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Fighting for “Justice”, Engaging the Other: Shi’a Muslim Activism on the British University Campus

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Received: 30 January 2019; Accepted: 4 March 2019; Published: 13 March 2019



Abstract: While Shi’a Muslims remain in the minority in Europe, including within universities, the past decade has witnessed the growing profile of Shi’ism on university campuses, especially in Britain. In particular, there has been an emphasis on campaigns that prioritise notions of justice, equality, and human rights. Drawing on interviews and ethnographic fieldwork conducted amongst Twelver Shi’a students in Britain between 2013–2018, this paper examines the forms of Shi’a activism currently being articulated on university campuses, especially those that explicitly seek to engage non-Muslims and spread awareness about Shi’a Islam. On the one hand, such practices constitute a form of self-representation for Shi’a students who would otherwise feel marginalised within the university space; while on the other, they promote a particular version of Shi’a Islam that both frames it within the European context and that also contributes to the *sectarianisation* of the contemporary Shi’a subject. While the forms and resonance of Shi’a student activism arguably only have meaning within the context of contemporary Europe, we argue that the discursive contours underpinning such activism ultimately transcend such national and cultural boundaries and contribute to a reinterpretation and reimagining of Shi’a sectarian identity for the modern age.

Keywords: Shi’ism; Islam; identity; sectarianism; activism; Britain; university

1. Introduction

Despite often being presented as the quintessential monolithic “other” to Western Judeo-Christian religious and cultural hegemony, Islam is as rife with internal nuances, divisions, and heterogeneity as any other sociocultural system of meaning. These differences naturally carry over when relating to Muslim populations in non-Muslim countries, including those in Europe and the West. As in the wider Islamic world, Shi’a Muslims in Europe represent a numerical minority, making up approximately 10–15 percent of the Muslim population ([Pew Research Centre 2009](#)). For this reason, adherents of Twelver Shi’ism¹ and other minority branches of Islam have often been overlooked in studies of Muslims in Europe more broadly; their experiences either glossed over or simply relegated to a caveat or footnote in more mainstream studies on Sunni Muslims ([Bowen 2014](#); [Cesari 2004](#); [Grewal 2013](#); [Hopkins and Gale 2009](#); [Meer 2010](#); [Modood 2003, 2006](#); [Modood and Ahmad 2007](#); [Roy 2004](#)). However, in recent years, there has been a growing interest in these marginalised communities, with a particular emphasis on Twelver Shi’ism and the place of Shi’a Muslims within Europe and the West

¹ Twelver Shi’is make up an estimated 85 percent of Shi’a Muslims globally and are so called because of their belief in the Twelve Imams: the spiritual and political successors to the Prophet Mohammed. Twelvers believe that the Imam Mahdi, the twelfth Imam, has gone into occultation and will return on the Day of Judgement. Due to their demographic and doctrinal dominance among Shi’is, for the purposes of this paper, all references to “Shi’ism” should be understood as pertaining to Twelver Shi’ism, rather than to other minority branches of the sect.

(Degli Esposti 2018b, 2018a; Flakerud 2014; Scharbrodt 2011; Scharbrodt et al. 2017; Scharbrodt and Shanneik 2018; Schmidt 2009; Shanneik 2015; Spellman-Poots 2018; Van den Bos 2012). While much of this emerging literature focuses on Shi'a rituals and practices, migrant spaces, and issues of gender and religious observance, there has been little focus on the ways in which Shi'a minorities actively engage with the wider societies in which they live.² Elshayyal (2018, p. 207) highlights both the dearth of and the need for such work, which we present here. In contemporary Europe—where a legacy of multiculturalism, Islamophobia, immigration, and securitisation have led to a problematisation of Muslim identity—how do Shi'a Muslims seek to negotiate and communicate their religious identity vis-à-vis the majority non-Muslim population? Such questions are especially pertinent given the growing profile of Shi'a Islam internationally, partly as a result of sectarian conflicts abroad and the recent rise of Sunni-Shi'a sectarianism on European soil (Wyatt 2015).

This paper examines the forms of Twelver Shi'a activism currently being articulated on British university campuses, especially those that explicitly seek to engage non-Muslims and spread awareness about Shi'a Islam. The British case study is significant as Britain represents a key focal point for Muslim integration in Europe (Modood 2006), and Shi'a Muslims in Britain are a vocal and well-represented minority (Bowen 2014). Drawing on more than five years of interviews and ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2013–2018, our research focuses on Shi'a Islamic societies on British university campuses (known as Ahlulbayt Societies, or ABSocs for short) as a way to excavate the kinds of social, religious, and political activism currently being orchestrated by Shi'a students in Britain.³ The focus on Twelver Shi'is is significant since Twelvers represent the largest Shi'a population both in the UK and globally. Moreover, focusing on Twelvers is also a strategic choice, as it sidesteps some of the more complex arguments regarding whether or not other minority groups (most notably Ismailis, Alawis, and Zaidis) can be regarded as adherents to Shi'a Islam or if they represent distinct sects of their own. For the purposes of this paper, therefore, any references to Shi'a Islam should be understood as referring to Twelver Shi'ism. While the research and findings of this paper focus on the British case, we have preliminary evidence to suggest that the experiences of Shi'is in Britain are being replicated elsewhere in Europe; Britain thus represents a microcosm of the ways in which Shi'a identity is currently being (re-)articulated and (re-)interpreted in the context of contemporary Europe.⁴

2. Results

One of our key research findings is that despite the religious foundations of Shi'a student organisations in Britain, much of the publicly-geared activism currently being undertaken by Shi'a students does not have an explicitly religious component, but rather is reflective of contemporary discourses of secularism and liberal humanitarianism. This is especially the case in examples of campaigns that explicitly target non-Muslims on campus. Furthermore, those campaigns that do contain a religious component often do so in ways that either implicitly or explicitly seek to contrast Shi'a Islam with (certain forms of) Sunni Islam. In the contemporary British context, such discursive positioning can be understood both as an attempt to articulate a coherent vision of Shi'a identity, as well as an attempt to distance a secularised, humanist vision of Shi'a Islam from the negative connotations of Sunni extremism in Britain.

