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‘Western seminary’: On transnational Shiite higher education in Britain

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Abstract
In this article the author delves beneath the surface of Shiite higher education in Britain to discover whether it constitutes a case for ‘European Islam’. Juxtaposing the theorisation of Islam in Europe with a commonly unrelated body of scholarship on education and citizenship, it examines a paradox of integrative blending and foreign frames. Understanding Western Shiite education requires recognition of both local identity and transnational ties, as well as the relationships between them. The author focuses on the Shiite Al-Mahdi Institute and the Islamic College in Britain, analysing on the one hand their local profiles, defined by efforts to engage with their Western environment, and on the other hand their organic foreign embedding, whether through state ties or links to educational and religious establishments. Dumont’s concept of hierarchy as ‘encompassment of the contrary’ is invoked to account for this paradoxical relationship, from which emerges a scale of differences between the two institutions.

Keywords
European Islam, hierarchical encompassment, modern *hawza*s, transnational education, Twelver Shiism

Résumé
L’auteur aborde l’éducation supérieure chiite en Grande-Bretagne, afin d’étudier si celle-ci représente un exemple d’ « Islam européen ». En juxtaposant la théorisation de l’Islam

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en Europe à un ensemble de recherches sur l'éducation et la citoyenneté qui ne sont habituellement pas mises en relation, l'article considère un paradoxe entre un mélange intégratif et des cadres étrangers. Pour comprendre l'éducation chiite occidentale, il est nécessaire de reconnaître aussi bien l'identité locale que les liens transnationaux, ainsi que leurs interrelations. À cette fin, l'auteur se concentre sur l'Institut Al-Mahdi et le Collège Islamique en Grande-Bretagne, dont il analyse d'un côté les profiles locaux particuliers, définis par des efforts délibérés pour interagir avec leur environnement occidental, et de l'autre, leur ancrage étranger organique, que ce soit par des liens avec l'État ou avec des établissements éducatifs et religieux. Le concept de hiérarchie selon Dumont comme « englobement du contraire » est utilisé pour expliquer cette interrelation paradoxale, d'où émerge une échelle de différences entre les deux institutions.

Mots-clés
chiisme duodécimain, éducation transnationale, englobement hiérarchique, hawzas modernes, islam européen

Introduction

Shiism in Europe remains largely a *terra incognita*. This article delves beneath the surface of an institution that is crucial in Britain in terms of its intellectual reproduction, namely religious higher education of the mainstream, Twelver Shiite, variety. Besides providing insights into a vast but neglected tradition in Europe, the analysis aims to explore the ways in which Shiite higher education in Britain might constitute a case of 'European Islam'.

Juxtaposing the theorisation of European Islam with a commonly unrelated body of scholarship on education and citizenship, this article examines a paradox between local identity and transnational ties. Whether looking into religious nationalisation (Cesari, 2007: 56; see also Cesari, 2003: 257), transformative generation change (Salih, 2004) or individualisation (Peter, 2006), theory on European Islam tends to accentuate the blending of Islam into its European environment. Studies on citizenship and education, on the other hand, often highlight the challenges of modern diversity as in the case of a transnational community effecting curricular change commensurate not with the ideology of the settlement territory but with their cross-border lives (Mitchell, 2001) or that of citizenship education developed in response to mass immigration (see Crick, 2003: 15). The sense that some diversity, in the face of national or liberal education, is challenging extends even to multiculturalist views (Kymlicka, 2003).

The two organisations discussed here do not make straightforward cases for either approach, as the core aspects of 'blending' and 'challenge' characterise both simultaneously. Both articulate Islamic practice that is particular to their pluralistic Western settings but also reflect organic foreign embedding, whether through state ties (i.e. to the Islamic Republic of Iran) or ties to educational (*hawza*) and religious (*marjaʿiyat*) establishments. A higher-order concept, of 'encompassment of the contrary'

(Dumont, 1980 [1966]), is employed to counter the view of these dual realities as coincidental, and to re-establish them as a part of Shiite religious, transnational organisation. Thus, the recent emphasis in Shiite studies on transnational religious networks (e.g. Shaery-Eisenlohr, 2007) comes together with a hitherto marginal focus in European Islam studies on what is intrinsic to religious organisation, across national borders (Warner and Wenner, 2006).

The examples examined here are two institutions of Shiite higher education in Britain, the Al-Mahdi Institute in Birmingham and the Islamic College (for Advanced Studies) in London[1], both of which show Western particularity at often opposite ends of several scales, such as the place of jurisprudence, ethnic profile and transnational ties. Both institutions were established in the 1990s and soon became landmarks for Shiism in Britain and abroad; together, they encompass the institutional field of Shiite higher education in Europe.

The following sections examine the profiles of both institutions, explore their relationships, both locally and globally, and locate them comparatively, on the basis of an initial assessment of limited documentation and interviews with students, lecturers, administrators and directors. The article first introduces the topic of Shiite higher education, then proceeds to sketch the two British institutions – the Al-Mahdi Institute and the Islamic College – before concluding with a discussion of hierarchical encompassment. The latter interprets the local profiles of these institutions in the light of their transnational relations, focused on the question: To what degree do these relations constitute an embedding from which their identities derive?

