

The Approach to Shiite Studies in British Academic Institutes¹

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Research Article



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Abstract

In contemporary British academic institutes and centers, a range of research is conducted on the Islamic world, including Shiite studies. British researchers have for long asserted that their approach to Islamic and Shiite studies is historical, claiming that unlike earlier anti-Islamic research by the Church, they just aim to learn more about Islamic and Shiite beliefs, without engaging in theological debates about Shiism and its doctrines. Contemporary Western, and particularly British, scholars claim to diverge from evangelical and colonialist approaches and instead adopt a scholarly and academic approach. However, it appears that think tanks in the UK that shape general policies may not align with the claims made by these researchers. We examine these two approaches by drawing upon image-making theory and its application in individual and

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organizational decision-making. On this theory, images are grounds of such decisions, and reality only makes sense within such images. I argue that “images” form the basis of Islamic and Shiite studies. Given this perspective, we address the following question: Is the approach to Shiite studies in the UK consistent with the claims made by British scholars?

Keywords

Britain, Western Shiite studies, Orientalism, Orientalists, British Shiism, academia.

Introduction

To provide some context before addressing the main question, let us take a brief look at the research background in this field. One notable work on the topic, which partly focuses on Britain and comprises a compilation of conference papers, is *The New Islamic Presence in Western Europe* edited by Tomas Gerholm and Yngve Georg Lithman. The book is divided into three sections, with the first section examining the institutionalization of Islam across Europe through articles such as “Making a Place for Islam in British Society: Muslims in Birmingham” by Daniele Joly and “Muslims in Britain and Local Authority Responses” by Jørgen Nielsen. The second section of the book explores migration and changes in religious experience, and the third section features an article titled “The Urban Sociology of Religion and Islam in Birmingham” by John Rex (Gerholm & Lithman, 1988).

Oliver Scharbrodt and his colleagues are engaged in a research project, focusing on Shiite centers in London under the banner of “Alterumma - Creating an Alternative umma: Clerical Authority and Religio-political Mobilisation in Transnational Shii Islam.” However, this is distinct from our research project. Scharbrodt has also conducted another study titled “The Study of Shia Islam in British Academia: Some Preliminary Reflections” providing an overview of Shiite studies in certain European academic centers (Scharbrodt, 2020). To date, no independent analytical work has been produced specifically on Shiite studies in Britain.

While the full context of this issue remains unexplored, it is safe to say that there has been a significant transformation in contemporary Islamic and Shiite studies in Britain. There are those who assert that current research in this area is conducted independently of both religious institutions (such as the Church) and governments (politics). In other words, far from being implemented by the Church or

governments, such research is methodically carried out by universities and academic institutes by Western researchers.

Moreover, it is believed that contemporary research by British scholars of Shiite studies has certain distinguishing characteristics that set it apart from the scholarships produced by Muslim and Shiite researchers. It is therefore argued that it is necessary for Muslim researchers to familiarize themselves with the Western methodology in order to engage more effectively with Western scholars and offer criticisms. This methodology is said to have three components: (1) phenomenological, (2) historical, and (3) phenomenological-historical (Sanepour, 2016).

Phenomenological Method

There are several notions of phenomenology. It is sometimes seen as referring to illusory properties of human perception and sometimes as concerning the reality. However, today, it is often viewed as a descriptive research method focusing on specific phenomena. Some scholars draw a distinction between phenomenology and phenomenism by highlighting that the latter is focused on the manifest sensible properties of a phenomenon, while phenomenology seeks to avoid mere reliance on surface-level observations of phenomena (Faramarz Gharamaleki, 2006, p. 323). We can therefore define phenomenology as a method of collecting and explaining phenomena without introducing hypotheses and analyses. In other words, phenomenology is chiefly concerned with descriptions of the existing reality, without analyzing it (Gharamaleki, 2006, p. 324). Moreover, phenomenology places particular emphasis on investigating phenomena and their consequences for individuals, societies, or historical periods.