² A notable exception is Oliver Scharbrodt's examination of Shi'is in Ireland (Scharbrodt 2011).

³ The bulk of the empirical material used in this paper comes from a series of 20 semi-structured interviews and complementary fieldwork that was conducted by E.D.E in 2017–2018 as part of a SOAS-funded project on "The Shi'a Voice on Campus". This research was instigated to complement a wider AHRC-funded project on "Islam on Campus" led by A.S.B. Further supplementary material for the paper also comes from E.D.E's doctoral research, comprising over 50 semi-structured and more than 100 informal interviews, as well as three years of fieldwork and participant observation among Twelver Shi'a communities in London from 2013–2016.

⁴ The potential emergence and crystallisation of what could be called a "European Shi'ism" is something that requires further investigation, and forms the core of E.D.E's current postdoctoral research.

In this sense, such examples of Shi'a activism, in which a universalist Shi'a identity is articulated in contrast to negative stereotypes of radical or extremist Sunni Islam, can be understood as productive of a *sectarianised* Shi'a subject. While eschewing primordialist or essentialist understanding of sectarianism as a natural product of underlying ethno-religious "sects", we are equally concerned to distance ourselves from any kind of normative characterisation of sectarianism as a necessarily "bad" thing. Rather, the term "sectarianism" as applied throughout this paper should be understood as a fundamentally *descriptive* category; one that highlights processes of identity formation and mobilisation in which certain kinds of in- and out-group identity boundaries are prioritised over others. In this way, identity discourses that work to construct the category of "Shi'a" as conceptually and empirically distinct from the category of "Sunni" (and vice-versa) are *necessarily sectarian*, no matter what their normative or emotive content. Such a characterisation of sectarianism has theoretical and analytical implications for the study of religious and ethnic minorities, and, crucially, it is our contention that positive affirmations of in-group identities (e.g., "I am Shi'a") can unconsciously work to foster antagonisms for those who fall outside the parameters of such boundaries (i.e., "Sunnis", "non-Muslims", etc.). In this sense, sectarianism should be understood as an unconscious and socially-produced *discursive by-product* of Shi'a-specific identity construction, and not as a conscious move towards antagonism or violence between Shi'is and Sunnis (though it may potentially lead to such conflict).

Discourse, Identity, and Psychoanalysis: Constructing the Shi'a Subject

For the purposes of this paper, we avoid problematic notions of "identity" as a fixed or coherent ontological property pertaining to individuals and/or groups, and draw instead on the literature of critical discourse analysis to excavate the discursive boundaries of the identity-category "Shi'a".⁵ Fundamental to this project is an understanding of discourse that extends beyond a purely linguistic category and sees it as the ensemble of social utterances, performances, and practices that constitute the social world and that, moreover, is reflective of particular networks of power and hegemony (Howarth and Torfing 2004; Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Torfing 1999). In this sense, discourse is what constitutes the meanings attributed to particular linguistic signifiers (such as the identity category "Shi'a"). Within such a framework, identities emerge not as ontological things-in-the-world, but as discursively-produced signifiers whose contours reflect the ways in which power works to naturalise and to render intelligible social categories of belonging and otherness (Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Žižek 2000). For this reason, we maintain a theoretical and conceptual distinction between the Shi'a subject as a discursively-produced identity category and individual Shi'is themselves.⁶ It is within this theoretical paradigm that we seek to understand examples of Shi'a student activism on campus as contributing to the discursive production of the Shi'a subject, where this subject is understood as simultaneously both embedded in contemporary discourses of liberal humanitarianism and also productive of a certain sectarianised logic of Shi'a identity and belonging.

Shi'ism, as a minority branch of Islam, is at once a religious sect, a sociological positioning, and a political orientation (Degli Esposti 2018b). The ideological split between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims originally occurred over a succession dispute following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD, with Shi'is believing that Muhammad appointed his cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Talib, as his rightful successor (the term "Shi'a" comes from the Arabic *Shi'at Ali* meaning "the followers of Ali"). This initial dispute eventually culminated in an uprising orchestrated by the Prophet's grandson (and Ali's son) Hussain in 680 AD following the death of the Sunni caliph Mu'awiya I that resulted in the massacre of Hussain and his family at the Battle of Karbala. Later in this paper, we document how the

⁵ For a critical discussion of the literature on identity, and especially issues of performative identity and identity change, see Degli Esposti (2018b).

⁶ This distinction between the individual and the subject is developed further in E.D.E.'s PhD thesis.

traumatic memory of Karbala, and its transformation in the late twentieth century “from an origin myth . . . into a mobilising narrative of political struggle and self-sacrifice” (Khalili 2007, p. 29), has come to undergird contemporary forms of Shi’a student activism within British universities. The Karbala paradigm, we argue, shapes and informs Shi’a activism on campus in ways that seek to place Shi’a identity (i.e., articulations of the Shi’a subject) within a universalistic framework informed by contemporary articulations of liberal humanitarian norms and minority rights. It is important to stress that the Shi’a subject under scrutiny here is first and foremost a discursive subject—one whose construction is representative of a particular socio-political juncture within the context of the British university campus—and should not be confused with the individual practicing Shi’is who alternately identify (or dis-identify) with this subject.

The paper will begin with a brief overview of the British context and the place and resonance of (Shi’a) Islam in Britain, before moving on to an empirically-grounded analysis of the contemporary forms of Shi’a activism taking place on British university campuses. The focus on Shi’a activism on campus should be seen as a microcosm of the ways in which Shi’is in Britain are negotiating their position within wider British society. It also has wider implications for the integration of Muslims and other minority religions within Europe and the West more broadly.