Shiism – knowledge – Europe

Since its 11th-century appearance in Shiite history, the *Hawza Ilmiyya* (*hawza*) seminary system has become a crucial institution, particularly, in Shiism's modern intellectual reproduction (see Sindawi, 2007). The particular nexus of knowledge (*ʿelm*) and authority in Shiism (see Hodgson, 1955; Calmard, 1991) makes that in the absence of the Twelfth Imam, the *hawza*, together with the High Sources of Emulation (*marjaʿiyat*), uniquely embody the creed.

A prominent religious ideal of the *hawza*, and an important aspect of its self-representation, is its independence, even in the Islamic Republic (Al-Hakim, 2011; see also Haddad Adel et al., 2012: 4, 14–15). Since the 1978–1979 revolution, however, the Iranian seminary system has been brought under stringent state control (Khalaji, 2008). A second feature of the *hawza* system in post-revolutionary Iran that is relevant to the comparison with Western Shiite seminaries concerns the 'rapprochement of seminary and university'. This development in the Islamic Republic has made Shiite seminaries into more academic institutions, subject to limited secularising influences (see below).

Neither the Al-Mahdi Institute nor the Islamic College was Europe's first *hawza*. Major institutions of Shiism having already been established in Germany and Britain (van den Bos, 2012), *hawza* graduates started missionary work in Europe in the 1970s. In the early 1980s there was 'an increase of Shīʿite activity throughout Europe, due to *ḥawza* graduates who were active in founding mosques, Islamic centres and various associations' (Sindawi, 2007: 846). The first European *hawza* in this context, as far as

can be ascertained, emerged in Birmingham in 1983, and the first Shiite school in Britain reportedly followed nearly a decade later. (It remains to be documented how lower-level Shiite education evolved in relation to the *hawza*.) The Al-Sadiq and Al-Zahra Schools were established in 1992 under the auspices of the late Grand Āyatollāh Abuʾl-Qāsim al-Khuʾi (Bdaiwi, 2010). They provide education at primary and secondary level (Gilliat-Ray, 2010: 63) and appear to remain the only Shiite institution of their kind in Britain (Bdaiwi, 2010) besides schools governed by the Iranian state (which exist in several other European countries (see Hesse-Lehmann and Spellman, 2004: 142–143; Spellman, 2004: 84–85, for their establishment in London).

The above-mentioned first *hawza* in Europe was the Khojas' seminary in Birmingham, named after Grand Āyatollāh al-Khuʾi. Its creation was remarkable, as the Twelver Khojas had not previously produced traditional Shiite scholars of repute or a *marjaʿ* (high 'source of emulation'). The *hawza* was established in 1983 by the World Federation of Khoja Shia Ithna Asheri Muslim Communities, 'in the name of Madressah-tus-Syed al-Khoei'. The London-based scholar of Pakistani origin Zafar Abbas mentions that he 'took the responsibility of Principal of the Madrasah' (religious school).[2] A second name associated with its foundation is that of the late Mulla Asghar, the first President of the World Federation.[3]

In 1985, the seminary relocated from Birmingham to Stanmore, London[4], where it was sometimes seen as 'a meeting place for *ʿolamā*' (religious scholars) (interview Sheykh Mohammad Zakaria, 14 August 2008), possibly reflecting Abbas' concurrent leadership of Majlis-E-ʿUlama Shiʿa Europe. The 'Khoei hawza' was still in existence in 20025, but had been eclipsed by then by another British Shiite seminary. The hawza 'was in Birmingham, then it went to London, and [when it was] no longer operational in London, the Al-Mahdi Institute was established' (interview Mahmood Dhalla, 18 November 2009).

Al-Mahdi Institute

An unchallenged testimonial posted on a major Shiite forum in late December 2002 claimed that the Al-Mahdi Institute was sometimes called the 'second Najaf' and had 'the best reputation [of] any hauza in the West'.[6] Muhammad Shukri, an Iraqi lecturer at the Institute, explained that the epithet 'second Najaf' did not imply a contrast with Qom's seminaries, but was used to indicate the elevated status of the Al-Mahdi Institute as an abode of learning (interview 19 November 2009).

Ugandan-born Shaykh Arif Abdulhussain founded the Al-Mahdi Institute in 1993, its official history reads, after having studied at Madrassah Syed al-Khoei in London and the *hawza* in Qom, among other centres of learning.[7] He established the Al-Mahdi Institute, in the view of the Principal, Shazim Husayn, because upon returning from his studies in Qom – where he had also taught – he and others had found that a Shiite centre that would approach Islam in its Western context was lacking in the United Kingdom. The Al-Mahdi Institute was founded to 'teach a Western Islam: … [to] teach classical Islamic studies, but also look at [Islam] in a Western way and use Western methods' (interview 4 March 2009).

