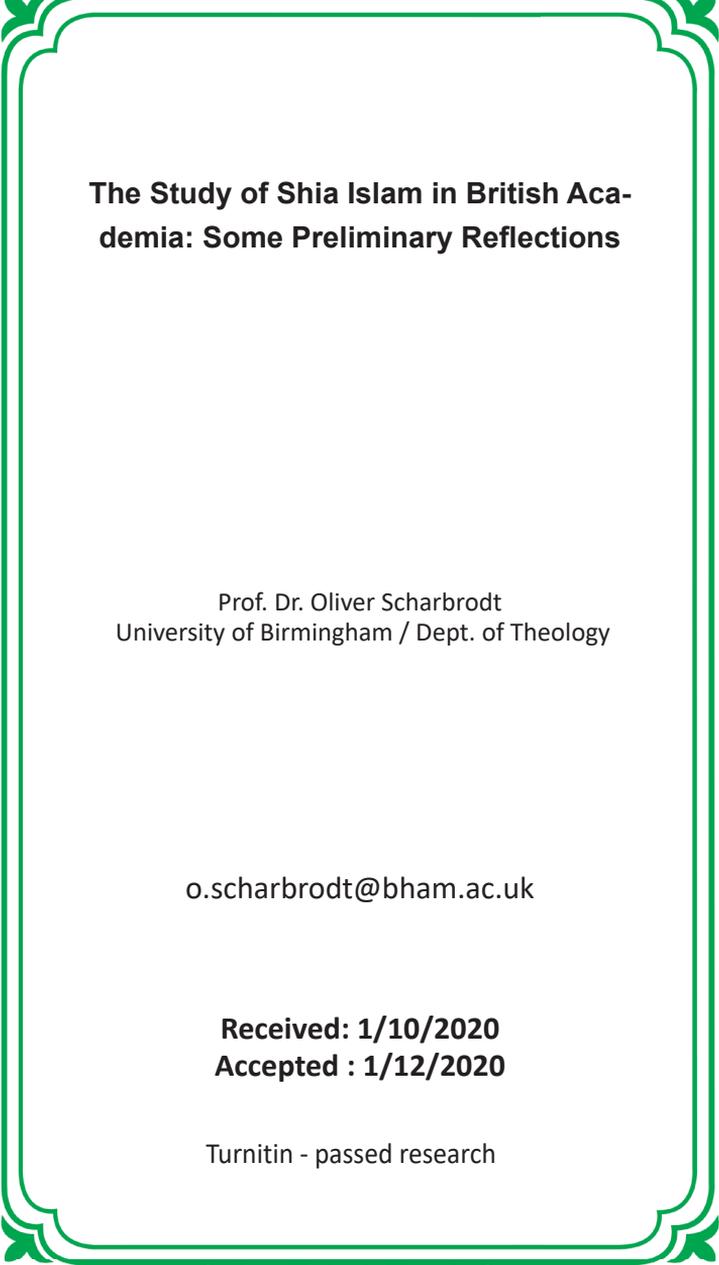


The Study of Shia Islam in British Academia: Some Preliminary Reflections

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Abstract

This paper investigates the development of Shia Studies in British academia and provides an overview of institutions of higher education undertaking research and providing teaching in Shia Islam. The paper will first provide an overview of the development of Shia Studies in Western academic institutions and the central role that the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 played in increasing significantly the study of Shia Islam in Europe and North America. Different universities in the UK in which research and teaching of Shia Islam is currently undertaken will be introduced with a discussion of the research areas and methodological approaches used by academic researchers based at these institutions. In addition to research and teaching at universities, a number of Shia denominational colleges exist that, in conjunction with a more traditional *hawza* or *pre-hawza* training, offer academic programmes in Islamic Studies with some focus on Shia Islam. The paper will also present some academic outreach initiatives of Shia community centres and organisations in the UK before concluding with a number of reflections on how Shia Studies might develop in the future and what opportunities exist for collaboration with community organisations and international partners.