3. (Shi’a) Islam in Britain: Multiculturalism, Islamophobia, and the Securitisation of Identity

The experiences of Shi’a Muslims students should be understood against the backdrop of the wider British socio-political context, especially when it comes to the way in which Muslims have responded to (often negative) public attitudes towards Islam. In particular, the British government’s attempts to police the Muslim population through a securitised agenda, coupled with the ethnonormative⁷ logic of British multiculturalism (Aly 2015), has arguably led to the emergence of a religiously-inflected Muslim political agency in Britain. Recent studies of Muslim political identity in the British context have productively drawn out the parallels between Muslim civic and political rights movements and the political claims made by gender and race activists (Modood 2006), and emphasised the role of liberal ideas of equality, human rights, and multiculturalism in shaping Muslim political consciousness (Meer 2010). In particular, studies have highlighted the trend towards the racialisation of Islam as a primary marker of identity, in which the term “Muslim” has come to function “effectively as an ethno-religious category in the West” (Bloul 2008, p. 7).

Since the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York on 11 September 2001 and the London bombings on 7 July 2005, the British government has engaged in a number of counter-terrorism initiatives and policies to combat the perceived threat of home-grown Islamist radicalism. One of the most significant of these policies is the Prevent strategy, which forms part of the government’s CONTEST counter-terrorism initiative. Created by the Labour government under Tony Blair in 2003, Prevent’s remit was widened in 2011 under Conservative prime minister David Cameron to cover all forms of extremism (Carlile 2011; Home Office 2011); however, there remains a widespread perception that the policy disproportionately targets Muslims (Awan 2012; Birt 2015; Heath-Kelly 2013; HM Government 2011; Richards 2010; Scott-Baumann 2017; Thomas 2010).⁸ As Thomas highlights, Prevent’s focus on Islam has thus effectively resulted in “enforcing the otherness of Muslim communities” (Thomas 2010, pp. 446–47). In this way, policies such as Prevent have not only led to the problematisation of Muslim identity in the UK by labelling Muslims as a “suspect community” (Awan 2012; Pantazis and Pemberton 2009), but they have effectively worked to construct a cohesive

⁷ The term “ethnonormativity”, a reformulation of the notion of heteronormativity taken from the literature on gender studies and critical feminism (most notably the work of Judith Butler), is used here to refer to “a deeply embedded set of beliefs about essential sameness and difference that naturalise the notion of ‘ethnicity’ and provide it with the status of a proper (ontological) object” (Aly 2015, p. 199).

⁸ Indeed, on 8 March 2019 the UK’s Court of Appeal ruled that Paragraph 11 of the Prevent Duty Guidance (which urges extreme caution on universities hosting external speakers in case of terrorism) should be deemed unlawful to the extent that it “is not sufficiently balanced and accurate to . . . assist [the decision maker] to a proper conclusion” (Islam21C 2019).

sense of “Muslim identity” in Britain that glosses over the heterogeneity inherent within Islam itself and British Muslims in particular. The practicing British Muslim is thus caught in a bind between attempting to promote a positive Muslim identity at the same time as seeking to distance themselves from the pejorative conceptions of Islam that permeate wider society. This is especially pertinent for self-identifying Muslims who represent minority branches of the religion (such as Twelver Shi’is), rather than the dominant Sunni/Salafi/Wahhabi version portrayed in the tabloid press.

For practicing Shi’is in Britain, there are a number of reasons why individuals might not feel part of a wider community of “British Islam” (and not merely due to the pathologisation of Islam in public discourse). Firstly, the vast majority of Muslims in Britain tend to be Sunni and come from South Asian backgrounds (mostly from India or Pakistan) (Abbas 2007; Hopkins and Gale 2009; Karner and Aldridge 2014; Meer and Modood 2009; Scott-Baumann 2018b; Spellman-Poots 2012). Demographically speaking, there are qualitative differences between the majority working-class, South Asian, Sunni Muslims in Britain and the mostly middle-class, predominantly Arab, Iranian, or East-African Indian, Shi’a Muslims (notwithstanding the political and ideological divisions between different schools of Sunni and Shi’a Islam).⁹ Moreover, against the background of what one interviewee called “anti-Muslim propaganda”,¹⁰ many Shi’is feel both misrepresented and misunderstood by conceptions of “Islam” propagated by the British media and wider society. As Zainab, an Iraqi Shi’a woman who came to Britain as a child, put it: “The Shi’a are all silent. You always hear about ‘Muslims’, but they’re inevitably [South] Asian and Sunni; you never hear about Shi’is . . . we don’t have a voice. We need to show people that it’s not us that do all these crazy things.”¹¹

This desire for Shi’is to distance themselves from the wider (Sunni) Muslim community was something E.D.E repeatedly came across during her research—there was an enduring sense that “we’re not *that* kind of Muslim”. In particular, a number of research participants highlighted the rise of Islamist terrorism post-9/11 and the prevalence of Wahhabi and Salafi brands of Islam within Britain as a way to stress their alleged difference from “those kinds of Muslims”. While the growing influence of extremist interpretations of Sunni Islam within Britain have certainly contributed to an enduring sense of Shi’a difference (Scharbrodt 2011), there is also an important respect in which geopolitical conflicts in the Middle East and wider Islamic world have also fostered intra-communal Sunni-Shi’a antagonism within the British context. In particular, the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, the 1991 Gulf War, the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, and the recent conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, have all nurtured different ideas of what it means to be “Sunni” and “Shi’a” Muslim in the contemporary world (Aly 2015). More recently, the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), including a number of high-profile attacks against Shi’a Muslims in the Middle East, as well as terrorist attacks on European soil, have further politicised what it means to be a practicing Shi’a Muslim in the contemporary context. As Scharbrodt emphasises: “In the age of ISIS, a particular responsibility falls on Shi’is living as a minority in the West to represent a different image of Islam and to ensure that Shi’a Muslims and their distinct sectarian identity are visible in the public and demarcated from violent expressions of Sunni Islam” (Scharbrodt 2018, p. 13).

Current events—both on and off campus—thus provide the backdrop against which young Shi’a Muslim students in Britain are developing their adult identity. It has become somewhat trite to comment on the sense of moral crisis currently characterising Britain’s student scene between a commitment to free speech, on the one hand, and a sensitivity to the potential for the university environment to foster certain forms of politically or socially extremist views, on the other (Brown and Saeed 2015; Hopkins and Gale 2009; Scott-Baumann 2017; Thornton 2011). In particular, there has been increased scrutiny of the activities of Muslim students at British universities, with both politicians and

⁹ This is a broad brush-stroke depiction of the demographics of Sunnis and Shi’is in Britain, but is representative of the narratives and forms of identities articulated by our research participants.

