modern World* (Sophia Perennis: 1927), 61

¹²⁰ Guénon, “Constitution of the Elite”, 122-138

Subquestion 2: Islam and the West

It might seem from Guénon's turn Eastwards and his criticism of Western modernity that there is little Western about Traditionalism despite Guénon's background. But Guénon's work is filled with references to the importance of reviving the West.¹²¹ As a matter of fact, Guénon's entire project might be said to be an attempt to rescue the West. He says:

*'The truth is that the West is in great need of defense, but only against itself and its own tendencies which will lead inevitably to its ruin and destruction. It is therefore "reform of the West" that should be demanded, and if this reform were what it should be, that is to say a real restoration of tradition, it would entail as a natural consequence an understanding with the East'.*¹²²

It should not be understood here that Guénon wants to save the West from the perils of modernity by making it Eastern, but rather by making it Traditional again (here capitalized, as for Guénon this meant his specific interpretation of Tradition). As the West has lost access to the primordial Tradition, Guénon wants to do so by learning from the East.¹²³ This project of saving the West through the East would be influential among both later Traditionalists and Neo-Traditionalists as this chapter will show.

We saw that to be able to draw a connection between the two schools we had to see whether their views on the West coincided but also overcome a problem that we encountered in the literature: that of their relationship to nativism and racism. We will discuss their views on the West and Western identity first, followed by a discussion on their views on nativism and racism and how these are related to their views on the West.

Saving the West:

The Traditionalists that came after Guénon would continue to believe that the West was in a dire state. Gai Eaton, a Traditionalist who studied under Frithjof Schuon, says that the loss of the sacred is one of the signs of the times and has led to an intense spiritual sickness. In the book reflections we read that he believed that only those who are spiritually healthy have the capacity to be fully human.¹²⁴ This insinuates that with the loss of the sacred which he describes vividly in the same text, modernity has not just ripped out the sacred but that the fragmentation this causes is breaking up our humanity.

According to Eaton, "faith in progress has become the dominant creed of the dominant culture: Western culture". This dominant creed asks of the Muslim "why don't you bring your religion up to date", meaning, up to date with the ever changing modern values. But Eaton notes that Muslims should not go along with this, as it leads to a path downwards, instead the West should give up its cult of progress if it wants to save itself from destruction.¹²⁵

¹²¹ This is especially true for his early work see for example René Guénon, "Preface", In: *Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines* (Sophia Perennis, 1921), 1-5 & René Guénon, "Preface", In: *East and West* (Sophia Perennis: 1924), 1-11

¹²² René Guénon, "The Opposition between East and West" In: *The Crisis of the Modern World* (Sophia Perennis: 1927), 31-32

¹²³ René Guénon, "Some Conclusions" In: *The Crisis of the Modern World* (Sophia Perennis: 1927), 110

¹²⁴ Gai Eaton, "Reflections: Living by the Book" In: *Reflections* (Islamic Texts Society: 2013), 74-76

¹²⁵ Ibid

The Neo-Traditionalist scholar Abdul Hakim Murad seems to agree that the West is in need of saving. But where Guénon grew up in a Europe that, despite its colonial possessions, had little Islamic visibility on its soil; Murad is dealing with a context in which large communities of Muslims have settled in Europe. Where Guénon looked at Eastern Traditions in general as the saving grace, for Murad it is specifically Islam which can revitalize the West,¹²⁶ highlighting again the divergence we saw in the previous chapter.

Murad's change towards Islam as the saving grace seems to be shared at least in part by Traditionalists that came after Guénon. In the introduction to his book on Islam in Europe, Murad mentions that his goal with the book is largely based on what the Traditionalist scholar Charles-André Gilis wrote regarding relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in the West, namely, that Muslims must not ever compromise on the *haqq* in their relation vis-à-vis the West but at the same time must remain flexible.¹²⁷ His focus on Islam might in part be as an evolution that already took root among the more Islamically oriented students of Guénon.

Echoing Guénon, Murad mentions the necessity of a “Western Turn” as the attempt to create a culturally sensitive and particularly Western form of Islam in his 2020 book *Travelling Home*. He says that as Islam historically offers the opportunity of the integration of local culture with a specific local Islamic form this should be possible in the West as well.¹²⁸

Murad heads the Cambridge Muslim College, which is specifically focused on providing Western born Muslims with a deeper understanding of the West and the necessary tools to benefit the Western Islamic community. The College tries to provide its students with these tools by educating them both on the history of the West and the cultural and societal context of the modern West, ultimately aiming to give them the ability to operate and educate in a way that ‘makes sense in the context of how Western Muslims are thinking’.¹²⁹

Similar motives can be ascribed to Hamza Yusuf and his Zaytuna College, although the American situation might be said to be somewhat different than that of Britain, as the United States is traditionally a melting pot. Regardless of this difference, Zaytuna shares much of the same goal that Cambridge Muslim College has, that is: the creation of an Islam that is rooted in the West. This is reflected in a statement on the Zaytuna College website which reads: ‘Zaytuna offers a curriculum that provides its students with a foundation in the intellectual heritage of two major world civilizations: the Islamic and the Western.’¹³⁰

As with Murad, for Yusuf there is no clash with Traditional Islam here as he argues that Islam has always adapted to the culture and that a Western expression of Islam would merely be one across a sea of many expressions.¹³¹ But an adaptation to contemporary Western culture seems to collide with Neo-Traditionalism's emphasis on the past and criticism of modernity. In what way do they define a Western expression of Islam? And how does this compare of the Neo-Traditionalist's definition of this? In the next section we will attempt to answer these questions.

¹²⁶ Abdal Hakim Murad, “On Migrating to Lands of Melancholy” *Renovatio* (2021)

¹²⁷ Murad, “Introduction”, In: *Travelling Home* (The Quilliam Press: 2020), 3-4

¹²⁸ Abdal Hakim Murad “The Multiple Horizons of British Islamic Studentship” in: *Travelling Home* (The Quilliam Press: 2020), 214-243

¹²⁹ Let the Quran Speak. “*What Is A Western-Muslim Identity?* | Dr. Abdal Hakim Murad”, Uploaded on Youtube on the June 3, 2015. Accessed via: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18_XdY8T51g

¹³⁰ Zaytuna College, ‘*About*’, n.d., accessed via: <https://zaytuna.edu/about>

¹³¹ Fajetas. “*Hamza Yusuf - Success In This World And The Next?*”, Uploaded on Youtube on December 29, 2011. Accessed via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldvz6LZ6BdU>

A Western Muslim Identity

In his book *East and West*, Guénon mentions that those spiritual elite that will lead the change in the West, must by necessity be Westerners. According to Guénon, there was no possibility that Easterners could take this task upon themselves if the West was to be able to retain their core identity as a society dominated by Easterners would cease being Western. Westerners should thus take the knowledge they learned from Eastern scholars and adapt it to a Western context, aimed at Westerners.¹³²

Abdul Hakim Murad says in his book on Islam in Europe that Muslims in the West must understand and come to terms with Western society and even become Western in part themselves if they want to become advocates of Islam in the West.¹³³ While Guénon's argument seems more essentialist, the Neo-Traditionalists thus still see a problem with the "Easternness" of Muslims living in the West.

Murad laments that Western Muslims have been failing to integrate with local culture and have kept strong ties with their cultural origins.¹³⁴ In his view, both in his native United Kingdom and in other parts of the West where Muslims have a significant presence, Islam is still seen as something foreign, something non-Western or non-European, despite a growing presence. This continued foreign status he attributes, in part, to the resistance that many Muslims have had in 'shedding their cultural baggage' instead of enculturating themselves in the local context and taking on local customs.¹³⁵

Instead, Murad calls for the rise of a Western Muslim identity. He rejects both "Scientific secularism and emotional Islamism" as a reaction to living in Western countries and instead argues for following earlier Muslims in the ways they integrated within cultures when arriving in new lands.¹³⁶ In his book he attempts to provide insights in why and how to achieve this by 'devising an uncompromising theory of Islamic belonging in Europe'.¹³⁷ For Murad, the path to achieving this starts with an indigenization of new generations of Muslims in the West; emphasizing the success of local forms of authentic training in the Islamic sciences and creating a form of Islam that is both authentically Western and authentically Islamic.¹³⁸

Yusuf has a more nuanced stance on the idea of cultural baggage. In 2008 he mentioned the enrichment of people bringing their cultural background to the United States and praised the globalization of the world and specifically of the United States.¹³⁹ But this does not mean that he does not care about the adaptation of Islam to the West. In 2001 Yusuf said that Muslims who do not enjoy living in the West should leave¹⁴⁰. As of recent there have also been several affiliates of Zaytuna college who have been taking a stance similar to Winter on the "cultural baggage" of immigrant Muslims.¹⁴¹ Other statements of Yusuf praising America as one of the

¹³² Guénon, "Constitution of the Elite", 122-138

¹³³ Murad "The Multiple Horizons", 231-243

¹³⁴ Cambridge Muslim College. "Travelling Home – Abdul Hakim Murad: Tea Over Books", Uploaded on Youtube on the September 11 2021. Accessed via: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ytZfLRTxtI

¹³⁵ Ibid

¹³⁶ Murad, "Introduction", 3

¹³⁷ Ibid

¹³⁸ Let the Quran Speak. "What Is A Western-Muslim Identity?"