The awareness of the need for 'Western Islam' had also evolved through other experiences. Abdulhussain's abundant community work had made him aware of 'the need for [an] Islam that could solve the needs of the people within this Western context'

(interview Husayn, 4 March 2009). Contrary to traditional Shiite views that considered the West principally as a religious problem for Muslim migrants (e.g. Al-Hakim, 2001), Abdulhussain issued public statements that indicated his understanding that the Western context was a religious benefit. Secular European countries were much more advanced in the institutionalisation of human rights than Muslim countries, he explained during a conference on Islam and Human Rights in 2010, and in that sense the former were more Islamic to him.[8]

How, then, did the Al-Mahdi Institute compare with religious education in Qom, where both Abdulhussain and Husayn had been trained? Differences emerged, for instance, from the contrast of perspectival diversity and spiritual unity. Referring to the teachers he had been exposed to at the Al-Mahdi Institute, Husayn said: 'I won't say "liberal", but they were open … to different ideas'. Accordingly, 'a lot of things you wouldn't hear in Qom …, you would discuss in the … Institute' (interview 4 March 2009). A fourth-year student, describing an institutional visit in 2008 to Qom, stated that 'the atmosphere of learning surrounding the spiritual sanctuary of the Lady Maᶜsuma was very appealing, almost enticing and far removed from the multicultural hotspot of Balsall Heath in Birmingham'.[9]

Another difference between the Qom and Birmingham-based institutions concerned political guidance versus agnosticism as to the political implications of the faith. 'In Qom', said Husayn, 'the only thing you hear about political [issues] is [Khomeinist] *velāyat-e faqih*' (doctrine of 'the guardianship of the Islamic jurisconsult'), whereas at the Al-Mahdi Institute, various perspectives were on offer (interview 4 March 2009). During a visit to the Institute in November 2009, however, I observed that its ideological preferences were slightly more pronounced than its alleged religio-political agnosticism might lead one to believe. The one portrait, among other decorations, that adorned the Institute's 'IT suite', available to its students, was of Āyatollāh Khomeini.

Despite the strong links to Qom in the leadership's personal histories, the Institute sought to establish wider alliances. Beyond the existing 'relationship' with the Iranian Grand Āyatollāh Sāneᶜi, they aspired to develop ties with the (late) Lebanese Grand Āyatollāh Fadhlallāh and in November 2009 were in the process of establishing ties with the Afghan-born Najaf resident Grand Āyatollāh Fayyādh (interview Shaykh Muhammad Shukri, 19 November 2009).

The Al-Mahdi Institute had obtained the permission of several *marjaᶜ*s, including Grand Āyatollāh Sistāni, to receive religious taxes (*khums*) (interview Husayn, 19 November 2009). Shukri and Husayn also indicated that the Al-Mahdi Institute now possessed an 'authorisation' (*ijāza*) from Fayyādh, to add to the *ijāza*s it had received from a range of other Shiite religious authorities (conversation 17 November 2009) granting them permission to disseminate religious knowledge. Husayn stated that they would not request an *ijāza* from Āyatollāh Khāmeneᵓi because they did not want political influence on their programmes (conversation 17 November 2009). The Al-Mahdi Institute does, however, maintain an eponymous office in Qom.[10]

The emphasis on diversity in the Institute also showed in its approach to Islamic jurisprudence. Husayn stated that 'although we do Jaᶜfari and Imāmiya *fiqh*, we always [reference] what the Sunnis have done', and the Institute's traditional *usul al-fiqh* [principles of jurisprudence] classes had included Sunni students who appreciated the

open way it was taught (interview 4 March 2009). Another particular approach to *fiqh* was mirrored in the Al-Mahdi Institute's larger mission, as voiced by Abdulhussain. Unlike the (*fiqh*-centred) seminary system generally, the Institute had adopted philosophy as the overall framework for study, where critical attitudes showed, for example, in the emphasis on philosophy of religion, rather than religious philosophy (interview 22 March 2010). Contrasting textual hermeneutics as usual with the open-ended critical approach to Islamic texts at the Institute, Abdulhussain explained that 'we have benefited a lot from Western culture and Western scholarship – objectivity, and not presuming anything'.

How, finally, did its local Islamic profile define the Al-Mahdi Institute vis-a-vis other Shiite institutions of higher learning in the European West? The Al-Mahdi Institute had 'very good relations' with the Islamic College (for Advanced Studies) in London, said Husayn (interview 4 March 2009), and several of its staff, including Abdulhussain, had taught at the College.[11] Although the greater financial resources of the Islamic College allowed it to offer better facilities and a wider curriculum, he indicated that 'what we do is … very specialised, and people appreciate that, and they come to us for that sort of a study'. In terms of student numbers, too, there were substantial differences of scale from the outset: 60 students at the Al-Mahdi Institute in 1993 compared with 280 at the Islamic College in 1998 (Mukadam et al., 2011: 73).

Other differences between the two centres defined limits to collaboration. Students had left the Islamic College for the Al-Mahdi Institute, and vice versa. '[A] lot of students [from the College] have left and come to our institution, not because we've encouraged them, but because they wanted a different aspect', said Husayn. 'Because [the College] has a relationship with Iran and [is] funded by Iran, they are very limited in what they can say, or what they can probably do, whereas we're independent' (interview 4 March 2009). Abdulhussain stressed that he had refrained from supporting any political regime when he had been confronted during a public lecture in Birmingham by Iranian protesters who, wielding a video camera and holding up images of tortured bodies, had demanded to know the difference between his and Khāmene'i's Islam.[12] The funding of Al-Mahdi Institute, Husayn declared, came from different sources. It followed that, 'if we want to criticise *velāyat-e faqih*, we can do it, whereas [the College] might have a problem in doing that' (interview 4 March 2009).