¹⁰ E.D.E PhD interview, 20 February 2015.

¹¹ Informal conversation with N.M, 16 August 2015.

the media accusing universities of being “complacent” regarding the alleged prevalence of Islamist radicalisation on campus (Gardham 2011). While there is currently no reliable evidence that a student has ever been radicalised on campus to commit acts of violence (Scott-Baumann 2017), the belief that university campuses are “hotbeds of extremism” (Gardham 2011) plays into populist perceptions of the threatening Muslim other, and is thus encouraged by politicians and adopted by the media and the general public (Heath-Kelly 2013; Scott-Baumann 2017).

While the Prevent strategy is, in theory, intended to address all forms of radicalism and extremism across the political spectrum,¹² a significant number of commentators have criticised the programme for focusing too narrowly on Muslims (Awan 2012; Birt 2015; Heath-Kelly 2013; Qurashi 2018). Indeed, the findings from the 2015–18 AHRC *Representing Islam on Campus* project show that Muslim students are engaging in forms of self-censorship in an attempt to avoid attracting unwanted critical attention. This suggests that Islam is viewed as a pathology: the *Representing Islam* team collected evidence of decisions by Muslim students not to invite particular speakers, or hold events on topics relating to Middle East politics, as well as examples of Muslim male staff deciding not to grow a beard and reported self-consciousness in Muslim women regarding wearing the *hijab* or other visible signs of religious commitment. Furthermore, the process of pathologising Islam also affects the intellectual pursuit of Muslim/British identity through the curriculum (Scott-Baumann 2018a). Such an approach has an impact upon non-Muslims as well, as noted in a recent report on free speech on campus by the Joint Committee on Human Rights (2018); in particular, there are concerns that the emphasis on countering radicalism and violent extremism is resulting in an impoverishment of the university academic environment (Perfect 2017; Scott-Baumann and Perfect 2019).

Practicing Shi’a students at British university thus find themselves in the difficult position of wanting to increase the visibility of Islam—and Shi’a Islam in particular—while being acutely aware of the social and political pitfalls of doing so. Nevertheless, Shi’a students are finding innovative ways to mobilise within the university environment. As detailed above, on the one hand, there is a tendency for Shi’is to attempt to distance themselves from “negative” perceptions of Islam (especially those related to Sunni Islamism), while emphasising the elements of their religion that are perceived to be more relatable to a non-Muslim audience. In particular, Shi’a students have drawn on liberal humanitarian discourses of freedom, equality, justice, and minority rights, to present a version of Shi’a Islam that is arguably well-suited to the liberal, secular environment of the university campus. In framing Shi’ism as a “fight for justice”, Shi’a students have thus contributed to the discursive construction of Shi’a Islam as a force for social good within the context of a secularised public sphere, at the same time as this discourse strives to distance Shi’ism from certain forms of (Sunni) Islam that are negatively viewed within the British social context.

4. Shi’ism on Campus: From Representation to Activism

There are no accurate figures regarding the number of Shi’a students at British universities, although anecdotal evidence garnered during this research project implies that there are small numbers of Shi’is (between 10–30 individuals) at most British universities surveyed.¹³ Such figures suggest that Shi’i students represent a significant minority among Muslims on campus. Until the early 2000s, Shi’a students at British universities had no official form of representation on campus beyond that which was provided by the university Islamic Society (ISoc). Against the backdrop of rising Islamophobia and

¹² In the period between April 2017 and March 2018, for example, there was a 36 percent rise in the number of referrals to the Prevent programme regarding issues of far-right activity (BBC 2018). Nevertheless, there remains a widespread perception that Prevent disproportionately targets the Muslim population.

¹³ These figures come from estimates provided by our research participants at the following universities: Aston, Birmingham, Bradford, Brunel, Cambridge, Cardiff, Dundee, Imperial College London, Hertfordshire, King’s College London, Leeds, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), Oxford, Portsmouth, SOAS, Sheffield, University College London (UCL), and Westminster. It should be noted, however, that these figures represent the number of Shi’i students known to our participants, and therefore the real figure is likely to be higher.

public scrutiny post-9/11, coupled with growing anti-Shi'a sentiment amongst British Sunnis in the wake of the 2003 Iraq War, it is easy to see how practicing Shi'a students may have felt outnumbered or "silenced" within the Sunni-dominated ISocs. These convening factors led to the splintering of the Islamic presence on some campuses, with the establishment of alternative Islamic societies intended to cater for those who no longer felt at home within the wider ISoc body. The first of these alternative organisations were established in 2005 at UCL and SOAS, and by 2006 the name Ahlulbayt Society (a reference to the family of the Prophet Muhammad, ABSoc for short) had become widespread. At the time of writing, there are currently 35 active ABSocs across the UK, at universities as diverse as Birmingham, Bradford, Cardiff, Dundee, Glasgow, and Southampton.

The emergence of ABSocs in the early 2000s thus took place within the context of both domestic and international political developments, especially with regards to increasing Sunni-Shi'a sectarianism in the Middle East and the growing influence of Salafist and Wahhabist-inspired Islamism. Although doctrinal differences between Sunni and Shi'a Islam are not always apparent, and the two sects share many similarities when it comes to the practice of Islam, Shi'a Muslims observe a number of different rituals than their Sunni co-religionists. For example, Shi'is pray with their hands by their sides, instead of clasped in front of them, and often use a small clay tablet (called a *turba*) during their prayers. Shi'is also traditionally hold specific prayers on a Thursday evening (known as *Dua Kamel*) and Friday morning (*Dua Nudba*), as well as the rituals associated with the Islamic month of Muharram—all of which differ from Sunnism. There are also certain forms of dress that are more closely associated with Shi'ism than with schools of Sunni thought, such as the wearing of black during Muharram (to mourn the death of Imam Hussain and his compatriots at the Battle of Karbala), the sporting of tattoos,¹⁴ and particular styles of the *hijab*.¹⁵ As a result of these variations, Shi'a Muslims can be visually and performatively distinguished from Sunnis, especially during prayer or at specific times of the year; differences that can serve as potential sources of friction in the university context. As Alia¹⁶, a 28-year-old British-born Iraqi commented, reflecting on her experiences studying at Cambridge and Imperial universities:

Unless you're all going as a big group of Shi'a to pray . . . you'll always be the one person in the room praying with a *turba*.¹⁷ (Alia, Cambridge, 2017)

Similarly, Hussain, a 29-year old British-born man of Iraqi background who completed both his undergraduate and postgraduate studies at Imperial College London, made the following comment regarding the potentially contested nature of prayer spaces on campus, which are mostly dominated by ISoc members:

I think there has been a very turbulent time between the two sects, ISoc being mainly Sunni. And, you know, [the university] would only offer one prayer room for the both of us, and the different styles of prayer were maybe not accepted by both groups. And . . . there would be friction when we went to pray . . . It was dominated by Sunni Muslims . . . So, you go down and the whole room is sort of territorialised in this group prayer, and you're trying to sneak in the side and do your own thing. (Hussain, Imperial, 2018)

This sense of not fitting into the Sunni-dominated portrayal of Islam on campus is echoed by Zainab, a 25-year-old British-Lebanese student currently studying at SOAS. Reflecting on the

¹⁴ This is mostly limited to followers of Lebanese-Iraqi cleric Ayatollah Mohammed Hussein Fadhlallah.

¹⁵ For example, some orthodox Shi'is wear their *hijab* in such a way as to also cover the lower part of their chin; a style that is particularly associated with those who follow Khomeini or support the Iranian theological establishment.

¹⁶ All names are pseudonyms.

¹⁷ A *turba* (pl. *turab*) is a small piece of baked earth or clay (those made of the earth of Karbala being the most sacred) used by Shi'a Muslims during prayer. The *turba* represents something clean and natural, and can be substituted in most Shi'a schools by a piece of paper or other natural material.

relationship between ISocs and ABSocs at different universities, she made the following comment comparing the small number of ABSoc members on campus to Shi'ism's minority status globally:

Because we're the minority because we've been marginalised . . . so, we always had that conversation; so now we have to break out of that, say: "No, we are Muslims" . . . We are the minority, even here. Like in the UK, even in university, ISoc is always bigger. (Zainab, SOAS, 2017)

Indeed, all the Shi'a students interviewed expressed some sense of being marginalised or sidelined by the Sunni majority at university, whether that be in terms of the kinds of events on offer, the lack of availability of Shi'a-specific resources, the general ignorance regarding Shi'ism exhibited by other Muslim groups, or (as above) the simple reality of being the only person in the room praying differently. The emergence of ABSocs thus allowed Shi'is to congregate with like-minded individuals without having to feel the need to justify their differences to other Muslims. While ABSocs thus began as a way for Shi'a Muslims to come together within a shared space of mutual understanding; over time, the organisations have evolved to do more than simply cater to the spiritual and social needs of Shi'a Muslims on campus and have arguably come to actively contribute to the meaning and resonance of what it means to be "Shi'a" in contemporary Britain. In this sense, ABSocs have become integral to the production of Shi'ism as a minority identity category in the British context.

Although such diversity, on the one hand, represents a positive affirmation of Shi'a religious and community identity within the university setting, the often fraught relations between ABSocs and ISocs within the same university campus points, on the other, towards a tendency to prioritise a sense of "Shi'anness" over and above notions of "Muslimness" that might be shared with Sunni co-religionists (and vice-versa). For example, throughout the academic year 2014–2015, the ABSoc of one London university¹⁸ engaged in a self-proclaimed "boycott" of the university ISoc in order to protest the perceived "sectarianism" of the latter. In a Whatsapp conversation amongst ABSoc members in September 2014, three Shi'a undergraduates participated in the following exchange in relation to the boycott:

Ali: So, with all this that's happening with isoc [sic] and their committee are we welcome in isoc or will [we] be treated like 2nd class citizens?

Jasim: If you join absoc you are not allowed to join isoc

Qaisar: 2nd [class citizens]?? Ud be lucky [sic]

Ali: Lool [sic] Here's me thinking people were more tolerant at [University]¹⁹

In the above exchange, humour is used as a way to mitigate the seriousness of the topic—the implicit accusation that the university ISoc is sectarian or anti-Shi'a. Interestingly, although accounts of why the split between the ISoc and ABSoc arose during this period varied considerably, the most frequently recurring discursive trope was of Shi'a victimhood and minority representation.²⁰ For example, take the exchange between two Shi'a students (both part of the university ABSoc committee) during the inaugural ABSoc meeting for the beginning of the 2014 academic year:

Ali: Why do we have two Islamic societies at [University]?

Hassan: Because one's right and one's wrong.²¹

While humour is again used here to soften the message (the comment by Hassan was accompanied by laughs from the other members), the promotion of two different Islamic societies, divided by

¹⁸ Due to the sensitive nature of this material, the name of the university in question has been omitted.

¹⁹ ABSoc Whatsapp conversation, 25 September 2014. Source: E.D.E fieldnotes.

²⁰ E.D.E fieldnotes, 25 September 2014.

²¹ *ibid.*

sectarian affiliation, is suggestive of a crystallising sense of “Shi’anness” as a specific identity category. The implicit assumption here, of course, being that it is the (Shi’a) ABSoc that is “right”, and the (Sunni) ISoc that is “wrong”—thus invoking a sense of Shi’a-specific identity predicated on an orientation towards religious difference. As Hussain commented, within Imperial ABSoc “the focus was certainly more on religion as a kind of primary means of expression”, where Shi’a religious identity came to take precedence over ethnic or cultural forms of belonging. Moreover, as in Zainab’s comment above, this prioritisation of Shi’a identity is, more often than not, founded on a sense of Shi’a marginalisation by the Sunni majority.