¹³⁹ Dr. Craig Considine. "Part 2: Speaking with Hamza Yusuf on American identity", Uploaded on Youtube on the July 2, 2012. Accessed via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3mY7zMPtMs4>

¹⁴⁰ Jack O' Sullivan. "If you hate the west, emigrate to a Muslim country", *The Guardian*: October 8, 2001.

¹⁴¹ Spannaus & Razavian, "Zaytuna College" 45-47

greatest nations on the earth¹⁴² as well as the parallels between Islam and American society show that Yusuf's stance was perhaps more influenced by the United States being a melting pot, then it was an instance of him rejecting the necessity of a Western identity.

This seems especially so as in 2011 Yusuf pointed out, as Murad did, that it is an absolute necessity that Muslims craft an Islamic tradition that is indigenous to the West.¹⁴³ These differences between Murad and Yusuf despite their concurrent insistence on Westernness might be attributed to sociocultural circumstances. In a way, it might even be said to emphasize the notion that they both care about adapting Islam to their local circumstances, as Yusuf's views seem influenced by the American cultural "meltingpot" context and Murad's seem mostly influenced by the British context.

A large part of the curricula of the Cambridge Muslim College and Zaytuna College is then focused on understanding the contemporary context that Western Muslims might operate in. But this seems to clash with their view on modernity that we have discussed before. If the modern world is devoid of identity, creating a Western Muslim identity could not come out of a mere understanding of the Modern world.

Murad admits that this is an incredibly difficult question as, according to him, it is increasingly difficult to determine what British identity is. He says that 'contrary to 50 years ago, it is by no means clear what constitutes Britishness'.¹⁴⁴ However, Murad sees the not as a problem but as a chance for creating an identity that can be both British and Muslim. He says that 'although it is nearly impossible to define what Westernness is, as Muslims we need to define what it is so that we can create an Islam that is local and indigenous'.¹⁴⁵

In typical anti-modernist fashion he thus not only focusses on the modern world but specifically delves deep into the history and traditions of Great-Britain to get a better understanding of what Westernness might be in the British context. He wants the Muslims in the West to 'revive the ancient Muslim practice of incorporating *'urf*, local customary norms into the lived Muslim experience', attempting to create a British Islam through these means.¹⁴⁶ In this, he specifically advises to take indigenous British Muslims an an example, who grew up in a time that there was little Islam visible in the UK.

Murad wants the Muslims to utilize this lack of identity, not to retain their own identity but to be what he calls "therapists".¹⁴⁷ He argues for a change in discourse 'from moaning and demanding equality and rights...to looking at what we can do to help this continent with their spiritual crisis', as such creating a fusion of Britishness and Islam that can jump in the gap of this crisis.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴² Scott Korb. "American Islam", *The Chronicle Review*: March 18, 2012.

¹⁴³ Fajeetas. "Hamza Yusuf - Success In This World And The Next?"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldvz6LZ6BdU>

¹⁴⁴ Let the Quran Speak. "What Is A Western-Muslim Identity?"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18_XdY8T51g

¹⁴⁵ Ibid

¹⁴⁶ Ibid

¹⁴⁷ Abdal Hakim Murad "A Theology of Ahl al-Kidhāb" In: *Travelling Home* (The Quilliam Press: 2020), 208-209

¹⁴⁸ Cambridge Muslim College. "Travelling Home – Interview with Abdal Hakim Murad", Uploaded on Youtube on the May 10, 2020. Accessed via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smnXzfWJ0c>

This is of grand importance to our lens of modernity. The Neo-Traditionalists acknowledge the difficulty of living in the Modern West but they disagree that this is all that the West is. Rather, they argue that Muslims should delve deep into Western history to fuse its now largely defunct traditions with a form of Islam. In this sense, Western Muslim identity for the Neo-Traditionalists seems not so much (or at least not solely) focused on providing Muslims an easier time of adapting to the West, but mainly focused on a way to move the West beyond modernity. They do this not through a destruction or replacement of the West, but by fusing the traditions of their localities with those of Islam.

But there is also another, related, idea behind this. As we saw when we discussed their views on modernity, the Neo-Traditionalists are strongly opposed to the Globalism and hyper-connectivity of our contemporary world. They view Islam as historically having fused with the local culture, taking on different forms in different regions where it rooted itself. The call to create such a form in the West can thus also be seen as a call to return to this historical diversity and opposing what is seen as the universalizing tendencies of modernity.

Once more, we see a change from Guénon's focus on Tradition and Traditional (again, in his particular understanding) societies, to a more specific focus on Islam and concepts such as 'urf, which they see as particularly capable of synthesizing local cultural contexts with an overarching Islamic framework. Islam (and thus its practitioners) should as such be aware of these problems of modernity and simultaneously root itself in a more "authentic" locality. To do this, Muslims must rediscover what the "authentic" West is and shed themselves of the forms of Islam that belong to their ethnic heritage.

Murad and Yusuf have perhaps taken the first step by opening their respective colleges. Murad furthermore has tried to synthesize Islamic and Anglo/Christian traditions with each other on a more practical level. Having written a book on songs by indigenous British Muslims such as Abdullah Quilliam¹⁴⁹, he has later added on to this tradition himself by recording sung versions of medieval Islamic poems as well as dhikr using Celtic Folk Melodies as a standard for these songs.¹⁵⁰

As explained in the historical chapter, many Traditionalists after Guénon focused more on Islam than Guénon himself did. The creation of a Western, European or American Islamic identity is something that was likewise mentioned by several Traditionalists that came after Guénon. In following of Guénon and in line with the Neo-Traditionalists we see an emphasis on Westernness and a critique of the "baggage" of immigrants.

William Chittick, an American Traditionalist academic said in a 2016 interview that the 'Traditionalist school plays an important role for Western Islam (a term he specifies as the Islam of Westerners instead of the Islam of immigrants)' as 'very few immigrants come with the combination of traditional and modern education that is needed to speak intelligently in the West about religion in general and Islam specifically.'¹⁵¹ Gai Eaton, a student of Schuon is quoted in a 2003 interview as saying: 'it is time for Muslims in Britain to settle down, to find their own way, to form a real community and to discover a specifically British way of Islam'.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Abdal Hakim Murad, *Muslim Songs of The British Isles* (Quilliam Press Ltd: 2005)

¹⁵⁰ For an example, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FxatQJiVFwg>

¹⁵¹ Abdullah al-Masud "Interview with William Chittick", published on: 1 September, 2016, Accessed on May 15, 2023 via: <https://issuu.com/almasud/docs/19105646-william-chittick-interview>

¹⁵² Samia Rahman. "The Talented Mr Gai Eaton", *Emel*. (Septman 2003)

In the interview mentioned above, Eaton was also quite critical of Muslim immigrants. He says that: ‘the constant arrival of uneducated, non English-speaking immigrants from the sub-continent’ disturbs the formation of a British way of Islam. Adding on to this the relatively harsh remark of ‘this is no curry-Island’.¹⁵³

This focus on a Western Muslim identity as a way to move past modernity brings us to an emphasis on Westernness and a critique of immigration. In the literature review we saw several scholars being critical of the Neo-Traditionalists for moving towards the far-right and nativist ideas and for their willingness to take inspiration from the Traditionalist school. A last step to understanding the relationship of these two schools to the West is addressing this elephant in the room in an attempt

¹⁵³ Rahman, *The Talented Mr Gai Eaton*.

(Neo-)Traditionalism and the far-right

In the literature review we saw that one of the problems with drawing a connection between the views on the West of these two schools was that Traditionalism was strongly associated with the far-right, while Neo-Traditionalism seemed to contain elements of anti-racist and anti-colonialist thought. Simultaneously, we saw that Neo-Traditionalists had no problem engaging with more far-right figures among the Traditionalists such as Evola. This latter engagement caused the Neo-Traditionalists to be accused of cozying up to the far-right and racist/nativist thought.

As we saw in the last section, “Westernness” is of importance to both these schools, and figures from both schools have criticized the supposed inability of Muslims to shed their cultural background. We also saw hints of Guénon’s tendencies to distinguish between Westerners and Easterners and assign these some inherent qualities. To overcome the problem of drawing a connection and to understand their relationship to the West and “Westernness” better, the far-right connection of both schools seems to be worth investigating.

The criticism in the literature focused mainly on the Nativism of the Traditionalists and Neo-Traditionalists cozying up to these ideas. I will here however take a broader definition of far-right thought, discussing aside nativism also their anti-egalitarian thought we saw when discussing their views on modernity and more broad ideas of immigration criticism that we came across in the previous sections of this chapter. As we will come to find out, many of the contradictions between the Neo-Traditionalist’s anti-racism and the Traditionalist’s supposed far-right ideas dissolve when we analyze it from our lens of a critique of modernity.