A look at the books of the Al-Mahdi Institute via the Register of Charities, however, shows that financial diversification has not always been the reality. In 2007, its second largest source of reported income, GBP 70,000, was the Irshad Trust, which in 2006 had been a less important donor, giving the Institute only GBP 28,000. The Irshad Trust is a Britain-based Iranian charity that also funds the Islamic College. Confronted with these facts, Husayn stated that the funding relation with the Irshad Trust had been discontinued since late 2007 or early 2008 'because we want to be independent'. The Institute similarly had an employee in its early days whose salary and maintenance were paid by 'the *markaz*' (interview 19 November 2009) – Iran's former state centre for international *hawza* students in Qom, which fell directly under the authority of its Supreme Leader.[13]

The depth of such relations, leaving their mark on curricular matters, is indicated by the institutional profile of Dr Seyed Hāshem Musavi (Mousavi), until 2005 Head of the Education Department at the Al-Mahdi Institute, who had also been Director of the

Western Europe Office of the Islamic Republic's Organization of Islamic Seminaries and Schools Abroad and, since 2000, Head of the office on Islamic education affairs of non-Iranian students in the United Kingdom of the same organisation.[14]

The Islamic College

Just like the Al-Mahdi Institute, the Islamic College in London hosts a seminary that evolved in the context of another local *hawza*, the Imam Hoseyn Institute. Little is known about the Institute, except that it preceded the foundation of the College, was referred to as Madrase-ye ʿElmiye-ye Emām Hoseyn-Landan and was headed by the College director Sheykh Dr Mohammad Saeed Bahmanpour.[15] The College was opened in 1997 as The Islamic College for Advanced Studies (ICAS) and began teaching in 1998 (Gilliat-Ray, 2006: 63). Namesake institutions were established in New York (2000), Ghana (2001) and Jakarta (2002) (Marcinkowski, 2008: 52),[16] the last describing itself as a 'branch' of ICAS in London.[17]

The self-proclaimed founder of ICAS, Hojjatoleslām Dr Mohammad (Jaʿfar) ʿElmi, emphasised that the initiative for the Islamic College had emerged not from Qom but from London. Together with others, he had wanted to train young local clerics, so that Shiite instruction would remain relevant to a young, ethnically diverse audience in the West, whose 'issues might be quite different … from [those of an] imam who comes from a far eastern edge near Pakistan or Iran' (interview 28 July 2010).

The first head of the College, Dr Aboʾl-Fazl ʿEzzati, had reportedly been 'for many years' the cultural attaché of the Iranian embassy in London before assuming this function (interview Āyatollāh Fāzel Milāni, 4 June 2009). ʿEzzati claimed to have established the centre 'in cooperation with Muslims living in England'.[18] He was purportedly faced with competition from the representative of Āyatollāh Khāmeneʾi in Britain, Āyatollāh Mohsen Arāki, who felt entitled to a degree of control over ICAS. As a result, according to an early ICAS collaborator, both ʿEzzati and Arāki had been 'excluded'. ʿElmi, ʿEzzati's successor, had also been 'called back, summoned to Iran', for reasons that remain unclear (interview Fāzel Milāni, 4 June 2009).

Academic integration accelerated under the directorship of Bahmanpour, who was appointed to head ICAS in October 2007.[19] The 'decree' (*hokm*) of his appointment was issued by Hojjatoleslām Nurʾelahiyān, heading and representing Khāmeneʾi (interview Fāzel Milāni, 4 June 2009) in the above-mentioned Qom-based state Organization for *Hawza*s and *Madrasa*s Abroad (*sāzemān-e hawzahā va madāres-e ʿelmiye-ye khārej az keshvar*).[20]

Bahmanpour was aware that '[t]he way things are taught in Qom is not relevant here' (interview 11 December 2007), and educational provision in the College had undergone a transformation. In 2003, 'under the stewardship of ICAS', a *hawza* evolved from the Imam Husain Institute, which was accompanied by 'a drastic revision of the curriculum' in the College. Learning was now 'orientated and contextualized to the British/European situation', while combining 'the academic rigour of university-style teaching and the self-development … from a seminary-style … environment' (Gilliat-Ray, 2006: 64). British/European contextualisation applied, for example, to 'some emphasis on the development of critical thinking' and the provision of courses such as 'Islam in Europe' and 'Western

philosophy', in contrast to insular South Asian, Sunni *dār ol-ᶜolum* (abode of sciences) establishments in Britain (correspondence Dr Sophie Gilliat-Ray, 13 May 2009).

The latter aspect of the above-mentioned curricular revision – the combination of academic rigour and self-development – was consistent with developments in higher education in Iran since 1979, rather than reflecting the College's Western setting. The 'cultural revolution' in Iran (1980–1987), following Khomeinist ideology, had as an important aim the 'unity of seminary and university' (*vahdat-e hawza va dāneshgāh*), serving to Islamize universities (see Razavi, 2009). But rapprochement also occurred in the opposite direction, through 'hybrid students' who brought academic insight to the *hawza*, and 'hybrid Islamic Institutes … based within the *hawza* but [maintaining] systematic relations with academic sources as well'.[21] The London College and its *hawza* similarly shared students and teaching staff and, stated an instructor, 'are not separate institutions' (interview Zakaria, 14 August 2008). The 'training offered to would-be Shiᶜa clerics takes place in both' (Gilliat-Ray, 2006: 63).