Keywords : Shia Islam , Orientalist, Islamic Revolution, Twelver Shia Islam

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 and its Impact on Shia Studies in Europe and North America

Until 1979, Shia Islam was a neglected field in Islamic Studies and often approached from a Sunni majoritarian perspective. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr rightly observes, writing in the introduction to Allamah Tabatabai's *Shi'ite Islam* in 1971: "Until now Shi'ism has received little attention; and when it has been discussed, it has been relegated to the secondary or peripheral status of a religio-political 'sect', a heterodoxy or even a heresy."¹ This perspective on Shia Islam prior to the Islamic Revolution is evident in the amount of academic literature that was produced in Shia Studies and the general position in which Shia Studies was held, often relegated as a marginal subject with little career prospects for those engaged in its research. A further issue impeding the development of academic Shia Studies was the lack of available sources – a challenge pertinent to Islamic Studies more generally that has disproportionately affected Shia Studies given its relegation to a secondary and marginal status within the overall academic study of Islam in Europe and North America. The collection, preservation and research on source material in Sunni Islam had often been prioritised.

This secondary status of Shia Studies in academia was however not solely due to the minority position of Shia Muslims in the wider Muslim world, both historically and in the contemporary period. It was also the result of the political context in which research of Islam was undertaken until the latter half of the 20th century. According to Edward Said's critique of Orientalist scholarship in Europe and North America, academic research has been complicit in the colonial subjugation of Muslim majority societies.² Research on Islam and Middle Eastern and North African societies was meant to provide expertise knowledge on the culture, history, politics, society, economy and geography of these regions with the aim to exploit this knowledge in the imperialist pursuit of political control: "'Orientalism is a discourse of domination, both a product of the European subjugation of the Middle East, and an instrument in this process."³ Given the colonial context of Orientalist scholarship, Islam was pri-

marily conceived as a political force that was perceived to stand in opposition to the social, cultural and political values of Europe and as force for political mobilisation that had to be researched in order to tame its dissident and revolutionary potential.

The Orientalist politicisation of Islam and focus on Islam as a political force favoured the neglect of Shia Islam in research activities prior to the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Until then, Shia Islam was seen as a marginal political force in the Muslim world. The largest Shia majority country in the Middle East – Iran – was ruled by the secular Pahlavi dynasty that in its radical modernisation drive sought to extinguish the socio-cultural role of Shia Islam in Iranian society and recreate modern Iranian national identity on secular nationalism that drew most of its inspiration from Iran's pre-Islamic heritage. In Iraq, the Shia majority has been disenfranchised since the failed 1920 Revolution against the British occupation of the country with the clerical leadership either exiled or politically quietist. Political power was concentrated in the Sunni minority with many Iraqi Shiis turning either to Communism or Pan-Arabism as main ideological orientations. The same is true for Shia minorities in other parts of the Middle East or South Asia which, in addition to their precarious position as religious minorities in predominantly Sunni states, often came from socio-economically deprived backgrounds and were subsequently politically disenfranchised to a significant extent, as the experience of Lebanon, for example, illustrates. While efforts in the countries began in the late 1950s to mobilise Shia communities in these countries, they had not yet become that significant and lacked to a certain extent momentum.

This changed with the Islamic Revolution in 1979. With the success of the Islamic Revolution and the subsequent wider religious and political mobilisation of Shia communities across the world, Shia Islam was for the first time seen as an important political force in contemporary Islam that had to be taken seriously and understood. For this reason, since 1979, academic research on Shia Islam has increased significantly focussing primarily on Iran but also considering other national contexts in which Shia political actors emerged as

important forces after the Islamic Revolution such as Lebanon and Pakistan. The toppling of the Baath regime and Saddam in Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent Shia political empowerment in the country equally saw a rise in research on an area that had almost been entirely neglected: Iraqi Shiism and the clerical establishment in Najaf in particular.⁴