Aside from the connection to Traditionalism, Neo-Traditionalist have been accused of cozying up to the far-right for other reasons. Yusuf in particular has received such attention and has been criticized for his open endorsement of and his work together with the Trump administration during Donald Trump’s presidency, serving as a member of a panel that advised Trump on human rights.¹⁵⁴ Yusuf has also been criticized for his willingness to engage in conversation with the Canadian Psychologist Jordan Peterson - who is seen as an important influence on young right wing men in the west¹⁵⁵ - and for his willingness to work together with conservative Christians.¹⁵⁶ Yusuf has defended himself by arguing that Muslims and Christian conservatives share many values and should form a broader front to defend their religious freedom.¹⁵⁷

During a public lecture in 2019 Murad was asked about the future of Muslims in Europe with the rise of National-Populism. He responded that ‘those who chose to leave the *Dar al Islam*, violating all the rules of Sharia can’t grumble too much...as they came for bigger helpings of kebab, not for Islam...so those that came here just to eat biryani and then complain about Islamophobia face a lot of difficult challenges.¹⁵⁸ Murad’s comments could be seen as in line with the more critical view of immigration that figures such as Peterson and Trump adhere to and are also in line with the commentary of a Traditionalist like Eaton on Britain not being a

¹⁵⁴ Hilal, Maha. "It's time for Muslim Americans to condemn Hamza Yusuf ." Al-Jazeera, July 15, 2019.

¹⁵⁵ The Thinking Muslim Podcast, “Ep.73 - Jordan Peterson, White Supremacy and the Perils of Engagement - with Yahya Birt”, (24th of July 2022)

¹⁵⁶ Essa “Hamza Yusuf”

¹⁵⁷ Kevin Singer & Chris Stackaruk, “We brought evangelicals and Muslims together to discuss the pandemic. Here’s what we learned”, n.d., accessed via: <https://faithcounts.com/evangelical-and-muslims-discuss-pandemic/>

¹⁵⁸ Karimia Institute. “Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad - Bridging the Divide”, Uploaded on Youtube on April 17, 2019. Accessed via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3p1to6eLsI>

‘curry island’.

While this seems to affirm that these schools have a similar sympathy for the far-right and their ideas, it should be stated that the connections between Traditionalism and the far-right are of a different caliber than what is mentioned above. While figures like Peterson and Trump are sometimes described by political opponents as ‘Fascists’, they are in many ways different from historical Fascists and contemporary Neo-Fascists, currents to which several Traditionalists had ties.¹⁵⁹

Connections between Traditionalist figures and Fascism existed before WWII. Michel Valsan was an admirer of the Romanian Iron Guard, as did Traditionalist affiliate Mircea Eliade.¹⁶⁰ Guénon himself also upheld contacts within (Proto-)Fascist organizations such as l’Action Française.¹⁶¹ As mentioned, Guénon believed that a revival of the West could only take place by way of a Western elite. He emphasizes that to retain Western civilization this elite must be comprised of Westerners because Easterners - because of their distinct spirits - would change the West in such a way that it would cease to exist.¹⁶² Many of these ideas were steeped in esoteric forms of racial science as in his books he discusses concepts such as Aryans and “ancient races” such as the *hyperboreans*¹⁶³ and argues that religious forms are formed according to the sensibilities of the race of people that follow that religion.¹⁶⁴

Although Guénon’s racialist¹⁶⁵ ideas might be viewed as a product of their time, it cannot be denied that Guénon’s racialism left a legacy on later Traditionalists which made him somewhat of an attractive figure for the post WWII far-right.¹⁶⁶ Schuon, who died in 1998, kept discussing “Aryanism” and the incompatibility of different races up until his death.¹⁶⁷ Most notably, Julius Evola developed Guénon’s racialism into his own concept of “spiritual racism”.¹⁶⁸ A concept which remains influential within the contemporary far-right of today.¹⁶⁹

The above distinction shows that far-right can mean quite different things and the ideas of Peterson are not the same as those of Evola or even of Guénon’s milder views. But as we saw in the literature review, Murad did in fact engage with Evola’s ideas by giving a lecture on the

¹⁵⁹ Sedgwick, “Fascism”, 95-117; Daniel Lindenberg. “René Guénon ou la réaction intégrale”. *Revue d'histoire intellectuelle* Vol. 9, (1991): 69-79

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 109-111

¹⁶¹ Lindenberg. “René Guénon”

¹⁶² René Guénon, “Not Fusion but Mutual Understanding” in: *East and West*, (Sophia Perennis: 1924), 139-155

¹⁶³ René Guénon, “Names and Symbolic Representations of Spiritual Centers” in: *King of the World*, (Sophia Perennis: 1929), 56-57

¹⁶⁴ René Guénon, “The opposition”, 34

¹⁶⁵ Racialist is often distinguished from racist in that racialism is the belief that humans can be categorized in different races and that these races substantially differ from one another. This is a precursor for racism (the belief that certain races are superior to others) and often goes hand in hand with it but not all racialist’s are also racist.

¹⁶⁶ François. “The Nouvelle Droite and “Tradition”.” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2014): 87-106.

¹⁶⁷ Gregory A. Lipton. “De-Semitizing Ibn ‘Arabī: Aryanism and the Schuonian Discourse of Religious Authenticity”. *Numen*, Vol. 64, No. 2/3 (2017): 258-293

¹⁶⁸ Where Guénon remained largely racialist, Evola was unapologetically racist. He however distinguished his spiritual racism from biological racism, the latter which he saw as too scientific and too all-encompassing. For Evola, “Aryan” people naturally were of spiritually superior stock but even among them this was only for a selected few and not for the masses.

¹⁶⁹ Morgan Jones, “How Julius Evola Became the Internet’s Favorite Fascist”, (Jacobin: July 12, 2022)

concept of “riding the tiger”.¹⁷⁰ This lecture needs some in depth discussion to understand the connection between Evola’s thought and that of Murad.

Riding the tiger refers to Evola’s idea (and book of the same name) that in a modern society in which morals and society are irreversibly degenerating, Traditionalists should not retreat from society but should instead fully participate in it while not letting its mores overtake them, so as to be able to seize an opportunity to take over society when that opportunity may arise.¹⁷¹ At the time of writing, Murad’s video has been watched 150.000 times, making it the most viewed video on Evola on YouTube.¹⁷²

In the video he discusses several ideas by Evola and the Guénonian Traditionalists and urges his Muslim listeners to investigate these ideas, especially their criticism of modernity and their emphasis on ‘the current breakdown of tradition, of order, of monarchy, of a natural hierarchy and of a sense of the sacred’. While Murad does not explicitly endorse Evola his positive discussion of Evola’s ideas shows that he at the very least agrees with much of his critique.¹⁷³

When it comes to Evola’s racist ideas however, Murad laments Evola’s xenophobia which, according to Murad, made him overlook Islam. Nonetheless he states that he finds Evola worthwhile to discuss for his various valuable ideas. The praise for Evola pointed out in the literature by Murad has thus little to do with Evola’s nativism but rather has to do with an appreciation of his broader anti-modern sentiment

Evola was best known for his emphasis on hierarchy and the necessity of aristocracy and his opposition to egalitarianism. Similarly, Murad remarks in another lecture that the modern world does not understand ‘the quality of royalty and nobility’.¹⁷⁴ Saying that the self-centeredness of the modern world causes people to overlook the benefits of a ‘natural aristocracy. He also praises Evola’s emphasis on the necessity of a common identity, which he sees as increasingly lost in the modern world through its fracturing and individualizing tendencies which we saw described in the chapter on modernity.

While Murad laments the xenophobia towards Muslims by contemporary far-right groups¹⁷⁵ he also claims that the far-right’s xenophobia and their Evolan critique of modernity is largely based in a form of unease about the loss of all the traditional constituencies of western identity and the anxiety based around that loss. He describes the animosity towards Muslims from the far-right as a ‘missed opportunity’.¹⁷⁶

This perhaps best showcases the difference between the Neo-Traditionalist thought and that of Evola and other more far-right inclined Traditionalists. While Murad and Yusuf do emphasize a Western Muslim identity, this is not aimed at race, but on creating a Western iteration of Islam, or what I have called “Western Islam”, offering the possibility to Muslims

¹⁷⁰ Cambridge Muslim College. “*Riding the Tiger of Modernity – Abdal Hakim Murad*”, Uploaded on Youtube on the April 10, 2016. Accessed via: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07Ien1qo_qI&t=6s

¹⁷¹ Julius Evola, “Part 1: Orientations” In: *Ride the Tiger: A Survival Manual for the Aristocrats of the Soul*, (Inner Traditions: 2003), 1-15

¹⁷² Cambridge Muslim College. “*Riding the Tiger*”

¹⁷³ Ibid

¹⁷⁴ Cambridge Muslim College, “*Imam Ali (ra) – Abdal Hakim Murad: Paradigms of Leadership*”, Uploaded on Youtube on the July 24, 2023. Accessed via: <https://youtu.be/IwWwOp314fw>

¹⁷⁵ Murad, “Introduction” 3-10

¹⁷⁶ Cambridge Muslim College. “*Riding the Tiger*”

of all ethnic background to root themselves in the West.¹⁷⁷ When Murad states that immigrant Muslims should lose their cultural baggage this then seemingly has to do with a cultural Westernization, as opposed to nativists and thinkers like Evola who give much more prominence to the importance of race.