Annemarie Schimmel, the German scholar on Islam, believes that in the phenomenological method, the researcher aims to “enter into the heart of religion by studying first the phenomena and then deeper

and deeper layers of human responses to the Divine until he reaches the innermost sacred core of each religion (Schimmel, 1994, p. xii).

The phenomenological method allows us to discover the underlying foundation of each thought, unlike the historical method which fails to provide insight into why a particular thought came into being.

Maurice Corvez believes that this method is pertains to an explication of things as they manifest themselves. A thing as it manifests itself is called a “phenomenon.” The upshot of phenomenology is to allow phenomena to disclose themselves in a pure unadulterated manner (Schimmel, 1994, p. xii).

The phenomenological method differs from the historical method in that it explores phenomena by examining people’s mental and psychological elements, as well as how these elements affect external matters. This approach involves utilizing and reexamining intellectual tools. Unlike the historical method, which disregards mental capacities and elements when studying phenomena, the phenomenological method focuses on the intellectual and doctrinal factors that impact religions. Rather than simply recounting the historical events that led to a particular thought or belief system, phenomenology seeks to describe and explain religion itself. For example, it may examine the roles played by beliefs like Imamate, *raj‘a* (the return of the dead after the reappearance of Imam al-Mahdī), and other similar concepts within the Shiite intellectual system (Cheloongar, 2011, p. 301).

The historical method requires that events, thoughts, and intellectual schools be studied within the context of historical periods; otherwise, no discernible subject would remain. It is essential to study events or phenomena in terms of their historical development in the past and present. On the other hand, phenomenology does not necessitate a logical relationship between an event and its past history or its spatial context. Nevertheless, understanding when an event occurred may be helpful when attempting to comprehend the phenomenon at hand. In

phenomenology, the primary factors contributing to the phenomenon are of utmost importance (Nasr, 2015, p. 3).

An advantage of the phenomenological perspective over historicism is that the former tries to situate Shiite doctrines within their sacred texts and sources, rather than locating them in historical and social events.

In Western Shiite studies, phenomenology aims to account for and describe Shiite beliefs to see what role is played by doctrines like Imamate in the Shiite intellectual system. Such an approach to Islamic and Shiite doctrines was more or less adopted by Orientalists such as Henry Corbin (1903-1978), the French philosopher and scholar of Iranian and Shiite studies; Annemarie Schimmel (1992-2003) the German Orientalist and scholar of mysticism and Islam; and Hamilton Gibb, the 19th-century British historian and Orientalist.

The Historical Method

The origins of the historical approach can be traced back to the works of Giambattista Vico, an Italian philosopher, and Michel de Montaigne, a French author. This approach reached its zenith in the writings of Hegel. According to this perspective, human societies, as well as their scientific, artistic, and philosophical endeavors, can only be fully understood through their historical context. Historicists contend that there is a natural connection between individuals and societies in the sense that individuals cannot be known unless they are situated in the contexts of their societies, and societies should be studied in the context of the history and powers that have shaped them (Zaeri & Ragheb, 2014).

Historicists believe in an organic relationship between individuals and societies. To study individuals, they should be situated in the context of their societies, and to study the society, it should be situated in the context of the history and powers by which it is informed

(Sanepour, 2016, p. 65). In the field of Shiite history, this method attempts to study the doctrinal parameters of Shiism in terms of their historical developments and roots. Parameters such as Imamate, *raj'a*, and Mahdism occurred in the context of certain historical events. Early in the twentieth century, the majority of Western scholars such as Goldziher,¹ van Vloten,² and James Darmesteter³ adopted such an approach, which is still maintained by some contemporary Western scholars. It is necessary to note that in the literature both terms “historicism” and “historism” are used to refer to this method.

Historical Approach to Shiism and Shiite Studies in the Contemporary Period

Some Western scholars of Shiite studies look for “historical Shiism,” that is, how and in what circumstances Shiism was shaped and developed. When it comes to Shiism and its doctrines, what they want to know is, first, whether Shiism is truly attributed to Prophet Muḥammad and ‘Alī, whether it dates back to the early Islamic period or arose and gained recognition in later periods.