In several respects, the Islamic College embodies the plurality of its Western setting. For instance, its self-presentation, including online, is deliberately non-sectarian; it has several Sunni instructors, of varying ethnic and national backgrounds; and it engages in ecumenical Muslim–Jewish and Muslim–Christian networking. The College stated in 2009 that while all of its Master's students were Shiite, 70% of its A-Level students (A-Level provision having since been discontinued) and 50% of those at BA level were of Sunni background (Mukadam et al., 2011: 48). Although obviously contrasting with the Iranian situation, the cross-sectarian character of the College is also consistent with Khāmeneʾi's policy of *taqrib*, seeking 'rapprochement' between the sects abroad (see Buchta, 2001).

The Al-Mahdi Institute is one of the College's many institutional ties. Among its teaching staff, for instance, is Professor Āyatollāh Fāzel Milāni (Sayyid Fadhil al-Husayni al-Milāni), who was Grand Āyatollāh al-Khuʾi's representative in Britain and is currently affiliated with the Khoei Foundation and a representative for Grand Āyatollāh Sistāni – in other words, crossing *marjaᶜiyat* divides within an institute tied to Āyatollāh Khāmeneʾi (see below). ᶜElmi indicated that he had wanted to create 'a multinational institution' but also confirmed my suggestion, in his office in Al-Mustafa University in Qom, that 'the leaders are always Iranian' (interview 28 July 2010).

Just as the Iranian and Shiite nature of the College is clearly perceptible but not in the forefront of its self-representation, so its politico-religious Islamic Republican ties and allegiances remain understated. An MA student in the College mentioned that he had written an essay critical of Khāmeneʾi's *marjaᶜiyat* but nevertheless received a high mark (interview MA student Islamic College, 28 April 2010). By 2008, however, the one book published by ICAS Press that addressed political theory, H Hadji Haidar's *A theory of religious democracy* (2006), built its Shiite case of 'religious democracy' – a term originating in the religious reform movement but by then appropriated by conservative forces in the Islamic Republic – on what it saw as Khomeinist thought (Haidar, 2006: 12, 14).

Several College directors emphasised the importance of locally crafted religious knowledge. Discussing imams' training, Bahmanpour pointed out that the College accepted only pupils from England (interview 11 December 2007). His predecessor,

ᶜElmi, had stated similar aims in a rare written contribution to *The Times*: 'I believe the Muslim community needs a new generation of religious scholars and imams who are born, raised and educated here. … [They] would be better qualified to understand and address the needs of the Muslim youth in the West' (5 August 2006, p. 70).

Bahmanpour indicated an area where locally crafted religious knowledge not only might benefit Muslims in the West but also would feed back into Middle Eastern *hawza*s: 'What ICAS does is look into … *feqh-e aqalliyat* [minority jurisprudence], which has hardly developed yet. We let students write PhD theses … that contribute to that [development]' (interview 11 December 2007). In an interview two years on, the Principal referred to 'a two-way flow with Qom', West–East as well as East–West, in that '[w]e hope that the syllabus in Qom will be partially influenced by our college' (Mukadam et al., 2011: 48).

The atmosphere of the Islamic College on the one hand is inviting (see Mukadam et al., 2011: 48) but on the other at times betrays insular, totalising and antagonistic attitudes regarding the relations between Islam, Iran and the West. Such attitudes manifested themselves, for instance, in a lecture in March 2009 by Dr Gholāmᶜali Haddād ᶜĀdel, a crucial figure on the extreme conservative front of Iranian politics. The lecture's main thrust was to reproach the positivism, colonialism, Orientalism and other alleged products of Western culture, which were held responsible for the wilful neglect in the West of Islamic philosophy after Averroes. That Haddād's subsequent enumeration of post-Roshdean Islamic philosophy included references to Khāmeneʾi, who was credited with providing philosophers with a safe haven, but ignored Sorush – who suffers state repression for his views – did not cause a stir among the other panellists or the audience (which included copious religious dignitaries as well as College staff and students). One would not have expected such an institutional reality from the Principal's statement the same year, that '(…) we hope we can influence them [at the *hawza* in Qom] with European thinking.' (Mukadam et al., 2011: 48).

Moreover, the Institute's most prominent teaching staff member, Āyatollāh Fāzel Milāni, played down the significance of such West–East flows, arguing that: the process was only at the beginning; there were few graduates now who could be expected to have an impact on society in the future; and (given that a cleric's status derived from years of communal service and recognition) radical change was not imminent (interview 4 June 2009).

Āyatollāh ᶜAbdolhoseyn Moᶜezi, the successor to Arāki as Khāmeneʾi's representative in Britain and a trustee of the Irshad Trust, which funds the College did not regard minority *fiqh* initiatives at ICAS as an important development at all (interview 19 February 2008). He may have had Khomeini's dictum in mind, that 'science [ᶜ*elm*] only comes from Qom because Qom is the centre of science. Science has been exported from Qom to the rest of the world and will continue to be exported' (in Razavi, 2009: 3).

