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Imam Hussayn is Love

Individualization of Shia Practices in Britain

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In the past few years, lectures, community organizations, and films intended for the consumption of the younger, English-speaking generation of Shia in the United Kingdom have sprung up. Numbers for the Shia community in the UK vary wildly, but estimates given by members of the community are generally between 200,000 and 600,000. Whilst the first Twelver Shia to arrive in the UK hailed from the Indian subcontinent, Iraqis and Iranians form the largest groups of UK Shia, followed by those from the Subcontinent, the Khoja community, Alevis as well as far smaller numbers of Lebanese and Shia from the Gulf, and non-Twelver immigrants. Communities are, in general, geographically distributed in the UK according to their place of origin.

Every *marja'a* (Shia religious authority) has an office in the UK, from the Imam Ali Foundation, the Liaison office of Ayatollah Sistani, to Shirazi's office. The various institutions differ greatly in size, ranging from al Khoei Foundation, which has schools attached and maintains relations with the government, to smaller *hussayniyyat* catering for small local communities. Some Shia institutions also participate in larger umbrella organizations which include non-Shia, such as the Muslim Council of Britain. Officially, there are good relations with the Sunni community, but privately, many in the Shia community will speak of a souring of relations as a result of the large Wahhabi presence in the UK.

Celebrating Ashura

The emergence of post-Islamist patterns among British Shia is most evident during the month of Muharram and the time of Ashura, which marks the martyrdom of Ali, the Third Imam, and the theological pivot of Shiism. In the Shia world, the death of Ali has been recounted in a variety of ways. In the UK, interpretations of Ashura offered to the youth portray an individualized and instrumentalized Shiism, a religion seen as a tool for self-improvement and personal happiness. This re-reading

has been fuelled by the desire of Shia activists to capture the imagination of the under twenty-five generation.

On the tenth of Muharram, in 2007, in a hall in London, one shaykh addressed a gathering of around 300 teenagers and young men and women in English. He boldly proclaimed Ashura has three goals, the first of which is "self-reformation," beseeching the crowd to "lets pay attention to ourselves." Near the end of his talk, which deliberated on the immorality of drink, drugs, and non-marital relations, he declared that the most important item at home is a mirror, insinuating that its importance supersedes that of a Quran. This item, the shaykh continued, will enable us to "look inside our heart, so we can improve our behaviour." He compared Ashura to the flight one takes towards a holiday destination, arguing that "you will enjoy this journey" and emphasising the pleasure and reward this will afford the partici-

Britain's Shia community is currently engaged in a process of individualization and privatization of religious belief. The recent flourishing of lectures, community organizations, and films intended for youth points to the younger, English speaking generation as the primary locus of change. Exploring Shia activities during Muharram and Ashura, this article traces the changing nature of religious authority and the structure of community organization among the second generation of the Middle Eastern Twelver British Diaspora.

pant. Shaykh Qawzini in Manchester continued along similar lines, arguing "take care of your prayers – that is the message of Ali. Spend more time doing them and your life will change."

Such interpretations diverge radically from earlier interpretations of Ashura in the Middle East. For example, in Iran in the mid 70s, religious authorities championed Imam Ali's death at the hands of Yazid as part of a discourse requiring dissent and opposition to monarchical tyranny in order to obtain a just and Islamic political order. Reflect-

ing the tyrannical practices of the Shah, this interpretation absorbed not only the class struggle but also the economic and social cadences of the time.

In Britain, individualized interpretations find their way into a variety of media, impacting upon the message of Muharram and the nature of Shiism. A leaflet drawn up by the AhlulBayt Islamic Mission (AIM ISLAM), a Shia organization set up by young professionals and university students with the aim of educating Shia, Sunni, and non-Muslim students about Islam, describes Imam Hussayn as "a symbol of love." The leaflet does not include traditional pictorial depictions of Hussayn at the battle of Karbala, but rather, the text is overlaid above a drawing of flowers. Other leaflets produced, also intended partly for Shia consumption, liken Imam Hussayn to internationally recognized figures such as Mahatma Gandhi.

Such patterns are mirrored elsewhere. One shaykh, during a lecture in the run-up to Ashura, stressed the appeal of Imam Hussayn to "Jews, Christians, and Buddhists," reflecting the exigencies of a globalized, multicultural society and giving the Third Imam a patina of deculturation. This is reflected in the film *Karbala: When Skies Wept Blood*, a commentary by a variety of primarily British, Muslim authorities on the chronology of Imam Hussayn's death. The film, among the first of its kind, is intended for the younger generation of British Shia. Made by a British-Iraqi university student it has reportedly sold or distributed over 5000 copies. One of the main regrets voiced by the film's director, was that there was no time during the filming to include commentary by a priest, in order to "add variety." The stated intention of the director was to produce a film that would resemble *The Passion of the Christ*, though he regretted that the budget did not stretch that far.

Whilst only relatively few in the Middle Eastern community practice *tatbir* (flagellation to express mourning for Imam Hussayn), even this practice has been transmuted. One participant describes the practice as "a way of cleaning out your head," thereby transmuting a religious obligation into self-help psychology similar to non-religious practices.