Moreover, when it comes to Shiite theological doctrines within the sources of hadiths, they study when and in what circumstances those hadiths were formed, and whether the doctrines could be traced back to those hadiths.

Upon examining the major works by contemporary Western scholars on Shiite studies, we can observe a predominant use of a historical approach, particularly on the following three subjects: (1) study of the

1. Ignác Goldziher (1850-1921) is a well-known Hungarian Orientalist and a founder of modern Islamic studies in Europe.

2. van Vloten (1866-1903) was a Dutch Orientalist, who edited and translated certain historical and literary works from the Islamic culture and wrote some books in this field.

3. James Darmesteter (1849-1894) was a French linguist and scholar of Avesta who worked at Sorbonne University. He was specialized in the Eastern culture, particularly ancient Iran.

practices of Shiite Imams and their companions, (2) historical development and evolution of Shiism and its associated trends, and (3) dating the hadiths and doctrines inferred from them.

Historical Approach to Shiite Doctrines and the Lives of Shiite Imams

Contemporary Western scholarship, particularly in Britain, on Shiite studies focuses on Shiite doctrines and the practical and doctrinal attitudes of Shiite Imams from a historical perspective, without delving into theological debates. Contemporary Western scholars of Shiism contend that they adopt an academic approach, steering clear of evangelical and colonialist inclinations. However, the accuracy of this claim remains to be established, given the publication of works by Western scholars that directly or indirectly challenge certain doctrinal and historical beliefs of Shia. These scholars claim that they do not engage in theological debates and apologetics, in contrast to earlier intellectuals who wrote repudiations of Shiism in the early centuries when the West was first introduced to Islam.

Contemporary Western scholars refrain from engaging in apologetic and theological debates concerning Shiite doctrines and their validity. Rather, they aim to understand the historical context of Shiism as well as Shiite ideas and prominent figures. This involves studying the temporal, spatial, social, economic, cultural, and religious circumstances in which Shiism emerged. These scholars seek to understand the prevailing conditions in Iraq, Medina, and Iran during the advent of Shiism, as well as the economic conditions that prevailed at the time. Moreover, they explore the factors that contributed the burgeoning of Shiism and Shiite ideas in various periods. Finally, they consider whether Shiite claims regarding their history as well as practices and beliefs of their Imams are historically accurate.

As evidence for my claim, let us point to examples of historical

approaches employed by Western scholars, including those from Britain, in recent decades. One such approach is known as “dating the hadith,” which involves tracing back to their original sources where they were recorded for the first time, and using the historical circumstances reported in the hadiths to uncover the origins of various hadiths.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, scholars such as Goldziher put forth the argument that many hadiths attributed to Prophet Muhammad can be traced back to the Umayyad and Abbasid eras. This has raised questions about various doctrines within the Islamic world, including those held by the Shiites.

Montgomery Watt, the British scholar of Shiism who was graduated from the University of Edinburgh, also adopts a historical approach in his studies. For instance, he argues that ‘Alī’s succession to the Prophet was a result of the social circumstances of Mecca, suggesting that differences in the social historical backgrounds of northern and southern Arabs were responsible for the disagreements between Kharijites and Shias. Moreover, he maintains that the Imamate of ‘Alī and his offspring was due to the historical conditions of the southern Arabian Peninsula, where hereditary monarchy held sway.

Montgomery Watt's view is that the Kharijites, unlike their northern Arab counterparts, rejected the idea of a religious leader and the passing down of leadership to their offspring. This reduces the significance of the doctrine of Imamate, which is a fundamental theological belief within Shiism and a key point of differentiation between Shiism and other Islamic sects, to a mere historical account of cultural differences between northern and southern Arabs in accepting authority.