Traditionalism's flirtation with parts of the far-right is then in part also present among Neo-Traditionalists but for the Neo-Traditionalists this mainly seem to center around an emphasis on hierarchy and a dislike of egalitarianism, points that we saw have mostly to do with a broader critique of modernity. With regards to nativism, which seems to specifically be a point where Traditionalists depart from other Muslims, we do see a divergence between the Traditionalists and the Neo-Traditionalists where Neo-Traditionalists take much less of a (race-based) nativist stance, despite their criticism of certain immigrants.

Westernness for the Neo-Traditionalists is as necessary as it is for the Traditionalists. But where for Guénon this Western elite could only be among those who were of Western "stock", the Neo-Traditionalists have an updated or developed understanding. That this is the case might be seen in the words of Murad who, when discussing Evola, called him a "point of reference for those who are seeking an alternative".¹⁷⁸ This shows that Murad's engagement with Evola is mainly tied to his extensive critiques of modernity.

While the Neo-Traditionalists still agree that the West can only be saved from the perils of modernity by a religion if its practitioners and the religion itself takes on an authentically Western form, their understanding of Westernness moved beyond the race-based Westernness of Guénon and Evola. What remains is that both schools are adamant that any idea that could save the West must inherently be Western.

Guénon, held to a broader understanding of this idea. For him, the West should become Traditional again in a more general sense, saved by taking knowledge from the East that he saw as lost in the West. For the Neo-Traditionalists, Islam was highlighted as the one saving grace of modernity and thus, in the Western context, that which should become Western. But how did we get from this general Tradition to Islam? Can this dichotomy between Perennialism and Orthodox Sunnism be bridged? In the next chapter I will investigate their Islamic ideas and juxtapose them in an attempt to further lay out this connection.

¹⁷⁷ IFG, "*Sh Abdal Hakim Murad*"; Hermitix Podcast, "*Islam, Modernity and Tradition with Abdal Hakim Murad*", Uploaded on Youtube on the June 14, 2021. Accessed via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68HOiflGoAA>

¹⁷⁸ Cambridge Muslim College. "*Riding the Tiger*"

Subquestion 3: Views, from Sharia to Perennialism

In the previous chapter we tried to show that the two schools had an agreement on the importance of Westernness due to their shared criticism of Modernity, but that the Neo-Traditionalists adhered to a developed understanding of what that term means. In this chapter, we will try to do the same for their Islamic ideas. In the way we have defined Western Islam it encompasses their entire view on Islam and as such the entirety of their Islamic framework. It is of course impossible to give a complete overview of all their Islamic ideas, as this would require an investigation far too extensive for this research.

Instead, we will focus on those ideas that make them “traditionalist” i.e. those that seem a departure from what they see as more modern/reformist expressions of Islam (whether of a conservative or progressive type) as we have seen in the literature. Focusing first on the concept of Sufism, we will see how the emphasis on hierarchy we came across is also strongly related to their ideas of Sufism. We will start with an overview of the exoteric dimension of Sufism, describing their views on the Sharia and how it is of utmost importance to their view on Sufism. The discussion of Sufism will then get us into its esoteric dimension and into metaphysics, which we have seen is fundamental to their view on modernity.

The biggest problem described in the literature was these schools having very different core doctrines, with the Traditionalist’s being described as Perennialist and the Neo-Traditionalists as Orthodox Sunni. In the previous chapter we briefly touched upon the fact that some of the Traditionalists that came after Guénon started to focus more on Islam. Chasing this development from Guénon’s Perennialism to the Neo-Traditionalist’s further, we will utilize our understanding of their metaphysical ideas and how these relate to their criticism of modernity to see whether we can overcome this problem and truly draw a connection between these two schools of Western Islam.

Sharia and the exoteric:

Within the realm of religion, Traditionalists draw a strong distinction between what they call the esoteric or “inner” teachings of a religion and the exoteric or “outer” teachings of a religion. The exoteric teachings refer both to societal prescriptions as well as to religious practices and rituals. The esoteric teachings refer to those “hidden” practices which can offer access to higher metaphysical truths.¹⁷⁹

When discussing the history of Traditionalism we saw that Guénon, in his criticism of Schuon, was adamant that a Muslim had to strictly follow the exoteric rules of the Sharia to be able to access the esoteric dimension of Islam. In a letter written in 1935 he says: ‘it should not be forgotten that the observance of the rites of the sharia constitutes the necessary basis; and it is moreover obvious that he who wants to reach the highest stages must first of all, and as a precondition, do the lesser acts’.¹⁸⁰

Hamza Yusuf holds the same view on the necessity of the Sharia and chastises certain Sufis for not adhering to the sharia, saying that it is ‘absolutely necessary’ for a true Sufi to follow the prescribed rituals of Islam and that one who follows tassawuf should start by seeking a teacher in sharia.¹⁸¹ Similarly, Michel Valsan says ‘the greatest esoteric scholars (of Islam) have always been at the same time masters of exotericism’.¹⁸²

Guénon’s criticism of Schuon can be related back to something we have been discussing since the historical chapter. Guénon saw the esoteric dimension of “authentic” religions as ways out of modernity for the West as it allowed one to access the metaphysical.¹⁸³ But as both Guénon and Yusuf pointed out, adhering to the rituals of the Sharia was an important part of being able to access the esoteric dimension of Islam. As Guénon turned to Islam, he thus did not in the least want to abandon the exoteric rituals (and we saw that in Egypt he did not do so), since that would render it impossible to access this esoteric dimension.

¹⁷⁹ Dickson, “René Guénon”, 589-611

¹⁸⁰ René Guénon, “Letter to L.C.” In: *Correspondence II*, Cairo, 6th of June 1935. Accessed via Archive.org on May 28, 2023

¹⁸¹ Islam Rewards. “Having a Teacher or Tariqa for Spirituality - Shaykh Hamza Yusuf”, Uploaded on Youtube on the October 9, 2016. Accessed via: <https://youtu.be/QWHkVZtfxLA>

¹⁸² Michel Valsan. “L’Œuvre de Guénon en Orient” *Études Traditionnelles*, n° 411 (1969): 33-35

¹⁸³ Robin Waterfield, “Cutting the Ties”, 32-37

Sufism and esotericism

Dividing the religion into exoteric matters and esoteric matters is something that is found among both Traditionalists and Neo-Traditionalists. Abdul Hakim Murad says: ‘some Muslims are suspicious of the traditional talk of a *zahir* and a *batin*. It seems too esoteric, mysterious and elitist...And yet the concept is purely and entirely Qur’anic and was never controversial among the classical ulama’.¹⁸⁴

That the Sharia was a requisite for accessing the esoteric teachings of Islam did not mean that Guénon believed that everyone who practiced the Islamic rituals would be able to access them. Rather, one needed to have a certain amount of innate understanding and a spiritual guide to be able to access the “hidden” meaning of these esoteric teachings.¹⁸⁵ Guénon very much emphasizes the fact that only a select few can access these deeper truths, in the anti-egalitarian fashion that is so typical of his anti-modern ideas.¹⁸⁶

For Guénon, tassawuf had little to do with mysticism which he described as a western concept that is about maintaining a passive attitude. Instead, he says that tassawuf is characterized by an active attempt to reach God through “initiation” into a *tariqah*. In this *tariqah* those select few who are intellectually capable could be guided to *gnosis* by a spiritual master.¹⁸⁷

Yusuf is not as strict when it comes to following a *tariqah* or a spiritual master. While he does see a lot of benefit in following one, he describes contemporary times as having many “charlatans who claim to be spiritual guides” and one should be careful and observe the person first before throwing away one’s autonomy.¹⁸⁸ This in and of itself doesn’t seem to differ from Guénon who, focusing mainly on the early organizations he dabbled in such as the Theosophical society, spent much of his writing “refuting” what he saw as charlatans who misguided the people by their claims of spiritual knowledge.¹⁸⁹ Similar to Yusuf, Guénon saw them as charlatans and as exemplary for the modern age.

Murad is quite clear that there must be somewhat of an elite in all areas of life to guide the people.¹⁹⁰ For Murad matters of tassawuf should be led by “spiritual elites”. He refers to the *Ahl al-Suffa*, as spiritual elites, comprised of *sahaba* who were among the first Sufists and who had learned their spirituality directly from the Prophet. Thus, for Murad the Prophet was the first teacher and the ultimate master and guide.¹⁹¹ Denis Gril, the student of Michel Valsan, likewise says that the relation between Master and Pupil reflects the relation between the *sahaba* and the Prophet and that the concept of the spiritual master was ultimately based on him.

According to Guénon, the split between the exoteric and the esoteric is expressed by the symbolism of the husk, which is the sharia, and the kernel, which is absolute reality or

¹⁸⁴ Abdal-Hakim Murad “*Seeing with Both Eyes: Text of a Lecture give at the Cardiff conference in May 2000*”, n.d. Accessed via: <http://masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/cardiff.htm>

¹⁸⁵ René Guénon, “Islamic Esoterism” In: *Islamic Esoterism & Taoism*, (Sophia Perennis: 1973), 1-8

¹⁸⁶ Ibid

¹⁸⁷ Ibid,

¹⁸⁸ Islam Rewards. “*Having a Teacher*”, <https://youtu.be/QWHkVZtfXLA>.