The aforementioned politicisation of Islam in Orientalist and Neo-Orientalist research agendas came again to the fore with research interest stimulated by the framing of Shia Islam as new powerful political movement. This again has led to a reduction of research agendas to political questions overlooking research possibilities on other areas of Shia Islam such as its history, theology, rituals etc. More recently, this political framing of Islam in general and Shia Islam in particular has led to an increased focus on the issue of sectarianism and the politicisation of religious identities in the current geopolitics of the Middle East.⁵

Despite this political angle, determining research agendas on Islam to a significant extent, research on non-political aspects of Islam, and Shia Islam, have equally developed with work on Sufism, *'irfan* and theology being promoted. This research is to a certain extent a response to the more politicised research agendas that have been dominant in Europe and North America and also dominate research on Muslim minorities in these regions which are increasingly framed within the politics of their securitisation. Research on Sufism, *'irfan* and other aspects of Islamic spirituality also tapped into the general interest and fascination with Sufism in Europe and North America with mystical expressions of Islam being often construed as non-political, harmless and “moderate” forms of Islam. Such a discursive framing of these mystical traditions equally mirrors and confirms Orientalist stereotypes that perceive Islam as a political movement primarily and seek to identify inner-Islamic movements that appear to be non-political to counter the dissident and revolutionary of political Islam.⁶

Shia Studies at British Universities

At the moment, in Britain academic research on Shia Islam is undertaken at the following universities:

-Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter (Robert Gleave,⁷ Sajjad Rizvi⁸): research is undertaken on the formation and historical development of Shia Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and mystical philosophy (*'irfan*). Robert Gleave is currently leading a major project, funded by the European Research Council, on the historical development of Imami jurisprudence and its place within wider Islamic jurisprudence.⁹

-Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Edinburgh (Andrew J. Newman,¹⁰ Elvire Corboz¹¹): a particular research strength lies in the intellectual history of the formative period of Twelver Shia Islam and of Safavid Iran. Another area of research relates to transnational Shiism and the role of clerical authority and networks therein.

-Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Glasgow (Lloyd Ridgeon¹²): research undertaken in Glasgow pertains to Persian Sufism in particular and hence investigates the intersection between Shia Islam and Sufism in the Iranian context.

-Department of Theology and Religion, University of Birmingham (Oliver Scharbrodt¹³, Yafa Shanneik¹⁴): recent appointments at Birmingham have created a new hub for the study of contemporary Shia Islam with research on gender in Shia authority structures and ritual practices as one particular area of expertise. In addition, Oliver Scharbrodt is leading a major project, funded by the European Research Council, on clerical authority and transnational networks in contemporary Shia Islam.¹⁵

In addition to these universities in which colleagues work explicitly on various aspects of Shia Islam, across different disciplines and departments at British universities, academics undertake research on aspects that relate to Shia Islam, usually within the context of Middle Eastern or more specifically Iranian Studies from the perspectives of either Political Science and History (Ali Ansari,¹⁶ St Andrews University; Charles Tripp,¹⁷ Arshin Adib-Moghaddam,¹⁸ School of Oriental and African Studies) or Anthropology (Morgan Clark,¹⁹ University of Oxford).

The approaches that most researchers at British universities have been taken are historical and textual with a particular focus on the intellectual history of the formative period of Shia Islam up to the end of the Safavid period. Such research tends to concentrate on the evolution of Imami jurisprudence and the place of *'irfan* and Sufism within Iranian Shia Islam in particular. More contemporary perspectives on modern Shia Islam including ethnographic research perspectives have only recently been included in British academia with new appointments in Edinburgh and Birmingham. Research on Shia Islam at the University of Birmingham intends to add a new important dimension by illustrating its manifestation and development as a lived tradition in the contemporary world.