From a Shiite perspective, however, the problem of succession to the Prophet is directly rooted in Quranic revelation, and so it cannot

be reduced to hereditary monarchy or be viewed as affected by geographical and cultural circumstances. For instance, there is a hadith according to which the Prophet decided to appoint his successor, but he faced an opposition by some people, at which point the following Quranic verse was revealed: “Have they settled on some [devious] plan? Indeed, We too are settling [on Our plans]” (Quran, 43:79; Astarābādī, 1988, p. 553).

On the other hand, some people believe that there is no explicit text on the Prophet’s succession, or if there is any, it is merely descriptive. Ibn al-Maytham believes that this remark by the Prophet is explicit on his succession.

Furthermore, as for the Shiite belief in a savior, Montgomery Watt believes that it is derived from Christianity. However, there is a hadith in which a Jewish man asks Imam ‘Alī about various matters, and in one of his responses, the Imam refers to Gabriel’s good tidings of the coming of the twelve Imams (Ibn al-Uqda, 2003, p. 46; Ibn Abī Zaynab, 1983, p. 99; see Baḥrānī, 1999, p. 42).

Another example is a book by Michael Cook, British research, titled *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought*, in which many sources are used. It is sometimes claimed that he does not adopt a jurisprudential or theological approach to “commanding right and forbidding wrong” (*al-amr bi-l-ma‘rūf wa-l-nahy ‘an al-munkar*), only seeking to provide a historical account of this Islamic ruling. However, a close scrutiny of the book shows that its historical approach implies the inauthenticity of this significant rulings among the Shia (Cook, 2001). Moreover, he distorts the original idea behind commanding right and forbidding wrong, as outlined in several articles.

Etan Kohlberg is another prominent British researcher who addresses the problem of *taqiyya* (dissimulation) from a historical perspective in an article titled “Some Imāmī-shīī Views on Taqiyya,

Etan Kohlberg (Kohlberg, 1975).” He claims that deployment of *taqiyya* among the Shia was due to the Shiite Imams’ inclination to distinguish themselves, trying to indicate a contradiction within the Shiite approach to *taqiyya*. However, *taqiyya* among the Shia was subject to certain exigencies that he ignores. Moreover, in his historical approach to the Shiite perspective on the Quran, he claims that Shias believe in the distortion of the Quran, particularly in earlier centuries, while the belief is mostly left unstated today (Kohlberg & Amir-Moezzi, 2009).

Robert Gleave’s entry in the third edition of Leiden’s *Encyclopedia of Islam* about Imam ‘Alī tries to adopt a more scholarly and accurate approach relative to other Western scholars (Gleave, 2011). However, some people believe that while Gleave had access to Shiite sources and was aware that Sunni sources were silent on parts of al-Ghadir event, he misrepresents Imam ‘Alī’s introduction by the Prophet merely as a spiritual, rather than a political, leader (Ghazanfari & Vahidi, 2015, p. 83). However, the historical approach adopted by Gleave could not yield a better result.

The historical approach to Shiite studies in contemporary research was influenced by researchers such as Montgomery Watt and Wilferd Madelung. The methodology and research approaches introduced by them may not be considered a trend (in that a trend is often characterized by works, prominent figures, followers, and other elements that are absent here), but there is no doubt that research approaches in British academic institutes to Islamic and Shiite studies can be divided into periods before and after Montgomery Watt and Madelung.

Historical Phenomenology

Some people believe that phenomenological and historical methods cannot be reconciled. Assuming that the methodology of Oriental studies, including Islamic and Shiite studies, is either phenomenological

or historical, there are serious challenges before Western Shiite studies.

Moreover, they hold that an inner understanding of a phenomenon cannot be obtained by deploying phenomenological and historical methods. This is because a proper understanding of religious phenomena rests upon an inner understanding in addition to studying them from outside.

Western Shiite studies provide an account of Shiite doctrines and communities, which is distinct and even at odds with the view of a Shiite scholar, since they rest upon epistemic foundations governing the academic environment in Europe, such as the works of earlier Orientalists and scholars of Islam and Sunni sources, particularly those by radical authors. Moreover, most of Western Shiite studies are conducted in void.