¹⁸⁹ René Guénon, *The Spiritist Fallacy*, (Sophia Perennis: 2004)

¹⁹⁰ Sami Yusuf, “*Reflections | EP 02 – Sami Yusuf & Dr Tim Winter*”, Uploaded on Youtube on the June 3, 2018. Accessed via <https://youtu.be/QSj4C0qsxyc>

¹⁹¹ Islam On Demand, “*The Ahl al-Suffa (Spiritual Elite) - Abdal Hakim Murad*”, Uploaded on Youtube on the May 7, 2013. Accessed via <https://youtu.be/ZMo431UO8Fk>

haqiqah.¹⁹² Murad, utilizing the same husk and kernel symbolism, explains it in rather similar terms, saying that the Sharia ultimately is the means of knowing Allah, of knowing ultimate reality.¹⁹³ As we saw from the beginning, ultimately everything relates back to accessing this absolute metaphysical reality. All problems with modernity ultimately stem from a loss of the metaphysical and the sacred and all deeds done are with the ultimate task of getting closer to the metaphysical kernel; the absolute reality.

¹⁹² René Guénon, “The Shell and the Kernel (Al-Qishr wa Al-Lubb)” in: *Islamic Esoterism & Taoism*, (Sophia Perennis: 1973), 9-13

¹⁹³ Murad “*Seeing with Both Eyes*”

Metaphysics: the importance of Ibn ‘Arabi

The idea of Allah as absolute reality is strongly correlated with the ideas of Muhyiddin ibn ‘Arabi’s idea of Wahda al-Wujud. Sometimes termed Islamic Monism, Wahda al-Wujud is a complicated ontological concept that deals with God, his creation and the relation between these two. Wahda al-Wujud has been controversial within the Islamic world, with some supporting ibn ‘Arabi and his ideas calling him “the greatest Sheikh” and others going as far as describing Wahda al-Wujud as pantheism and arguing that believing in it makes one a disbeliever.

The Traditionalists clearly fall within the first category and ibn ‘Arabi is by far the most discussed Islamic scholar within the school.¹⁹⁴ Starting with Guénon, many of his students would continue to study ibn ‘Arabi extensively, especially the students of Valsan. Some of them would become “ibn ‘Arabi scholars” in their own right, such as Michel Chodkiewicz, Charles-André Gilis, Denis Gril and William Chittick.¹⁹⁵ This focus on ibn ‘Arabi by Valsan’s students is exemplary for the more Islamic direction they would take as opposed to the students of Schuon.

The Neo-Traditionalists seem less occupied with ibn ‘Arabi, preferring to focus on ‘ulama that are less controversial within Sunni Islam such as Al-Ghazali. It does seem that especially Murad was somewhat influenced by Ibn ‘Arabi when it comes to metaphysics however. In the 2018 Khutbah mentioned above he explains the world in terms that seem strongly aligned with the ideas of Ibn ‘Arabi, mentioning the world and everything that exists as mere shadows that point to the primordial reality of God.¹⁹⁶

Hamza Yusuf, while defending ibn ‘Arabi, doesn’t seem to have spoken in depth on these metaphysical ideas.¹⁹⁷ This might be because Yusuf in general seems to speak for a laymen audience more so than Murad. Renovatio contains some articles that talk (in a seemingly positive manner) about Wahdatul Wujud but most of these articles take a descriptive approach, making it hard to deduce whether this directly corresponds to the author’s ideas or, by extension, the ideas of Hamza Yusuf as the head of Renovatio.

Looking deeper into the concept of the Prophet as spiritual master mentioned by Gril and Murad brings us to another metaphysical concept by ibn ‘Arabi; that of *al-Insan al-Kamil*; or the Prophet Muhammad as the most perfect and primordial human.¹⁹⁸ Utilizing ibn ‘Arabi’s understanding of this concept, Traditionalists such as Gril see the idea of Muhammad being the Seal of the Prophets as Muhammad being the ultimate spiritual master whose example is to be followed by those same spiritual elites. He is, in that sense, thus the ultimate symbol and mediation between God and the world and both the first and the last of creation, a concept that ibn ‘Arabi called “the Muhammadan reality”.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁴ Dickson, “René Guénon”, 593

¹⁹⁵ Taji-Farouki, “Notes on Chapter 6”, 346

¹⁹⁶ Masjidul Quds, “The Meaning of the Black Stone” Uploaded on Youtube on January 3, 2018. Accessed via: <https://youtu.be/r3OdlH8QB0>.

¹⁹⁷ Uloom E Quran, “Islamic Tradition And Ibn Arabi | Ibn Arabi & Ibn Taymiyyah”, Uploaded on Youtube on May 4, 2021. Accessed via <https://youtu.be/I6OYzeO9fdI>

¹⁹⁸ Denis Gril, “The Prophetic Model of the Spiritual Master in Islam” In: *Sufism: Love & Wisdom* (World Wisdom: 2006), 72-76

¹⁹⁹ John L. Esposito, “Sufism” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, (Oxford University Press: 2003), Accessed via: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780195125580.001.0001/acref-9780195125580-e-802>

Valsan takes the idea of the Muhammadan reality to relate the Prophet's mission to the primordial Tradition and not just to Islam in particular.²⁰⁰ Gril mentions that the Prophet was the first to be created and thus a model for all humanity and that his mission will not end after death, as he will continue to intercede for humanity on the day of judgement.²⁰¹

Murad in like fashion speaks about the Prophet as 'primal man, perfectly mirroring the qualities of God' and as the 'ultimate manifestation of the divine names' he describes the Prophet's intercession as universal, for the entirety of mankind because of his status as the seal of the Prophets, his light being the basis of the light for all the other prophets and as such all guidance.²⁰²

But there remains a difference. Murad uses the concept of the Muhammadan reality to argue against the idea of the universal validity of all religions, exactly because the Prophet's mission was ultimately universal and the light for the mission of all other Prophets.²⁰³ Describing Islam's theology as proposing a cyclical history he says: 'The Prophet Muḥammad brings these lesser cycles to a close, as the only prophet who is sent to the entirety of mankind; all humanity is in principle obligated by the commandments he brings, once his message has been conveyed... He pleads on behalf of others even if they are not of his own confession, by virtue of his universal mission and his representation of God's *rahma*. Thus, it is that members of abrogated traditions may hope for salvation'.²⁰⁴

While Murad's view might be said to be relatively inclusive, it seems a far cry from the Perennialism of the Traditionalists. This then gets us to the one part of metaphysical thought that seems to be irreconcilable between the two schools: Perennialism

²⁰⁰ Michel Valsan. "L'investiture du Cheikh Al-Akbar au Centre Suprême" *Études Traditionnelles*, n° 311 (1953): 300-302

²⁰¹ Gril, "The Prophetic Model", 74

²⁰² Tim Winter, "Realism and the Real: Islamic Theology and the Problem of Alternative Expressions of God" In: *Between Heaven and Hell: Islam, Salvation, and the Fate of Others*, (Oxford University Press: 2013), 122-150

²⁰³ Ibid

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 142-143

Perennialism and pluralism:

In the literature we saw that Sedgwick and others had described the intricate relationships and network that existed between Neo-Traditionalists and Traditionalists. This raised unanswered questions regarding the basis on which these connections were made in light of their different core beliefs. In this last section I will use our understanding of their metaphysics to analyze this topic and we will attempt to bridge the divide between Guénon's focus on a general Tradition and the Neo-Traditionalist's focus on Islam that we have come across before.

The Neo-Traditionalists have on occasion been criticized by other Muslims for their cooperation with the Traditionalist "Perennialists". One notable case is Hamza Yusuf, who after his cooperation on "the Study Qur'an", a project which was lead by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, was disavowed by several Muslims for his engagement with what they saw as a Perennialist project.²⁰⁵

Yusuf responded by stating that 'It wasn't a Perennialist project. It does contain some instances of Perennialism but many of those were taken from classical Qur'anic commentary'.²⁰⁶ He continues by saying 'I'm not a Perennialist...I was taught that Islam abrogated the previous religions. That doesn't mean that these religions don't contain truth or that we can say whether non-Muslim individuals go to hell'.²⁰⁷ Yusuf thus seems to oppose Perennialism on Islamic grounds.

Murad has made similar remarks, stating that while previous religions may contain truth, they were ultimately abrogated by Islam. When Murad was asked about his views on Perennialism he responded by saying that the validity of other religions is ultimately a non-Islamic idea and that many of the religions are 'naturally and mutually exclusive in their fundamental truth claims'.²⁰⁸ Where Traditionalists see ibn 'Arabi and Rumi as Islamic predecessors of their beliefs, Murad says that this is a misinterpretation of their views and that they inherently believed in Islamic supremacy and often made harsh remarks regarding other religions.²⁰⁹

In the literature we also saw that both schools were proponents of pluralism. The question arose however whether there could be any similarity between the pluralism of the Perennialist Traditionalists and the pluralism of the orthodox Sunni Neo-Traditionalists. We assumed that the Perennialist pluralism would stretch to all religious forms, while those of the Sunni Neo-Traditionalists would be encompassed by the boundaries of their strict Sunnism.