Hierocracies

In its application to Islamic cases in Europe, citizenship and education theory often presents three aspects of challenging modern diversity, namely some Muslims' state-border-crossing but particularistic, non-cosmopolitan primary solidarities (Pike, 2008:

114); controversial secular-liberal values undergirding national school curricula (e.g. Halstead, 2007: 284, 289; Pike, 2008: 114) – that is, substantive rather than procedural liberalism (see Joppke, 2008); and demands for educational separatism ignoring the political common (Miller, 2008: 386).

Research on European Islam, in contrast, often highlights integration, while bypassing questions of transnational ties[22], in parallel with prescriptions for a particularistic Islam in Europe, as in Tariq Ramadan's rendering of Europe as a 'space of testimony' or *dār al-shahāda* (e.g. 1999: 150), which implies a requirement of civic engagement (Mandaville, 2008: 28). But, unravelling such 'blending', it is argued here that European particularity in expressions of Islam should be discussed in relation to Islam's local organisation, which may involve trans-European relations with East–West directionality.

As previously signalled, the use of Louis Dumont's higher-order concept of the 'encompassment of the contrary' (Dumont, 1980 [1966]) is explored here to account for this paradox of local identity (including diversity-embracing, modernity-oriented, sect-transcending, ideologically muted and traditional-authority-averse education) and transnational ties (to clerical establishment-run, sectarian and in the main traditionalist seminary systems abroad, closely choreographed in Iran's case by an ideological,conformity-enforcing state).

The Dumontian concept of encompassment is applied to counter the view of these contradictory realities as coincidental, or as mere examples of the hierarchical incorporation of cross-national communication, which may occur in transnational Islamic institutions (see Bowen, 2004: 881), and to re-establish their duality systemically, as an integral part of Shiite religious, transnational organisation. Thus, a Shiite case presents itself for the recent but still marginal tendency in the literature on European Islam to highlight socio-political factors intrinsic to macro-religious organisation (Warner and Wenner, 2006; cf. Bowen, 2004).[23] Such insight echoes the recent tendency of scholars to 'rescue' Shiism from national perspectives (Cole, 2002: 1), even if transnational religious solidarities cannot be taken as a given and must rather be seen as the product of 'ideological work' (see Shaery-Eisenlohr, 2007: 286), bridging conflicts and contradictions – as detailed too in this essay.

Dumont developed the idea of hierarchy as 'encompassment of the contrary' in *Homo Hierarchicus*, his acclaimed study of the Indian caste system, indicating that 'a higher principle encompasses a lower principle which is partly consistent with and partly contradictory to the higher principle, and partly determined by and partly autonomous from the higher principle' (Kolenda, 1976: 582). Rather than a social structure, hierarchy was essentially a 'system of ideas and values' (Dumont, 1980 [1966]: 36, 343–344), which, according to Reichle, was 'essentially connected with religion' (1985: 334)24 - as can be deduced from its systemic integration of realms of the pure and the impure (see Khare, 1971: 864; Dumont, 1980 [1966]: 65).

Dumont later (1977) extracted 'hierarchy' from the Indian context and reapplied it contrastively in a study of Western modernity, while others recast static hierarchy as a generative principle of social organisation. Rio and Smedal (2008: 234, 237) aimed to salvage Dumont's hierarchy as 'an ideology in motion that constantly melts down categories and substances, things, ideas and people that come under its totalizing sway' and 'transforms them and gives them value according to its own social universe'.

Recognising that 'the religious way of seeing things requires a classification of beings according to their degree of dignity' (Dumont, 1980 [1966]: 65), Dumontian hierarchy is instructive here in the sense of a transformative system of religious classification. In other words, identifying the 'totalizing sway' of hierarchy in Shiite higher education in Britain will illuminate it in relation to foreign establishments of religious knowledge and authority.

Particularity and encompassment

The profiles of both the Al-Mahdi Institute and the Islamic College show Western particularity, for example, in the curriculum, the approach to learning, the ethnic make-up of students and personnel, and the institutions' cross-sectarian orientations. Some aspects of these Western profiles also suggest independent religious articulations, or beyond that, West–East flow. Bahmanpour expressed the hope that the College would influence the *hawza* curriculum in Qom, but stopped short of claiming that it had. Abdulhussain stated that he was respectful of, but 'not truly concerned with the hierarchical structure' of, the *marjaʿiyat*. Even at the risk of 'cutting away from the mainstream', he issued independent edicts on issues such as the sighting of the moon. And his office would proclaim: 'This is what *we're* saying [is right] for the people in Europe.'

How independent were such Western religious articulations, however, from state and religious authority in the wider Shiite world? Both institutions have had dealings with more than one state. The Al-Mahdi Institute's more direct relations with the Islamic Republic seem to have occurred not only in its early phase (as in the funding of personnel by the World Centre of Islamic Sciences), but also more broadly in the past (as in the case of financial contributions from the Irshad Trust). More indirectly, the Institute maintains an office in, arranges student visits to and accepts book donations from Qom, while having Khomeini's portrait on display in Birmingham. None of this suggests that the Islamic Republic prescribes religious identity in the Al-Mahdi Institute, or that their relationship is otherwise defined through forms of dependency. But the emphasis in the Institute's attitude, consistent with the leadership's training in post-revolutionary Qom, is on engagement and respect for the fundaments of the Islamic state in Iran.