University ABSocs thus function both as a place for Shi’a Muslims to come together with other co-religionists without fear of judgement or persecution and as a crucible for the production and reinforcement of a Shi’a-specific minority religious identity. This identity is, in turn, institutionalised and encoded by ABSocs’ organisational status within the wider student body. In 2007, the Muslim Student Council (MSC) was founded as an umbrella body to oversee the activities and organisational structure of ABSocs. As Ali, a former chair of the organisation, explained, the MSC is “essentially a supporting organisation for any society that reflects its aims, but in reality, this is mostly ABSocs.” As well as coordinating nationwide campaigns and outreach across all ABSocs, the MSC holds regular training camps for incoming ABSoc presidents, along with an annual convention open to all ABSoc members, both past and present. According to Ali, the MSC was founded on three key principles: Development (personal, spiritual, and professional); Integration (both within university and within wider society); and Engagement (spreading awareness about Shi’a Islam). It is this last principle that has transformed university ABSocs from inward-looking organisations catering to the needs of Shi’a students, to faith-based platforms for social activism, under the direction of the MSC. The motto, “your mission is your campus”, encapsulates this spirit of this impulse to spread the message and visibility of Shi’a Islam within the university setting. As Zahra, an Economics student at Hertfordshire commented, reflecting on her experience within the ABSoc:

I think we play a major role in universities to represent who we are as Muslims . . . And if we don’t talk about it, and don’t have a conversation, then (a) people will never know about what Shi’as are, and (b) people will follow the wrong idea of what we’re about through ignorance. (Zahra, Hertfordshire, 2017)

In this sense, then, ABSocs not only serve a religious and social function for Shi’a students within the university, they also stand in as the representatives of Shi’a Islam on campus. While many of the students interviewed spoke of the need to “educate” the wider Muslim student body about Shi’ism, especially those (mostly Sunni) Muslims who harbour negative or ill-informed ideas about Shi’ism, there was also a general consensus about the necessity of providing information about Shi’a Islam to non-Muslims. As Zahra went on:

We need to be more outverted [sic], not inverted, we need to talk to more people . . . A lot of people come and ask me, a lot of non-Muslims ask me loads of questions. I get really excited when people ask me, because it’s nice. It means people want to know what I am, so that way we’re reducing the stigma of all the negative things you hear about Islam, and at the same time we’re introducing what Shi’as are. It’s important we have a conversation about that. (Zahra, Hertfordshire, 2017)

Along with running a regular timetable of faith and social events aimed primarily at members, ABSocs also encourage Shi’is to engage with the wider student body through outreach and activism. The organisations thus serve as a platform through which Shi’a students can find the means and mechanisms to express themselves, both as Muslims and as members of wider British society. For example, during a SOAS ABSoc meeting in October 2014, Mohammed, a young Iraqi Shi’i, proposed that members of the society should “bring a personal item that is linked to your Shi’a identity to be worn . . . at the UGM [University General Meeting]” (E.D.E fieldnotes, 9 October 2014). Here,

Mohammed not only demonstrates an awareness that certain material items serve to mark individuals out as having a “Shi’a identity”, he also encourages others to visibly and publicly display this identity as a form of self-determination and minority representation within the university campus. Similarly, Zahra spoke of how she makes an effort to explain Shi’ism to any non-Muslim who asks her about her faith:

People who are non-Muslim just see me as a Muslim . . . They don’t ask me what sect you are, you know, what do you believe in, are you different from that person. So, I have to sit down and I tell them a story. I always tell them a story every time: “Oh, I’m from this sect, and I do this.” (Zahra, Hertfordshire, 2017)

While these examples show individual ABSoc members taking the time and energy to explain their faith to others, the societies also organise a number of campaigns that are specifically targeted at promoting Shi’ism within both the university campus and wider society. It is to these campaigns that we now turn.

Engaging the Other: Towards an Ethical Shi’a Activism

Due to Shi’a Islam’s minority status both within university campuses and within wider British society, young Shi’a students expressed the need to spread awareness about Shi’a Islam, and about the issues facing marginalised Shi’a groups around the world. In many cases, such efforts to engage and educate the wider British public take inspiration from the Karbala paradigm and the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, on the one hand, and global westernised discourses of human rights and ethical humanitarianism, on the other. In this sense, contemporary forms of Shi’a activism, both on- and off-campus, mimic other emergent forms of international activism, where marginalised groups make use of the language of global humanitarian activism to stake claims for representation and recognition (Gallagher et al. 2017; Hogan 2010; Samuels 2003; Stychin 2004).

For example, the annual ‘Ashura Awareness Week (AAW) campaign run by university ABSocs and coordinated by the MSC seeks to engage both Muslim and non-Muslims students in a conversation regarding the place and resonance of Shi’a Islam, and especially to raise awareness about the figure of Imam Hussain and the historical persecution of Shi’a Muslims. The campaign involves a number of coordinated events and outreach by ABSocs across universities, including manning an AAW stall in prominent places on campus, distributing written material, and engaging passers-by in discussions about ‘Ashura, Imam Hussain, and Shi’ism more generally. Marketing and publicity for the campaign similarly focuses on the figure of Hussain, and often discursively links his martyrdom to wider global issues of injustice. For example, the AAW 2018 Facebook page run by Leeds University ABSoc, states that:

On Ashura, the tenth day of the Islamic month of Muharram, Imam Hussain ibn Ali made the ultimate sacrifice for social justice in the face of corruption and tyranny.²²

Similarly, one of the posters produced for AAW by the Ahulubayt Islamic Mission (AIM), the youth branch of the Iranian-run Islamic Centre of England, and in collaboration with London ABSocs including Imperial College, UCL, Queen Mary, and City universities, declares that the campaign is “aimed primarily at Non-Muslims [sic]” in order to promote “Truth, Justice, and Freedom” (E.D.E Fieldnotes). Other forms of activism, both on- and off-campus, replicate this discursive logic. For example, the MSC coordinate an annual nationwide campaign against food poverty called Hungry For Justice, in which ABSocs collect donations from the student body to distribute to local food banks. In addition, there are a number of one-off or small-scale events organised by individual ABSocs, often in collaboration with other student societies, that seek to raise awareness about contemporary

²² Source: Facebook. Accessed 10 December 2018.

issues both in Britain and internationally. Examples of such campaigns include fundraising events for humanitarian aid to conflict-torn countries such as Yemen and Syria; post-natural disaster zones such as Haiti, the Philippines, and Nepal; and awareness campaigns regarding issues of Black and minority rights, femicide, and racism.