Yusuf has received criticism not just for his extensive work with Traditionalists but also for his positive and pluralist comments on other religions.²¹⁰ In a talk he described all three Abrahamic religions as traditions that bring immense purpose and uses a hadith in which the Prophet says that anybody who utters the words *la illaha illa allah* will ultimately be saved to

²⁰⁵ Mufti Shahid Ali, "Refutation of Perennialism, the Study Qur'an & Hamzah Yusuf", Uploaded on Youtube on the March 20, 2022. Accessed via: <https://youtu.be/RvqokcfD6C4>

²⁰⁶ Islam Rewards, "The Study Quran & The Issue of Perennialism - Shaykh Hamza Yusuf", Uploaded on Youtube on the July 22, 2018. Accessed via: https://youtu.be/UTrfc_dmQi4

²⁰⁷ Ibid

²⁰⁸ Yahya Snow, "Perennialism Discussed By Timothy Winter Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad (Re-upload)", Uploaded on Youtube on May 15, 2016. Accessed via: <https://youtu.be/wLmDnmTHbyw>

²⁰⁹ Ibid

²¹⁰ The Muslim Skeptic, "Hamza Yusuf: From Traditionalist to Reformist/Deformist", Uploaded on Youtube on the March 22, 2023. Accessed via: <https://youtu.be/9slxkys5RIA>

equivocate this with the idea that everybody who believes in Islam's God will be saved.²¹¹ While not saying so directly, the fact that Yusuf mentioned earlier in the same talk that Christians and Jews believe in the same God as Muslims was taken to imply that he believes that Jews and Christians are among those that will be saved.

In another video he once more denounced the equality of all religions but simultaneously says: 'I do believe that there is a validity in those religions and to the degree with which that validity is there, Allah maintains and sustains people through it...until something better comes along that is what God has given them'.²¹² This openness to plurality seems to be extended to Hinduists and Buddhists. Commenting on Hinduism, Yusuf says that while both religions have very different understandings of God, the two religions ultimately believe in the same God and share a very similar understanding of that God.²¹³

It seems that for Yusuf this positive view of other religions does not clash with his belief that Perennialism is false. He explains this along 2 lines. One of the explanations has to do with the hadith that God sent a prophet to every nation and that all these religions as such came from God. Even if they deviated from the full truth later on, they still contain an element of truth. Yusuf argues that this is evident if one looks at the great civilizations that arose in different parts of the world which could only have come about through some form of divine revelation. The other explanation is akin to Murad's idea of the Prophet's light, as primordial man, having been the inspiration for all other Prophets, again concluding that as such these religions must retain part of the truth.

This raises an interesting point. In the historical chapter I mentioned the split between the Schuonians who adhered to a more syncretic view and the Valsanians who took a turn towards a more orthodox Islamic view. While Valsan himself never completely disavowed the belief of the validity of all Traditions, he, and especially his students, had a different interpretation of it. For them, Islam ultimately reigned supreme over other traditions, even if those other traditions held a certain validity themselves.

In a 1953 article Valsan attempts to absolve the Traditionalist school from the claims of heterodoxy, defending Guénon's ideas as Islamically valid. He argues that Guénon was ultimately talking about religions all pointing to the same essential truth at their essential metaphysical core and not with regards to their exoteric or even their esoteric forms.²¹⁴ While in this article he does not argue that this means that Islam is ultimately superior, this seems to have become his thought later in life.

In a 1964 article Valsan argued that while all religions ultimately stem from the primordial Tradition, they have degenerated to certain degrees. He continues by saying that in the modern world "Only entry into Islam, understood in its absolute sense and with its complete virtues, can recover the lost primordial condition".²¹⁵ This seems very close to Yusuf's view and quite different from what we normally understand by Perennialism. For Valsan, as was

²¹¹ Zaytuna College, "Medina and Athena: Restoring a Lost Legacy by Hamza Yusuf", Uploaded on Youtube on December 8, 2019. Accessed via: <https://youtu.be/5hNOZljMFE?t=4378>

²¹² Islam Rewards, "Perennialism & Other Religions - Shaykh Hamza Yusuf", Uploaded on Youtube on February 15, 2016. Accessed via: <https://youtu.be/00GfbWYRito>

²¹³ Closer to Truth, "Hamza Yusuf | The Global Philosophy of Religion Project | Islam", Uploaded on Youtube on June 30, 2021. Accessed via: <https://youtu.be/8us98dDs5gI?t=1277>

²¹⁴ Michel Valsan, "L'Islam et la fonction de René Guénon", *Études Traditionnelles*, n° 305 (1953): 14-47.

²¹⁵ Michel Valsan, "Le Triangle de l'Androgyne et le monosyllabe « Om »" *Études Traditionnelles*, n° 382 (1964): 102-104.

the case for Guénon, it was a return to metaphysics via Tradition that could overcome the problems of modernity. But within the above quote we see that, already with Valsan, a turn towards Islam is made as the only Tradition being capable of this.

In the same article he continues that while the primordial Tradition is indeed distinct from all religious forms as Guénon asserted, the ‘Muhammadan form bears the name Islam, which points to divine unity, par excellence, because it asserts itself, in the final cosmic cycle, as the perfect re-actualization of the original truth’.²¹⁶ These cosmic cycles for Valsan are the prophetic cycles which ended with Muhammad, whose Sharia, he says, ‘is the ark of this cycle’.²¹⁷

Valsan thus seems not only close to Yusuf, but even to Murad, who seemed less receptive to the idea of the validity of differing religions. Murad likewise used the concept of Muhammad as the seal of the Prophets, as a completion of the last cycle and a fulfillment of the primordial religion as an argument to argue on the one hand for the intercession that non-believers might receive and that they thus might enter Paradise, while on the other hand asserting that only Islam was to be followed after the Prophet arrived.²¹⁸

There might still be some ambiguity in Valsan’s ideas, as he particularly states that it is Islam that remains the only valid tradition in the modern world. A critical reader might compare this to Guénon’s view on Catholicism, which he saw as invalid in modern times because of its degeneration but of which he wrote on several occasions that it was a valid Tradition in the Middle-Ages. (cotmw). Valsan might then have taken a similar view on all religions besides Islam. But the idea that Christianity or Hinduism would be valid in the Middle-Ages but not in Modernity would still not be seen as Islamically correct by most orthodox Sunni’s. However, such ambiguity disappears completely with the students of Valsan.

We saw before that Valsan’s student Dennis Gril used these ideas (which are part of the concept of the Muhammadan reality) to emphasize the special status of the Prophet. In the same article Gril uses this concept to declare Islam as *al-din al-fitrah* and as the religion that embodies the primordial Tradition that has existed eternally and as such as the religion that was eternally connected with primordial man, beginning with Adam’s disposition towards this primordial tradition and ending with the Prophet Muhammad as the seal of the Prophets.²¹⁹

We once again encounter a remarkable similarity in ideas when we contrast the above with the ideas that Murad spoke on in a 2022 lecture. In the lecture Murad discusses the prophet as the primordial example of the fitrah of Islam, which as a religion is the perfect manifestation of primordial religion. He says that ‘the prophet’s sunnah, the Islamic instantiation of primordial living, functions as a shield against the alienation imposed by modernity’, describing the sunnah as ‘the ark of salvation’ in the same manner as Valsan did.²²⁰

Valsan’s student, Charles-André Gilis emphasized the need to follow Islamic orthodoxy and the superiority of Islam perhaps the most out of all Traditionalists. He describes the absolute necessity of having to follow the Sharia with the Prophet bringing it as a means of guidance

²¹⁶ Valsan, “Le Triangle”, 95

²¹⁷ Ibid

²¹⁸ Winter, “Realism and the Real”, 122-150

²¹⁹ Gril, “The Prophetic Model”, 74

²²⁰ Cambridge Muslim College, “*The Ark of Salvation – Abdal Hakim Murad*”, Uploaded on Youtube on April 3, 2022. Accessed via: https://youtu.be/yo0Hd-0w_5c

and perfection.²²¹ He bases much of this on the universalism of Islam and Gilis denounces the idea of the equal validity of other religions and instead declares Islam to contain a superior position.