The Islamic College is situated very differently, as it is, literally, an 'office' of Al-Mustafa International University, Jāmiʿa al-Mustafa al-ʿĀlamiya, in Qom.[25] In 2008, the Al-Mustafa University, proclaiming 'independence' as in the *hawza* ideal[26], succeeded the Organisation for Hawzas and Madrasas Abroad and the World Centre for Islamic Sciences[27], and now reports directly to Iran's Leader[28], besides maintaining relations with the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology. Even if the curriculum of the Islamic College were to come to influence that of the *hawza* in Qom, then, this would properly be seen as an internal development, contained within the Qom-based, state-led *hawza* itself, rather than an outside influence and an independent, local, Western articulation. Moreover, the reorganisations of knowledge that have sometimes been seen as Western articulations can in fact be shown in some cases to parallel and follow developments in Iran. Such is the case for the rapprochement of the academic and seminary spheres of learning, and for the introduction of secular subjects and knowledge of the West.[29] The understatement of religious-political identity in the College, then,

presents itself as a case of hierarchical encompassment – encompassment of the contrary – within Al-Mustafa University, which expresses commitment both to 'cultural sensitivity' in instructors and to the values of the Islamic revolution.[30]

The relation of the two institutions to the sources of religious authority in Shiism, the *marjaᶜiyat*, reflects their very different positions vis-a-vis the Islamic Republic and shows different kinds and degrees of encompassment. As indicated above, the Director of the Al-Mahdi Institute, issuing personal edicts, asserted that *taqlid* required reform. The Institute's Principal indicated that he did not currently practise *taqlid*. At the same time, religious authorisations and *marjaᶜiyat* relations are important to the Institute, and publicised, whereas the topic is absent from the Islamic College's self-representation. Cross-divisions of *marjaᶜiyat* allegiance are visible among the personnel of the College and a student mentioned the high rating of his paper criticising Khāmeneᵓi's *marjaᶜiyat*. Unlike the Al-Mahdi Institute, there is no doubt that the College owes allegiance to Khāmeneᵓi – whether in his capacity of *rahbar* (Iran's 'leader') or in his position as *marjaᶜ*.

A subsequent question to explore is how authoritative such Western religious articulations – whether independent or not – are in wider realms of Shiite learning. On a visit to the famous Feyziye Institute in Qom, a graduate of the Al-Mahdi Institute mentioned that '[i]nitially we tried to communicate in Arabic, only to be shocked that our fellow students were less confident in using spoken Arabic than we were!'[31] Husayn indicated that the Institute's students recognised its unicity and ultimately preferred it over Qom. The founder of the Institute had rejected the idea that it would offer only lower-level, step-up training for the real *hawza* – unlike the seminaries on the subcontinent, which *are* intended as preparation for Qom (interview Arif Abdulhussein, 22 March 2010).

But a comparison between their overall levels of provision would have been unfavourable to the Western seminary. Shukri mentioned that for the future, the Shiites aimed to have a comprehensive *hawza* in the West, but indicated that currently such an institution was lacking. After completing an MA at the Al-Mahdi Institute, students were in 'the middle of the middle (*sutuh*)' level of *hawza* formation (interview 19 November 2009). Educational provision in the London seminary, at the Islamic College, is similarly restricted: in 2010, the *hawza* offered two diploma programmes, of two years each, in Muslim Chaplaincy and Shiᶜa Studies (the first serving as an entry qualification for the second).[32] ᶜElmi, at the time of our interview on 28 July 2010 the Vice-President for research at Al-Mustafa International University in Qom, prefaced his assessment by emphasising that he was not stating his views to put either of the two institutions down. But 'the level of study at the Al-Mahdi [Institute] or ICAS, you cannot compare it to Qom. It is incomparable.'

A final aspect of encompassment concerns the status of transmitted knowledge and follows from the discussion of levels of knowledge. The Islamic College Principals had sketched their scenarios for Western leadership in Shiism, whether through contributions to minority *fiqh* or through the formation of local community leaders. However, two religious authorities within and outside the College, Milāni and Moᶜezi, poured cold water on expectations for the near future of Western Shiite leadership – for reasons deriving from the subordinate level of Shiite knowledge provision in the West, including the lack of seniority in recent graduates to the limited Western *hawza*. Significant

scholarly contributions to Shiite knowledge by Europe-based scholars affiliated with either of the institutions seem to be lacking.

While recognising distinct levels of learning, however, others would discuss different kinds of learning, non-hierarchically, and define a distinct niche for the Al-Mahdi Institute. A fourth-year student mentioned that foreign students at the Imam Khomeini Institute who left Iran 'were not being encouraged to pursue the core seminary subjects which would enable them to be independent scholars'. However, 'the local students [at traditional *hawza*s] who were being trained to become Mujtahids seemed neither aware of nor interested in the global challenges.' The Al-Mahdi Institute did, on the other hand, provide high standards of learning, combined with modern standards of critical analysis as well as temporal relevance.

Shukri estimated that Shiite religious knowledge would be produced in the West in the future, but observed that nowadays people still did not accept the Al-Mahdi Institute as a place where fatwas were produced. Abdulhussain, unusual in Western realms of Shiism for his humanistic approach to the faith, commands an enthusiastic audience with edicts that remain contested, for content as well as their actual religious status. The Institute was not really here to produce religious knowledge, said Shukri, but for community service and interfaith relations. In this particular regard, the comparison of the Al-Mahdi Institute imposes itself with the Imam Khomeini Institute in Qom. Just like the Western seminaries, the Iranian flagship centre aims at students beyond the Shiite heartland, who come from far and wide and rather than as full-fledged religious scholars are trained as *mobalegh*s – propagandists for the faith.