For instance, without a clear understanding of the notion of Imamate and its relevant issues, such as the Imam's knowledge, his infallibility (*iṣma*), or certain tenets of political conduct such as *taqiyya* (dissimulation), and the like, there would be no proper understanding of Shiite phenomena and history. Accordingly, if we rely on our own sources, no inner understanding could be obtained. Such a perspective is exclusively possessed by certain scholars of the field (A group of authors, 2009, p. 119).

Obviously, much research has been carried out in British academic centers about Muslims, and several specialized journals have been launched on the issue. The majority of Islamic studies in European countries, particularly in Britain, is focused on Sunni activities in those areas. These studies aim to highlight the distinguishing features of Islam for the European community, and independently discusses the challenges of various Islamic denominations.

Some European researchers, including Madelung, Robert Gleave,

and Etan Kohlberg, have focused on Shiism and Shiite works. One example is Oliver Scharbrodt, the head of the Center for Islamic Studies at the University of Chester, England. He is focused on translating *Kitāb al-ḥujja* into English. Obviously, this book is pivotal to an understanding of the principle of leadership and authority in the Shiite thought. He aims to provide a comprehensible translation and put the hadiths into context. In his view, a translation of the hadiths cited in this book demands vast knowledge of other Islamic hadiths, otherwise no proper interpretation of those hadiths could be obtained.

However, my claim about the Shiite studies carried out by these researchers in Britain and other academic centers in the West is that they are influenced by political concerns, which leads to a predicament for research. As admitted by some of these researchers, European institutes demand a focus on political concerns when it comes to Islamic or Shiite studies.

Islamophobia in Britain

Unfortunately, in Britain, Islam is mostly known by radical movements such as IS, Taliban, and al-Qaeda. Some people believe that the increasing interactions of European and Muslim communities could be enhanced if academic research into Islamic and Shiite doctrines is conducted with the purpose of developing academic exchanges between Islamic and European countries.

Some academic centers have security, political, and economic concerns, ignoring other realities and dimensions of non-Western communities. When it comes to Islamic studies, they tend to adopt a positivistic perspective, denying the widely accepted facts of the Islamic history. They promote a new style of Islamic historiography, which leads to additional tensions between Islam and the West. It is noteworthy that, before the Islamic Revolution of Iran, some British

institutes and universities sent students and researchers to Iran and conducted research in various fields. Their presence in Iran could enable them to arrive at a concrete, immediate understanding of Shiism. After the Islamic Revolution, the relationship between Iran and Britain deteriorated, resulting in a decline or even severance of their academic ties. As a consequence, researchers at British universities and academic centers are deprived of a concrete understanding of Shiite communities. They are often engaged in library research, which culminates in making concrete images of Shiite communities and doctrines.

Anti-Islamism in Academic Communities

There are two well-known anti-Islamic institutes in Britain: The Centre for Social Cohesion (CSC) and Policy Exchange. Most such institutes are affiliated with conservatives, far-right movements, and ultra-nationalists. CSC was established in 2007 in Britain. Its founders believed that Islamic terrorism was the main threat to the British community. It defined itself in opposition to political Islam. Douglas Murray,¹ the head of CSC, maintained that Islam was the most organized threat against the cohesion of the British society today. In the present encounter between Islam and the West, the enemy, which he believed to be the Islamic community, was demographically and politically within the British boundaries.