The idea that this signifies an even further development towards Islamic particularism and as such an even further break from Perennialism is supported by a talk Gilis held at the Muhyiddin ibn 'Arabi society. The society is a largely Perennialist organization dedicated to the study of the works of Ibn 'Arabi. In the talk Gilis addresses the members of the society to discuss 'what an organization that promotes Ibn 'Arabi's teaching should base itself on'.²²²

Gilis chastised the society and said that if they claim to be in support of the truth apart from any religious forms it means they 'either think there is no relation in Ibn 'Arabi's thought between this Truth and Islam, and in this case you don't know his teachings; or you are aware of this essential relation in his thought and in that case I ask you why your society refuses to discuss this essential point'.²²³

Gilis explained that while it is true that within Ibn 'Arabi's thought the ultimate truth is void of any religious form, it is also the case that 'the divine truth is attached to a special doctrinal formulation, excluding any other... Ibn 'Arabi endows Islam with this excellence, as he explains the exclusive privilege it has over any other tradition... there is then no doubt that there is between the universal metaphysical doctrine and the particular Islamic tradition an eternal link'.²²⁴

That this position of Gilis gets close to that of the Neo-Traditionalist's is seen in Murad's article on universalism, in which he managed to establish a bridge between the idea that Islam was the only valid religion after the arrival of the Prophet and the idea of potential salvation for non-Muslims through the concept of the seal of the Prophet.²²⁵ It might be said that the position of the Valsanians and that of the Neo-Traditionalists manages to synthesize the orthodox Islamic position with that of the Traditionalist school, establishing the supremacy of Islam while still adhering to the universality of the metaphysical truth and a potential salvation for non-Muslims.

This combination between Islamic particularism and pluralism is retraced by Gilis to Ibn 'Arabi. Similarly, Murad manages to make a convincing case that it is a valid opinion within orthodox Sunni Islam, by retracing the opinion to several classical Islamic scholars.²²⁶ From Guénon, to Valsan, to Gril and Gilis, to Murad and Yusuf we see an increasing emphasis on Islamic particularism, while never fully discarding the pluralist framework that Traditionalism was based on. While clearly evolved, the position of Islamic particularism could in some ways be said to already exist before Valsan who traces it back to Guénon.

²²¹ Charles-André Gilis, "Le dernier de califes" In: *Les sept étendards du Califat*, (Traditionnelles: 2004), 273-279

²²² Suha Taji-Farouki, "Projecting Ibn 'Arabi for today's world" In: *Beshara and Ibn 'Arabi: A Movement of Sufi Spirituality in the Modern World*, (Anqa Publishing: 2010), 179-181

²²³ Ibid

²²⁴ Ibid

²²⁵ Winter, "Realism and the Real", 122-150

²²⁶ Winter, "Realism and the Real", 122-150

Within Guénon's specific framework which proposed a return to an essential metaphysical truth via the world's religions we see a clear emphasis on pluralism. This pluralism would remain a part of the Valsanian subschool and the Neo-Traditionalist schools, ultimately forming a distinct characteristic throughout this evolution. This eventual evolution to an Islamic pluralism, instead of a more general Traditionalist pluralism can offers us a further insight into the question of what it was about Islam that those thinkers saw as especially equipped to battle the problems of modernity and how it is related to their views on Western Islam. We will discuss this in the next chapter, where we will comprehensively analyze, interpret and situate the findings on these two schools.

Analysis

Throughout the preceding chapters we have attempted to present a holistic understanding of the three subquestions that have been discussed to arrive at an understanding of what Western Islam might mean for these two schools and whether a development can be seen in their understanding of Western Islam. In those preceding chapters, we have also attempted to connect the dots and show where the similarities lie between the two schools and, where applicable, through which figures a development in thought might be seen.

As such, in this chapter we will not summarize these similarities again, but rather interpret those findings to describe what we think Western Islam means for these two schools, draw a development between their understandings of this Western Islam and explain what we think this understanding and this development is based upon. We will do so in largely chronological form, painting a narrative of Western Islam from Guénon to the Neo-Traditionalists to show how and why the understanding of Western Islam might have evolved between these two schools.

The Traditionalist school, beginning with René Guénon, laid the principles for a Western school of Islam, one that was centered around Guénon's criticism of modernity. Guénon's Traditionalism focused on a return to metaphysics, only made possible through an initiation in "authentic" religions, as a way out of the problems of modernity.²²⁷ Both the Traditionalist school that was formed by his students and the Neo-Traditionalist school retain this fundamental criticism of modernity, viewing it as an era marked by consequent drift away from metaphysical truths, leading to a world that is in crisis. Both schools uphold the view that in the pre-modern era, metaphysics and universal truths played a vital role in offering a shared sense of direction.

We saw that an important part of their critique of modernity has to do with the individualism that replaced metaphysical beliefs and the fragmentation that came along with it. But we also saw that besides a critique of this individualism and fragmentation, they are just as likely to criticize modernity's tendency to universalize. Murad mentioned that the modern world, for all its talk of diversity, increasingly breaks up traditions and moves the world into a monoculture.²²⁸

While this might seem paradoxical, we explained this through Esmé Partridge's article on the problems of the internet, who explained this paradox of modernity through Guénon's critique of the lack of hierarchy in modernity,²²⁹ something we have seen is important for the later Traditionalists and the Neo-Traditionalists as well. With modernity's lack of stratification comes both a fragmentation and a universalization of this fragmentation, where instead of "everything being in its right place" as Guénon called it,²³⁰ religions and cultural traditions (in the general sense) are removed in favor of the individual human being and his whims.

²²⁷ Dickson, "René Guénon and Traditionalism", 589-611

²²⁸ Cambridge Muslim College. "Abdul Ghani bin Ismail al-Nablusi" Accessed via: <https://youtu.be/BonYltAN7n8>

²²⁹ Esmé L.K. Partridge. "Rethinking the World Brain"

²³⁰ René Guénon, "Individualism"

For Guénon, we saw that his Traditionalism ultimately came down to the belief that different religions were varying paths leading to the same metaphysical universal truth. In contrast, modernity, with its skepticism and relativism, challenges this shared trajectory. Of course, in a sense, Guénon can himself be seen as a product of modernity. His Perennialism might have been unthinkable in pre-modern times for the scholarly classes within the Abrahamic traditions (and if we were to judge from the criticism Yusuf received for his work with Seyyed Hossein Nasr: it still is in many ways). Indeed, we saw that this is what Murad criticized about Perennialism, he said that classical Sufi scholars such as ibn ‘Arabi and Rumi were in no sense Perennialist.²³¹

But we mentioned that Guénon himself already early on in his life became critical of the occult organizations he used to frequent, because they did not focus on what he saw as “authentic” Traditions and could thus not offer any access to the metaphysical. Guénon's advocacy for a return to authentic Traditions can be seen as both influenced by the immense fragmentation of modernity, but also an attempt to oppose it by limiting his pluralistic view to those religions that he saw as providing access to the universal metaphysical truth.

As we have clearly seen, both schools have emphasized the notion that while there exists a universal metaphysical truth, it does not negate or diminish the existence of a plurality of forms. In other words, while truth is singular, the means to approach or understand this truth can be manifold. This idea of a plurality of forms that point towards a singular universal truth can be seen as the most important continuous underlying idea between these two schools. They assert that true unity does not mean homogenization, and true pluralism does not entail fragmentation. The understanding of this idea evolved further after Guénon, but the idea itself remained. This idea and its evolution lie at the basis of the creation of a Western form of Islam for these two schools.

We described that Guénon's conversion to Islam and strict practice of the Islamic rituals would have an impact on his followers, who split over the importance and supremacy of Islam. The more Islamically inclined Valsanians evolved in their understanding of pluralism and unity. Building onto the metaphysical concepts of ibn ‘Arabi, they posited that Islam had come to perfect all previous Traditions and was uniquely equipped to deal with the challenges of modernity, exactly because it united the universal and the plural within itself, with the haqiqatul Muhammadiyyah as uniting factor between all religions, religions which culminated in Islam.

This development moved further along with Valsan's students Denis Gril and Charles-André Gilis and would develop even further with the Neo-Traditionalist's Abdul Hakim Murad and Hamza Yusuf. They would further emphasize Islam's unique potential and applicability to deal with the problems of modernity. Nonetheless, the Neo-Traditionalists never fully opposed the idea of pluralism, even if they completed the move away from the Perennialism of Guénon. Instead, they argue for an Islamic understanding of this pluralism, and connect this idea of a plurality of Islamic forms back to classical scholars. Murad and Yusuf argue that this has been the Islamic practice throughout history and that Islam has always been able to be diversely interpreted and integrate cultural practices within itself.

²³¹ Yahya Snow, “Perennialism Discussed By Timothy Winter”. Accessed via: <https://youtu.be/wLmDnmTHbyw>

For the Neo-Traditionalists, Islam isn't just one path among other, equal, paths but the most comprehensive path that provides an “ark” amid modernity's crisis. For them, Islam can satisfy a return to universal truths, while also providing the opportunity for plurality, and as such is able to deal with modernity’s globalization and fragmentation of knowledge without having to resort to Perennialism.

As we saw, there were different understanding about what Westernness means between Guénon, who tied it to racialist ideas²³² and the Neo-Traditionalists, who had a more cultural understanding.²³³ But the emphasis on Westernness remained within both schools. The very idea of creating a Western Islam emerges from the recognition of the fragmentation inherent within a modernity devoid of access to universal truths.

Thus, creating a "Western Islam" for these two schools becomes an exemplification of Islam's pluralistic essence, demonstrating that while its foundational truths are unchanging, its external expressions have always adapted to the local and the particular. It becomes a way to move towards a renewed connection with the local in a fragmented and globalized world, one that can retain its position within the fragmentation of modernity.