The suturing of Shi'ism's Karbala paradigm with global discourses of liberal humanitarianism is, we argue, typical of contemporary forms of Shi'a activism in the West; and reflects a particular form of discursive subject-formation in which Shi'a identity is equated with ethical self-betterment. While the globalisation of liberal norms through the spread of international humanitarianism and the human rights regime (Hopgood 2013) has certainly contributed to contemporary articulations of Shi'a identity, it is our contention that in the context of Muslim minority communities in Britain this sense of Shi'a particularism is also heavily imbued with the political and social realities of the modern secular state. As Mahmood (2015, p. 3) argues: "Secularism . . . is not simply the organising structure for what are regularly taken to be a priori elements of social organisation—public, private, political, religious—but a discursive operation of power that generates these very spheres, establishes their boundaries, and suffuses them with content, such that they come to acquire a natural quality for those living within its terms." In the British context, the encounter between secular discursive power²³ and Shi'a politico-religious ethics has arguably resulted in the emergence of a particular kind of ethical Shi'a subject predicated on the discursive logic of secular humanitarianism. Here, ethics does not refer to any sense of the normative "good", but rather should be understood as an ensemble of behaviours geared towards self-betterment and self-fashioning (Eastwood 2017; Fassin 2014; Faubion 2012; Foucault 2012). In this sense, ethics is ultimately a practice of *subject formation*; one that "simultaneously shapes and is shaped by the political choices and the moral economies of contemporary societies" (Fassin 2009, p. 48).

For individual practicing Shi'is, the ethical imperative to "be (a good) Shi'a" thus increasingly blurs into and becomes interchangeable with the ethical imperative to "be (a) good (Shi'a)"—i.e., from one productive of the *Shi'a* politico-religious subject to an ethical self-transformation undergirded by a preoccupation with secular liberal humanitarianism. This is especially visible in the increasing transformation of the Karbala paradigm and the memory of Imam Hussain from a Shi'a-specific politico-religious myth to a model for ethical behaviour and self-improvement applicable to all humanity (regardless of their religious affiliation). For example, during the 2014 Arba'een march in London, several volunteers (including large numbers of ABSoc members, who coordinated volunteering sign-up campaigns on London university campuses) walked up and down Park Lane handing out roses to members of the public which were accompanied by a tag bearing the following message:

Hussain's Epic Legacy Inspires Millions

Hussain inspires me to . . .

Give back.

Be caring to all of humanity.

Care for people around me.

Stay strong in what I stand for.

Help those less fortunate than me.

Resist oppression in all forms.

What will your legacy be? ²⁴

²³ While Britain does not technically operate as a secular state, our use of the term "secularism" here should be understood as a reference to widespread assumptions regarding the place and status of religion within British public life in which issues of faith and practice (especially of non-Christian religions) are relegated to the private sphere.

²⁴ Message produced by the Who Is Hussain? campaign and handed out during the 2014 London Arba'een march. Source: E.D.E.'s fieldnotes.

Again, the message here combines elements of Shi'a religious piety with an ethical imperative founded on a logic of secular humanitarianism. In particular, the final rhetorical question ("What will your legacy be?") encourages the reader to engage in similar practices of ethical improvement by continuing the "legacy" of Imam Hussain's philosophy and behaviour.

It is exactly these kinds of discourses that undergird many contemporary forms of Shi'a student activism, both within the campus environment and among wider British society. One such example is the Imam Hussain Blood Donation Campaign (IHBDC), a charitable project run by the UK-based Islamic Unity Society (IUS), a Shi'a-run charity affiliated to the Muslim Council of Britain and backed by the NHS. The IHBDC also has a presence on university campuses, with ABSocs often distributing marketing material about the campaign at freshers' fairs and other university events. According to the IUS website, the Imam Hussain Blood Donation Campaign is "the first campaign within the UK which aims to increase the number of regular blood donors from Muslim communities."²⁵ The website goes on to say:

At the same time, the campaign seeks to increase awareness about Hussain, grandson of Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon them), and the tragedies he faced in Karbala when martyred for standing up against oppression and tyranny, and for justice and equality. Millions of people Worldwide [sic] are inspired by Hussain's great character and give blood as a way to help others in need and live up to these high values.²⁶

Through the blood donation campaign, IUS's self-professed aim is to increase awareness about Shi'a Islam and the beliefs of Shi'a Muslims. Here, the emphasis is very much on the inspiration of Hussain's story and the value that his legacy can imbue to others through the ethical imperative to give blood. Such positive articulations of "Shi'anness" thus form part of the discursive landscape within which a specifically *Shi'a* identity category can emerge. In this sense, the increasing visibility of Shi'a Muslims as *Shi'a* first and foremost is part of a wider discursive and social architecture that undergirds the construction of the Shi'a subject. This subject, invested in the logic of ethical humanitarianism and oriented towards positive articulations of Shi'a activism and emancipation, nevertheless unconsciously (re)produces sectarianism in the way it works to prioritise Shi'a experiences and unproblematically constructs "Shi'anness" as a transnational, trans-ethnic, and ahistorical politico-religious identity category.

Mehdi, a student at Birkbeck, perfectly captures the ethical imperatives undergirding such forms of Shi'a subject-formation:

They say: "Oh, there's only a few Shi'is, there's more Sunnis, we must be right." No, there might be a few Shi'is, but we stand for what we believe—we don't believe in quantity, we believe in quality . . . If you have 70,000 people in front of you and you've got 72 people on your side, and you can hear the drums of war, and you know you're going to get killed. And after everyone gets killed . . . and you still say: "No, you're wrong." Nobody does that in their right mind; that means there must be something there. (Mehdi, Birkbeck, 2014)

Here, Mehdi constructs a coherent historical narrative that inscribes the Karbala paradigm onto the contemporary context; he also draws on the historical memory of Karbala to highlight Shi'a moral authority in the face of aggression. The language used here is particularly interesting, with the constant repetition of "right" and "wrong" working to discursively construct a Shi'a-specific ethics of victimhood and struggle against oppression. In this way, the language of justice, equality, and human rights is used to undergird articulations of a Shi'a-specific identity that is then communicated to the wider British public through activism and engagement.