Their publications concern issues such as hatred of the state, virtual caliphate, blood and nobility, and social crimes, which preoccupied the British society, government, and Church for a while. They are close to the conservative wing of the British Church, which is at odds

1. Douglas Kear Murray (b. July 16, 1979) is a British author and political commentator. He is known as a conservative, a neo-conservative, and a critic of Islam. Various academic and journalistic sources connect his theories and ideology to far-right political ideologies. Moreover, Murray is known to promote far-right conspiracy theories and Islamophobia, an accusation he denies.

with Islam and the Islamic society, including Lord Carey¹ and Michael Nazir-Ali,² as opposed to the reformist wing led by Rowan Williams.³

As an example, Michael Nazir-Ali wrote an article in which he accuses Muslims of extremism and violence, adding that extremist Islam is the winner of the increasing moral decline of Christianity in Britain. Moreover, the Bishop of Rochester accused ex-Christian Muslims in Britain of having extremist violent motivations for their conversion (Reed, 2009). He believes that, instead of accusing Islam of violence and extremism or of exploiting the moral decline of Christianity, we need to diagnose the problem more responsibly and cease blaming others for our problems. If British youths turn away from Christianity and its teachings and make recourse to Islam instead of taking refuge to alcohol, sex, and violence, we should appreciate the Islamic world for having attracted them, since in this way their relationship with spirituality and God is preserved. However, those young people who are attracted to extremist approaches under the label of Islam, their problem has nothing to do with true Islam, since it opposes such violence.

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1. George Leonard Carey was the 103rd Archbishop of Canterbury since 1991. He was from an evangelical open-minded family. Since 1987, he was the Bishop of Bath and Wells. His defense of appointing women to Church positions in his first meeting with Pope John Paul II (1992) led to disagreements between the two.
 2. Michael Nazir-Ali is an originally Pakistani bishop of the Church of Rochester, who was born in a Christian-Muslim family. His father was a Shia. He participated the Christian School of St. Paul and St. Patrick College in Karachi. Later, at the age of twenty, he was admitted into the English Church of Pakistan. He is a serious critic of Islam and the Muslim community. He published books, articles, and speeches against Islam.
 3. Rowan Douglas Williams was born in Swansea in June 14, 1950. After high-school, he began studying theology at Cambridge. He then went to the University of Oxford where he did research on Christianity in Russia. In December 5, 1991, he was appointed as the Bishop of the Church of Monmouth. In 1999, he was appointed the Archbishop of Wales and in July 23, 2002, the Archbishop of the Church of Canterbury.

The Policy Exchange think tank was established in 2001 by a group of conservative representatives in Britain. During the conservative prime minister David Cameron, the budget and employees of the institute were increased four times. Their ideas and origins are outlined in a booklet titled *A Blue Tomorrow* edited by Edward Vaizey, Michael Gove, and Nicholas Boles. In 2006, Michael Gove published his *7/7 Celsius* to make a case for Islamophobia.

Policy Exchange published an initial brief in 2006 under “When Progressives Treat with Reactionaries: The British State's flirtation with radical Islamism” by Martin Bright, an anti-Islamic journalist who had written a note against the Quran for *Statesman Journal* in 2001 (Ghasemi & Hatamzadeh, 2018, p. 14).

The report by Policy Exchange was published in early July on the first anniversary of London bombings in 2005. The report contains some of Bright's notes on the relation between the British monarchy and certain Muslim groups. He wrote that the British foreign ministry adopted a policy of compromise with radical and fundamentalist Islam, which was followed by negative reactions for Britain (Bright, 2006).

Moreover, the center published other surveys, including *When Progressives Treat with Reactionaries*, *The Hijacking of British Islam*, *living apart together: British Muslims and the paradox of multiculturalism* by Martin Bright's¹ and *Faith Schools We Can Believe In: Ensuring that Tolerant and Democratic Values are Upheld*

1. Martin Derek Bright (b. June 5, 1966) is a British journalist. He worked as an education correspondent of *The Observer* and then became a domestic editor of BBC World Service and *The Guardian*. From 2005 to 2009, he was the political editor of *New Statesman*. He had a weblog for *Spectator* and was a political editor of *The Chronicle* from 2009 to 2013. In 2014, he began work at Tony Blair's foundation, but he resigned after five months due to lack of independence in the editorial board of the foundation. Since later twentieth century, particularly after the emergence of radicalism among Muslims, he covered news of terrorist attacks in Britain and abroad, and Britain's governmental relations with the Muslim community in the UK.

in Every Part of Britain's Education System (Bald et al, 2009).