This endeavor isn’t solely, or even primarily, a cultural exercise. Rather we posit here that it is an attempt to reintroduce the West to a robust metaphysical framework that can alleviate the problems of modernity. The creation of a Western Islamic identity is a putting into action of their beliefs of Islam being historically pluralistic in its forms and expressions and an attempt to use this to root Islam in the West by making it local. In this way it eventually hopes to “heal” the West of its spiritual crisis as Murad describe it,²³⁴ by once again infusing it with a local form of access to the universal truth.

In this, the Neo-Traditionalists are following the project that Guénon began and have finalized the turn to Islam that was started by the Valsanians, aiming to create a form of Islam that is authentically Western. Instead of being two schools in contradiction, we posit by way of the comparisons this thesis has drawn that the Neo-Traditionalists, in following of the Valsanians, narrowed their focus to Islam, but remained rooted in the episteme of Guénon’s critique and can thus be seen as the successors of those Traditionalists that were more Islamically inclined. That this is a genuine intellectual evolution we have attempted to show through our discussion of the contentious topics we found in the literature.

Additional proof of this might be seen in Abdul Hakim Murad’s book “Travelling Home”, which we have mentioned extensively, and which deals with the idea of Western Islam. Murad mentions in the introduction to this book that the essays in the book and his approach towards an Islam in Europe are inspired by Charles-André Gilis,²³⁵ showing the connection between the Valsanian approach towards Western Islam and that of Murad.

²³² Guénon, “Constitution of the Elite”, 122-138

²³³ Fajeetas. “*Hamza Yusuf - Success In This World And The Next?*”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldvz6LZ6BdU>

²³⁴ Abdal Hakim Murad “A Theology of Ahl al-Kidhāb” In: *Travelling Home* (The Quilliam Press: 2020), 208-209

²³⁵ Murad, “Introduction”, 3-4

Conclusion

This research began with the desire to challenge prevalent, and according to us, limited, understandings of Western Islam. In this research we have questioned the idea that Western Islam is a contemporary phenomenon and that the idea that it needs to align with modern “Western” values to be authentically Western. We have attempted to show throughout this research that this does not have to be the case, by highlighting two schools of Western Islam who are opposed to modern Western values but simultaneously strongly aligned with their Western localities.

The intellectual evolution from the Traditionalists to the Neo-Traditionalists highlights that Western Islam is not merely a contemporary phenomenon. Its roots can be traced to the first half of the 20th century. While emerging out of a new-age milieu, it gradually evolved to take on more and more characteristics of a normative strand of Islam. While they have had a wide influence on Islam in the West, the more Islamic ideas of Traditionalism find their spiritual successor mainly among the Neo-Traditionalists today.

From the start of this intellectual evolution the figures we discussed have emphasized the necessity of a strong tie to their localities. With the Neo-Traditionalists this culminated in the emphasis on the need to create an Islamic form that fuses the Western local traditions with Islam. As opposed to the prevailing understanding of such a “Western Islam” as attempting to fuse Islam with modern Western values, for these two schools a Western Islam has little to do with modern values. In fact, these values are seen in opposition to any sort of authentic way of living, including any sort of authentic Westernness.

They strongly critique modernity’s dilution of distinct cultures, including Western cultures, due to phenomena such as Globalization. As we saw Murad say, deciding what the West is, is incredibly difficult these days because no one knows what an Englishman is anymore. This dilution means that any sort of Westernness can only be authentic through an older, more traditional Westernness, and not through an integration in modern values.

Islam is then seen as a remedy, possessing a unique capability of fusing the local with the universal. Instead of Islam needing to adapt to modern Western values then, Islam for these two schools can be said to have the ability to make the West authentically Western again. For that to be possible, a move away from modernity is necessary, as modernity does not retain cultural differences but rather moves towards a universal fragmentation.

Bano rightfully pointed out that the more conservative Muslims who attempt to create a Western Islam (among whom she named the Neo-Traditionalists), still attempt to engage with modernity. This still rings true in some sense. Of Guénon it can be said that he attempted to completely distance himself from modernity. But for later Traditionalists and especially for the Neo-Traditionalists, it would be inaccurate to say that they are opposed to every single modern invention or idea.

We saw that in the curricula of Zaytuna College and Cambridge Muslim College there is a focus on understanding contemporary Western society and values. But there is also an attempt to understand Western pre-modern history and a focus on historical Western Muslims who are studied as examples. The broader interaction with modernity among the Neo-Traditionalists then should not be seen so much as the Neo-Traditionalists wanting to integrate modern values with Islam, but rather an attempt to diagnose the current situation and understand it so as to be able to properly establish a Western Islam in contemporary conditions.

This is strongly opposed to descriptions of Western Islam that focus on Islam's integration with modern or contemporary values, instead of a move away (or a move beyond) modernity as these schools seem to be doing. The latter, by focusing not on modern values which they see as merely globalized values but on reigniting older values (values that they see as traditional Western values) manage to overcome the idea that Islam needs to somehow fuse with the modern to become Western, as it manages to be both staunchly anti-modern and staunchly Western.

We do not deny that there can be schools of Western Islam that are much more in line with these modern values and do indeed attempt to fuse those with Islam to create a Western Islam. What we do however posit is that only focusing on schools that do so makes one misunderstand the forms that Western Islam can take. This is especially so because the schools that we have described have both been extremely influential, with the Neo-Traditionalists Abdul Hakim Murad and Hamza Yusuf currently being among the most popular western scholars of Islam.

The Traditionalists are furthermore the oldest of such a school of Western Islam as far as we know. Established already before the arrival of large groups of Muslims, they have in many ways paved the way for Islam in the West. By showing an evolution between the schools we have attempted to make it even more clear that their "anti-modernist" views are to be taken into account when talking about Western Islam. These views are present among what according to us is the oldest school of Western Islam as we have defined it and have directly influenced one of the most popular contemporary schools of Western Islam.

Given the Neo-Traditionalist's popularity and their distinct ability to tackle problems faced by Western Muslims, this strand might significantly shape the future of Islam in the West. That this might be so might be seen in the fact that other prominent Western scholars, have started to make similar organizations of which I will give just one example.

In a video uploaded on the 26th of September, 2023 titled "Urf and the Problematic Application of Western Cultures", Ismail Kamdar, an American Muslim scholar who is associated with the Al-Yaqeen Institute describes the differences in applying 'Urf and creating a Western form of Islam. He says that while historically it is true that Islam adapted to different cultures, these cultures were largely rooted within similar conservative principles, but just with different applications.²³⁶ The West he claims, in losing its Christian roots, is adhering to values that are completely opposed to Islamic values. In the last part of the speech he explains that he has become more strict on giving fatwa regarding Muslims dealing with Western culture, believing that Western values uproot after having seen that these values destroy societies and traditions. For Kamdar the culture itself is in direct conflict with the Sharia which cannot be overcome through the principle of 'Urf.²³⁷

In this talk, we see the echoes of the critique of the Neo-Traditionalists and Traditionalists, perhaps showing the influence of such anti-modernist thought. But what is not yet included in Kamdar's talk is that these schools already came up with a solution, namely that for them, to be authentically Western had nothing to do with being modern, but rather an Authentic Western Islam needed to be sought in the historical traditions of the West.

²³⁶ Ismail Kamdar, "Urf and the Problematic Application of Western Cultures | Ismail Kamdar", Uploaded on Youtube on September 26, 2023. Accessed via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2lQYJt5hq-c>

²³⁷ Ibid

This lasting anti-modernism among two such prominent schools of Western Islam challenges us to investigate what we associate Western Islam – and even Islam in general – with. Their unique position fits neither the common conceptions of Western Islam, both among general public and academics, nor does their rejection of modernity lead to the extremity that some might associate with such a position.

While their strong anti-modernism implies that their project of establishing a Western Islam also leads to the establishment of a new form of Islamic conservatism but their pluralism, their openness to work together with non-Muslims and their admiration and engagement with the West and its history, challenges our idea of what Islamic conservatism is as much as they challenge our ideas of what Western Islam is. They break through the stereotypical dichotomy often drawn between “liberal” Muslims who admire and love the modern Western world and “extremist” Muslims, seen as foreign elements who hate the West. As such, they’re paving the way for a conservative form of Islam that is as Western as it gets.

With their current popularity, the Neo-Traditionalists will probably come to have a strong influence on Western Muslims in the near future. This could potentially lead to a renewed understanding of Islamic conservatism. A far cry from the extremism or anti-Western thought which many governments, politicians and individuals have associated with Islamic conservatism, the Neo-Traditionalists attempt to establish a Western Islam is also an attempt to reshape the consciousness on traditional Islam in the West.

In many ways the Neo-Traditionalists follow in the footsteps of the Traditionalist school. This poses its own challenges as their willingness to work with figures on the right-wing echoes in some sense the relations with the far-right of many Traditionalist figures. But perhaps these schools also challenge the contemporary West to look inwards. The pragmatic critique of modernity that the Neo-Traditionalists adhere to can, in their eyes, save the West from destroying its own societies. Instead of seeing everything that is anti-modern as the enemy, perhaps, as Murad poses, the Neo-Traditionalists could than become healers within Western society, rekindling its authenticity.

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