²⁵ Source: <https://ius.org.uk/giveblood>, accessed 21 January 2017.

²⁶ Ibid.

While this sense of Shi'a victimhood and exceptionalism is hardly new, and may even be considered to be integral to the faith itself (Barzegar 2008; Cole 2002; Dabashi 2011; Nasr 2007), the incorporation of pre-existing and contemporary Shi'a grievances into a humanitarian framework based on the discourse of "human rights", is arguably a thoroughly modern phenomenon, and can only have arisen within the international political and humanitarian system that has been developed over the last fifty years. Significantly, it is our contention that the encounter with Western liberal discourses of "human rights", "justice", "equality", and "minority representation" (both as a result of the British public sphere and of the increasing globalisation of such discourses in the contemporary moment) has worked to construct a Shi'a subject whose contours are determined by a certain preoccupation with ethical norms. In other words, the Shi'a subject implicated in such examples of Shi'a humanitarian activism is necessarily an *ethical subject* as a result of its emergence within what Didier Fassin calls the contemporary "banalisation of moral discourse and moral sentiments" (Fassin 2014, p. 433). Moreover, within the discursive construction of this Shi'a subject, terms such as "human rights", "justice", and "equality" have thus come to function as what Khalili (2007) call "empty signifiers": linguistic constructs that are ultimately lacking in any core meaning but whose ambivalence functions as a suturing point for the production of social and political meaning. The advent of the ethical Shi'a subject is thus inextricably intertwined with contemporary articulations of humanitarian principles, and as a result can be understood as a thoroughly modern subject, rather than as the ultimate expression of an underlying and primordial sectarian "essence".

5. Conclusions

This paper has charted the emergence and evolution of Shi'a Islamic societies on British university campuses from spaces of minority representation to platforms for public engagement and activism. In particular, we have emphasised the ways in which such forms of activism are undergirded by a discursive suturing of Shi'a theology and ethical subject formation with global liberal humanitarian discourses of justice, equality, and minority rights. On the one hand, such attempts by Shi'a students to engage the wider non-Muslim student body should be understood as contributing to positive articulation of Shi'a religious identity within the contemporary context, and especially against the backdrop of widespread public antagonism towards Islam. In this sense, the discursive framing of Shi'ism through the secularised, humanist language of equality, justice, and human rights, can be seen as a strategic choice by young Shi'is who wish to promote a version of Shi'ism that resonates with the secular liberal values of wider society, and particularly with the ethics of activism characterised by contemporary grassroots movements such as #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and the Occupy protests. The Shi'a subject constructed by such narratives is one that is embedded in the political and social climate in which it is articulated, while simultaneously harbouring a deep attachment to a Shi'a-specific ethics of self-betterment through the Karbala paradigm and the figure of Imam Hussain. Young Shi'i students are thus actively engaged in re-negotiating and re-imagining their religious commitments and identity for the turbulent politics of the twenty-first century.

On the other hand, this re-imagining of the Shi'a subject for the contemporary age is also potentially complicit in the sectarianisation of Shi'a politico-religious identity as a result of the prioritisation of Shi'a-specific identity categories over and above a wider sense of Muslim-ness that may be shared with co-religionists. In particular, the antagonistic political and social climate in Britain—whereby Islam and Muslims have been pathologised and securitised as presenting an existential threat to the wider British public—as well as the growing international profile of Salafist and Wahhabist Islamist groups such as ISIS, has arguably fostered articulations of the Shi'a subject that either explicitly or implicitly seek to distance Shi'ism from such negative perceptions of (Sunni) Islam. This move towards a sense of Shi'a particularism and exceptionalism—often predicated on a historical sense of victimhood dating back to the Battle of Karbala—has also been compounded by the very real experiences of marginalisation, misunderstanding, and even active discrimination encountered by Shi'a students at the hands of Sunni Muslims (not to mention the persecution of Shi'is in the Islamic

world by Islamist and terrorist groups). For this reason, while the promotion of a distinctive Shi'a identity as qualitatively different from broader perceptions of (Sunni) Islam can be understood partly as a strategic choice within the context in which it is articulated, there is an important sense in which it also actively contributes to the sectarianisation of Shi'a identity through the act of discursively bracketing off Shi'ism as an identity category in its own right. Again, it is worth stressing that our use of the term sectarianism functions here as a purely *descriptive* category and does not imply any kind of normative judgement about the content and resonance of the identity in question.

While our research and findings in this paper have focused on the British case, we would like to highlight the fact that the British context serves as a microcosm for the kinds of political, social, and religious discourses currently operating on Shi'a communities across Europe. Ultimately, the experience of Shi'a students should not be understood as being limited to the British university context, but is reflective of the ways in which Shi'a minorities are engaging with non-Muslim populations both in Europe and elsewhere in the West. For this reason, we propose that the discursive contours underpinning the forms of student activism documented in this paper ultimately transcend such national and cultural boundaries and contribute to an ongoing reinterpretation and reimagining of Shi'a sectarian identity for the modern age.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, E.D.E. and A.S.-B.; Data curation, E.D.E.; Formal analysis, E.D.E.; Funding acquisition, A.S.-B.; Investigation, E.D.E.; Methodology, E.D.E. and A.S.-B.; Project administration, A.S.-B.; Supervision, A.S.-B.; Writing—original draft, E.D.E. and A.S.-B.; Writing—review & editing, E.D.E. and A.S.-B.

Funding: The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research is supported by the AHRC [Re/presenting Islam on campus: gender, radicalisation and interreligious understanding in British higher education' (2015–18), AH/M00841X/1] for which Scott-Baumann is PI. Degli Esposti also received financial support for this research in the form of a PhD scholarship from SOAS, University of London, and a fieldwork grant from the British Institute for the Study of Iraq (BISI).

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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