Recent academic research in Britain is focused on how Islam is represented and perceived in British universities and academic centers. It addresses the changing nature of academic life and the place of religion therein. Even though many universities adopt ambiguous or confirmatory positions towards religious institutes for historical and moral reasons, much of Western research assumes that academia is a strongly secularized force. Due to this framework, religion is often marginalized or disregarded as a culturally irrelevant factor by universities. Nevertheless, in recent years when academia is increasingly led into political discourses, religion in general and Islam in particular are portrayed as problems.

This may more particularly encompass Shiism as well. However, the model of available research at state and non-for-profit universities in Britain seeks to present an example of Islam, because opposition to the Islamist movement in Britain might cause severe tensions. For this reason, they exploit the largest data set collected to date in the country to investigate academic life and ways in which ideas about Islam and Muslim identity are produced, experienced, perceived, specified, and concretized.

Furthermore, universities and academic institutes take into consideration the role of Muslims in producing and reinforcing new forms of protests about religious differences. This cultural approach differs from the traditional perception of universities as centers of knowledge production, paving the path for negotiating cultural and religious perspectives among new generations. Such academic research demonstrates the pressing need for liberation of Islam from its official role as the other. Once universities obtain this objective, they claim that with this research background they can help students of all leanings to become citizens of universities and then prepare for the citizenship of the world (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020).

British Universities as Think Tanks

Think tanks are organizations whose main objective is to provide political analyses. Moreover, they aim to purvey information to citizens and governmental officials. There is no single definition of the notion of think tanks, just like many other concepts in humanities. Andrew Rich believes that think tanks are non-for-profit research institutes that try to play a role in public decision making by presenting strategic analyses and specialized issues (Rich, 2004, p. 23).

John C. Goodman, the chief executive of National Center for Public Analysis in the US wrote an article under “What is a think tank?” in which he defines this as an organization that encourages finding solutions for problems by supporting research into them, speeding up the process by creating connections among the elites. Think tanks for public policy are particularly focused on governmental policies (Goodman, 2008). A precise account of the problem at hand in this research – that is, the role of universities as think tanks in their approaches and the development of Shiite studies in the British academic community – is possible in terms of the image-making theory. This way, it turns out what history and process it has gone through and what position it is in today. The results of this research can help domestic researchers in their religious research within the contemporary context.

According to image-making theory, images are foundations upon which decisions are made and realities make sense only in terms of images. In these terms, we can say that certain “images” form the basis of Islamic and Shiite studies (Eftekhari, 2008, p. 32). On this theory, humans are more concerned with their takes on the reality than they are with the reality itself. The ground of their decisions and actions are their conceptions of reality. The concept is often used with regard to media, but it can be generalized to written works as well.

In his book *The Information Age: The Power of Identity*, Manuel

Castells points out the prominent role of media in people's minds, maintaining that since media weave our lives, they affect our consciousness and behavior just like real experiences that affect our dreams. They provide peculiar matter with which our minds work (Castells, 2001, p. 431).

In the UK, particularly in England, there are active interconnected networks of parties and think tanks working on Islamic and Shite studies, which spring from educational centers such as universities, colleges, and private educational institutes. They are not only connected to each other in different ways, but also related to vaster networks of universities and academic institutes in Europe and the US.

In addition to academic and research centers in Britain, there are other academic and political centers that affect the approaches adopted by researchers, including British National Party (BNP), Counter-Jihad Movement, and English Defense League. In recent years, they have been active in propagating the idea of the Islamic world as the origin of terror and the main threat to people in Britain, encouraging the British government and society to counter the Islamic world. Among these, two right-wring think tanks are noteworthy as they had a remarkable effect on the formation of public opinions and policies against Islam and Muslims: Center for Social Cohesion and Policy Exchange.