While Shia Islam is touched upon and referred to in courses on Islam and the Middle East and Iran in particular across different universities, only two universities offer stand-alone courses on Shia Islam at the moment: the University of Edinburgh and the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

Shia Educational Institutions in Britain

Outside of the institutional settings of British universities, there are a number of community-based institutions that have been engaged in research and teaching in Shia Islam. The Institute of Ismaili Studies is the oldest and most influential of these institutions, established in 1977.²⁰ While initially established to advance research on Ismaili Shia Islam with research on the Fatimids and the pre-modern history of the Nizari Ismaili tradition as a particular focus, the research remit of the Institute has advanced significantly with research on the variety of intellectual traditions of Islam, both formative, classical and modern. Recently, research and publication activities have been undertaken in the context of Twelver Shia Islam as well.²¹ As part of its Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities, a specific graduate transition programme for students from the Nizari Ismaili community, the Institute has also successfully introduced students to the academic study of Islam.²²

In the context of Twelver Shia Islam, three educational institu-

tions have operated since the 1990s which have also increased their academic profile by seeking partnerships with British universities. The Islamic College London, initially established as the Islamic College of Advanced Studies in 1997, is one of the most prominent of these institutions.²³ It was initially formed to provide *hawza* and *pre-hawza* training for young Muslims growing up in Britain and to facilitate their transition to *hawza* institutions in Iran, in particular. This *hawza* programme is still an integral part of the Islamic College's activities. In addition, the Islamic College offers more academically-oriented programmes at both undergraduate and post-graduate level in Islamic Studies which are validated by Middlesex University. The degree validation programme means that while students at the Islamic College study at the College and are taught by its staff, they receive a degree from Middlesex University. While such validated programmes had existed on BA and MA level, a new cooperation has been established with the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Glasgow at PhD level. PhD students are co-supervised by staff in the Islamic College and the Department in Glasgow.

The Islamic College in London is part of the global network of educational institutions that are part of the Al-Mustafa International University with its headquarters in Qom. As such, the Islamic College, in particular its *hawza* section, plays an important role in preparing students for the *hawza* programme that is provided and managed by Al-Mustafa International University for international students in Qom.²⁴ It is important to mention that despite the origins of the Islamic College as a *hawza* in London and its links to Shia educational institutions in Iran and across the world, the institution as such does not have an explicit Shia ethos: staff and students come from a variety of Muslim backgrounds, both Sunni and Shia, and some non-Muslim students are also enrolled in its academic programmes. The Islamic College also owns its own press and publishes books and translations which focus on Shia Islam, in particular. It has also organised an annual Shia Studies conference – a quite unique academic event in the UK.

Another Shia institution of higher education in London is the International College of Islamic Sciences which was established in 1989.²⁵ It provides postgraduate degrees, MA and PhD in particular in the Arabic language primarily. In terms of staffing, in addition to staff based at the College, it benefits from a network of academics based at universities in the Arab world. The degrees offered by the International College of Islamic Sciences are not validated by any British university.

London is host to the largest Muslim population in Britain and also the largest Shia presence, in particular in the north-west of the city where also the Islamic College London and the International College of Islamic Sciences are based. Outside of London, the city of Birmingham hosts one of the largest Muslim communities in Britain which also includes a significant number of Shiis from Pakistan and Iraq but also an important Khoja community which runs the largest *husayniyya* in Europe. In 1993, out of informal study classes a *hawza* programme was established, the Al-Mahdi Institute.²⁶ A particular aim of this Institute has been to provide an educational platform for young Shia Muslims who grew up in Britain that intend to engage with fundamental questions of their religion from the perspective of their lived experiences as Muslims growing up in Europe. As such, the Al-Mahdi Institute has developed a strong intellectual atmosphere that encourages a critical reflection on Shia Islam and its legal and doctrinal aspects from a faith-based perspective while integrating them into the multicultural context of British society. Since 2018, the Al-Mahdi Institute entered a partnership with the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Birmingham allowing successful graduates of their *hawza* programme to apply for the MA programme in Islamic Studies at the Department. As such, graduate of Al-Mahdi's *hawza* programme will be able to complete their education with an academic postgraduate degree.²⁷

Apart from offering a *hawza* programme, the Al-Mahdi Institute is also engaged in research and publication activities around Shia Islam and Islamic Studies more generally, organising among other activities the annual *fiqh* workshop that brings together traditional legal scholars with a background in the *hawza* tradition with aca-

demics working on various aspects of Islamic law. In addition to its educational and academic activities, the Al-Mahdi Institute is also centrally involved in communal activities at a local level in Birmingham, hosting and organising both interfaith and intra-faith events and running regular forums to facilitate dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims and also among Sunni and Shia Muslims.