Religious authority

The trend towards post-Islamist individualization is also visible in a variety of Shia practices. Notably, the concept of *marja'iyya*, the choice of religious representation, is undergoing modification. Whereas followers once chose one specific authority to follow and adopted his ruling, among some in the younger generation there appears to be a shift in attitude. In this group, an individual follows different *marja'a* for rulings on different topics, adopting a bricolage style. According to one Shia lay activist, this has become "a personal issue," an "individual

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choice," whereby the believer decides autonomously which elements of Islam (s)he considers to be binding.

Another symbol of this transformation is the growth in lay figures delivering what can be termed as religious instruction to the younger community. Whilst Muharram lectures are still delivered by qualified shaykhs, non-traditional, non-learned figures are also growing in importance. Part of the reason for this transformation is a result of the English language difficulties of the older generation of clerics and the generational gap between them and British Shia youth. "Up until five years ago, we were excluded. There was a language and generation gap which prevented others from understanding what we face, what it's like, living in a western society" pronounces Bushara, a twenty three year old Bahraini-British Shia dressed in black, sitting in a lecture hall in North West London on the eve of Ashura. The use of lay people testifies to the fragmentation of authority structures, the democratization of the paths to experience religious "truth," and new ways of interaction between religious authorities and recipients of religious knowledge. A plurality of voices is highlighted and the monopoly of religious truth is broken down.

Noor Youth, an organization run by students and devoted to young Shia life in Britain, invites not only scholars, but also lay people to deal with topics from abortion to drug use from the Shia perspective, because, as one of the organizers phrased the matter, "we find it really easy to relate to them." An article on AIM ISLAM's website which stressed the need to recruit speakers, both scholars and lay people, argued that "no matter what your occupation is, gaining enough knowledge to give lectures and preach about Islam isn't that far-fetched." Although the article distinguished between the two categories, it is clear from the comment section that not all respondents made the same distinction and that they saw little wrong in lay people delivering a form of religious instruction.

One student activist at an Ahlul Bayt Society (a Shia student society) at a London university phrased the choice of speakers as "it depends what you mean by a scholar, we obviously wouldn't take someone off the street, they need to have a general understanding of Shia issues" thereby not addressing the question of whether a formal Shia education is necessary.

In the *Karbala* film, the focus was as much on lay people as on traditional clerics. Out of the various figures chosen to give a commentary, several were lay people and women. Although the two groups were dressed differently (the clerics wore traditional garb) the film made no distinction between the importance and relevance of the lectures by the learned and non-learned, with both groups interviewed against a background of holy books, thereby equating the type (and nature of acquisition) of knowledge of both groups. The justification for this, according to the director of the film, is that "sometimes a non-'alim' can speak better than a 'alim.'" Bushara echoes this argument arguing that "a mixture of scholar and non-scholar is ideal." This overall trend has provoked a response from trained scholars, who fear counter claims to their authority. As one traditionally trained scholar lamented to me following a speech by a student activist about Ashura "he is competition for us."

New activities

Another signifier of the individualization of Shia Islam in the United Kingdom is the growth of new forms of organization and activity catering to the second generation. The launching of "Ashura Awareness Week" on university campuses, particularly in the south of the UK, is a clear example. This event, which began roughly four years ago and takes place during Muharram, is intended for Shia, Sunni, and non-Muslim students. The aim, in the words of a student campaigner, is to "raise awareness of the morals of Karbala" for non-Muslim students, and to help Shia students to "relate issues to our own community... to benefit itself and its people." Ashura Awareness Week entails setting up stalls, organizing lectures, and handing out material. As such, it detaches Ashura from its religious connotation of a one-day lamen-



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tation, and transposes it into a traditional student activism framework, not much different from say, environment week. Indeed, this year, Ashura Awareness Week in Imperial College University in London, entitled "Thirsty for Justice," focused on water scarcity in the region through the prism of the notion of injustice, as opposed to more "traditional" readings of the sacrifice of Hussayn. Organizers created links with the Environment Society and instead of showing the customary visual images of Imam Hussayn, the stand was stacked with water bottles and covered with a motif of a green leaf, stickers of which were also handed out to passers-by.

These developments mirror post-Islamist trends documented in certain Sunni communities in the West and among some social strata in the Middle East. Olivier Roy has argued that an individualization of Islam is taking place, whereby "faith is a face to face encounter ... between individuals and themselves,"¹ a shift from "religion to religiosity"² and the recasting of Islam "in spiritualist and moral terms."³ This argument dovetails with Asef Bayat's thesis on Egyptian society, which argues that emphasis is now placed on "an active piety concerned with personal salvation and culture."⁴ It also echoes Patrick Haenni's "Islam du Marché," which focuses upon the quest for individual happiness, in-

cluding ambition and social success.⁵ It is among the younger generations in the West, distanced from the "traditional" religious authorities held in esteem by their parents and benefiting from the transformations engendered by new media, that these general trends are most perceivable.

The younger generation of Middle Eastern British Shia very much reflects these processes. Individualization has found an outlet in the message of Ashura and the portrayal of Imam Hussayn in a variety of media. It is also reflected in practices intimately tied to Ashura and Shism in general, including the nature of religious authority and the structure of community organization, impacting upon the shape and form of the religion in the UK.

Note

1. Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam* (London: Hurst & Company, 2004), 185.
2. Ibid. 9.
3. Ibid. 191.
4. At <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/639/fe1.htm>.
5. At <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2003/09/HAENNI/10460>.

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