Think tanks assert that they have an academic enlightened approach to the spread of Islam and its possible hazards, claiming that they merely seek to present the facts. However, when reactions to Islamophobia are discussed, these conservative think tanks find themselves under pressure, since on the one hand, they ask for the condemnation of the National Party and Defense League for their racism and violence, and on the other hand, they try to downplay the spread or existence of anti-Islamic racism, since this may divert attentions from Islamism (Mills et al., 2011).

The problem with this dual view is that at the end of the day they condemn peaceful political, cultural, and religious activities of Muslim groups, while downplay or even justify the violence by racists and Islamophobes such as British Defense League. Given the background of such institutes, it may be inferred that they overstate the threat from the Islamism of public British institutes (Ibid).

All available reports and analyses are intended to inject Islamophobia to the British society. They ask for a harsh treatment of Muslims and their associated institute such as mosques and private schools by the British government. Meanwhile, some leftist groups also support Islamophobia, publishing their work in *The Jewish Chronicle*¹ and *New Statesman*.²

Notes by Gisèle Littman,³ the British historian, and Robert Spencer⁴ remarkably contributed to Islamophobic tendencies in the West. Anti-jihad movements, which promote Islamophobia in the West through academic research, newspapers, think tanks, conferences, movies, cartoons, and computer games, introduce the Islamic world as a threatening ideology for the Western culture.

It is necessary to note that one objective of various universities in Europe, particularly Britain, is to establish academic fields and

1. This is a weekly journal attributed to British Jews. Its first issue came out in 1841. It is published in English and is generally concerned with political, literary, cultural, and sport issues and critiques.

2. This is an English political and cultural journal in London. Its first issue came out on April 12, 1913 as a weekly journal of politics and literature.

3. He is an Egypt-born British author, with the penname Bat Ye'or in the early 2000s. He wrote a book titled *Eurabia* in 2005, which is a neologism composed of "Arab" and "Europe." This is an ultra-right Islamophobic conspiracy theory to the effect that international institutes, led by France and Arab powers, are conducting a process of Islamization and Arabization of Europe to undermine the present European culture and its convergence with the US and Israel.

4. Robert C. Spencer (b. 1962) is an author and blog-writer and a main anti-jihad and anti-Islam figure in the US. His published books include two *New York Times* best-sellers. In 2003, he launched a weblog on jihad watchdog to trace Islamic radicalism. In collaboration with another weblog-writer Pamela Geller, he founded the anti-Muslim group "Stop Islamization of America."

research at various degrees to train people with vast knowledge of Islamic and Shiite concepts. The number of such universities is increasing in Europe. For instance, in Britain alone, 46 courses of Islamic studies have been offered by 18 institutes and universities. These institutes and colleges are expected to increase given the growth of the Muslim population in the country and the need for more experts on Islamic studies.

Conclusion

British researchers studying Shiite studies predominantly adopt a historical approach in their research. Contrary to a claim made by researchers that the historical approach to Shiite studies is intended as a way of introduction to Shiite ideas, seeking second-order knowledge, so to speak. The contrast between the traditional Shiite movement and research by these scholars is not precise enough. The answer given in this article may not be the whole picture, but given the evidence outlined above, and assuming the image-making theory that such research may be consciously or subconsciously affected by think tanks shows that this research may not be entirely oriented by the historical approach.

The point is that the works that are allegedly carried out from a historical perspective are critiques of Shiite views and doctrines. For instance, Montgomery Watt sees the Shiite Notion of Imamate as a historical product that began as a mere belief in 'Alī's superiority to others, but over time, it turned to the doctrine of Imamate. Such a historical approach leads to a critique of the Shiite doctrines, which demonstrates that these researchers do not really seek second-order knowledge. Such views confirm the image-making theory and the influence by think tanks. Moreover, the following question remains: academic studies in the West are based on demands and practical needs, so how could the studies conducted by these institutes be just

intended at an introduction to Shiism, without any underlying objectives? In any case, despite all the explanations and analysis of the activities of various centers in Britain, it may not be possible to say that all these centers have a negative view of Islam.

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