Considering the diversity of educational and research institutes on Shia Islam, some general reflections on their nature and development are at place. The Institute of Ismaili Studies was not just one of the first research institutions in Shia Islam in the UK but has also retained quite a unique position. Established to advance the study of Ismaili Shia Islam, its historical development and intellectual history in particular, it has expanded its research remit while at the same time emphasising academic research excellence and seeking collaborations with leading academics and research institutions working in the field of Islamic Studies across the world. As a research institution, it has thereby acquired an excellent international reputation. The Islamic College and Al-Mahdi Institute started as community-based organisation to provide a platform for a traditional religious education, geared towards the needs of Muslim minorities living in Europe, and preparing them for more substantial *hawza* studies in the Middle East. At the same time, both institutions have exhibited a particular desire to become integrated in the academic and institutional context of British higher education by seeking links with academic institutions to receive validation for their various degree programmes but also to enhance the academic quality of their programmes and to align them to similar programmes at British universities. This has been undertaken with the aim to link academic research on Shia Islam with more traditional faith-based perspectives and to open up degree pathways that would recognise *hawza*-inspired Islamic Studies programmes as equivalent qualifications to degrees obtained at British universities.

There are also a number of academic outreach centres in London affiliated to Shia centres in the capital that organise seminars and conferences and publish research on Shia Islam. One of the more

prominent of such initiatives is the Centre for Academic Shi'a Studies (CASS), established in 2009, which is based at and affiliated to the Al-Khoie Foundation, one of the oldest and most active Shia community organisation in Britain.²⁸ While CASS was very active in the past, it seems that in the last two or three years, its activities have become dormant. The the Centre for Islamic Shi'a Studies (CISS) was established in 2010 and is affiliated to the Imam Al-Jawad Centre.²⁹ Similar to CASS, it has engaged in a variety of academic activities shortly after its formation, organising conferences and publishing research papers. However, it seems that the Centre has become less active in the last few years.

Concluding remarks

To bridge the gap between academic research undertaken at British universities and traditional scholarship, new models of institutional partnership need to be developed in order to foster dialogue between the two scholarly traditions of investigating Shia Islam. The partnership programmes that exist between the Islamic College in London and the University of Glasgow and between the Al-Mahdi Institute and the University of Birmingham are good examples of such cooperation. Given their very recent nature, it is difficult to make any substantial assessment of their success and future viability – but certainly all parties involved in these collaborations are eager to maintain and expand them.

There are also some challenges which deserve consideration. For educational institutions coming from the community access to resources to sustain their activities and maintain momentum has posed a challenge. While foreign funding is often essential for some institutions, others prefer to remain independent of state funding to pursue educational and intellectual agendas which are not determined by external actors. Another issue that has arisen relates to academic standards and different expectations that exist in different institutions; this pertains in particular to the challenge of engaging in academic research that is recognised at Western academic institutions, that still grapple with the legacy of Orientalism, whilst maintaining a faith perspective.

At the same time, such collaborations are essential to address the educational needs of young Shia Muslims growing up in Britain who want to engage critically with their own tradition without the need to deny or overcome their religious convictions. At the same time, such collaborations allow these students to gain academic recognition through validated degree programmes. These collaborations also reflect the further need for an intellectual space that provides a platform for Muslim theological reflections within the context of British higher education. At the moment, this is only catered for to a limited extent and not really in the context of Shia Islam in Britain. To enhance such collaborations in the future, British universities need to engage more with local communities. Equally, Muslim communities in Britain themselves need to acquire a sense of “stakeholder-ness”, seeing the worth of investing in academic research on Islam more general and Shia Islam in particular at British universities.

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