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Notes

A simplified transliteration method for Persian and Arabic has been adopted in this article, with ›ā‹, ›u‹ and ›i‹ for long vowels, ›a‹, ›o/a‹ and ›e/i‹ for short vowels, › '‹ and ›'‹ for 'eyn and hamze, and ›ey‹ and ›ow‹ for diphthongs, except where different renderings have gained wide currency or where the people mentioned choose to render their names differently.

1. Interviews at the Al-Mahdi Institute were conducted in 2009 and 2010. The break-off point for this discussion of the two institutes is December 2011, when Dr Jaᶜfar ᶜElmi (see below) was appointed as the new Principal of the Islamic College.
2. See Islamic Institute for Postgraduate Studies, 2007: http://www2.world-federation.org/IslamicEducation/Articles/Islamic_Institute_Postgraduate_Studies_ideal_religious_community.htm

3. http://www.world-federation.org/Secretariat/Articles/Appointment_ASG_for_Islamic_Education.htm (accessed 5 June 2012).
4. See Islamic Institute for Postgraduate Studies (2007).
5. See Islamic Institute for Postgraduate Studies (2007).
6. http://www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=3781 (accessed 3 December 2009).
7. http://80.176.249.21/arif.htm (accessed 7 May 2009).
8. AMI Islam and Human Rights conference, Birmingham, 13 March 2010.
9. *AMI Newsletter* 1(1): 3–4.
10. See *AMI Newsletter* 1(1): 3.
11. http://80.176.249.21/arif.htm (accessed 7 May 2009).
12. AMI Islam and Human Rights conference, Birmingham, 13 March 2010.
13. The *Markaz-e jahāni-ye ʿolum-e eslāmi* (World [or International] Centre for Islamic Sciences) was founded in 1979 and merged in 2008 with the *Sāzemān-e hawzahā va madāres-e ʿelmiye-ye khārej az keshvar* (Organisation for *Hawza*s and *Madrasa*s Abroad). The Head of the World Centre stated in 2003 that it was supervised by the Supreme Leader, Khāmeneʾi, who also appointed the Board of Trustees (*Pagāh-e Hawza, farvardin* 1382/2003, no.6: http://www.hawzah.net/fa/magart.html?MagazineID=6436&MagazineNumberID=7086&MagazineArticleID=86012 (accessed 12 June 2012)). It is reported that the Leader's supervision had been in place since 1994, and that the appointment of the Director was also made by Khāmeneʾi (Zulkifli, 2005: 30).
14. http://www.aic.ac/index.php/chancellor/6-about-chancellor (accessed 6 August 2014).
15. http://www.iqna.ir/fa/news_detail.php?ProdID=179523 (accessed 8 June 2012).
16. Additional centres by the name of ICAS are found in Georgetown, Guyana and Tehran, Iran. A former ICAS student in London was quoted as stating, erroneously, that the London and Jakarta institutions were both founded by Grand Āyatollāh Sistāni (http://www.isn.ethz.ch/pubs/ph/details.cfm?lng=e—n&id=31105 (accessed 17 March 2007)). A report on the website of the Institute in Jakarta (correctly) mentioned the Khāmeneʾi-supervised International Centre in Qom as 'the Head Quarters of ICAS around the world' (ICAS JAKARTA – Summary Report, 2008).
17. http://www.icas.ac.id/ (accessed 8 June 2012).
18. http://www.iqna.ir/en/news_detail.php?ProdID=393644 (accessed 23 October 2009).
19. http://www.iqna.ir/fa/news_detail.php?ProdID=179523 (accessed 8 June 2012).
20. http://www.iqna.ir/fa/news_detail.php?ProdID=179523 (accessed 8 June 2012). The Organisation for *Hawza*s and *Madrasa*s Abroad was founded in 1370/1991–1992 (and existed until 2008). Like the World Centre, it was directly affiliated with the Leader's Office (the *daftar-e rahbari*). It is mentioned on Qom's official *hawza* website that the purpose of its foundation was the realisation of the Leader's ideas for the education of foreign students (http://www.hawzah.net/FA/markazview.html?MarkazID=11771, accessed 12 June 2012).
21. Samiei M, research project 'A critical appraisal of two important channels for disseminating modern knowledge in the *hawza* (Qum and Mashhad).' Hybrid Students and Research Institutes, http://www.thehawzaproject.net/docu/y1/samiei.pdf (accessed 10 June 2012).
22. As well as observing that the literature often focuses on local integration as opposed to the transnational connectedness of Islam in Europe, I recognise the significant extant treatment of transnational connectedness of Islam in Europe, as for instance, in Schiffauer (2007), Mandaville (2009) and Laurence (2006).
23. Bowen's argument for taking Islamic universality into account as a 'global public space of normative reference and debate' in studies of Islam in Europe may be taken as an antecedent to Wanner and Werner's rarer exploration of factors intrinsic to religion on the level of socio-political organisation (explaining diffuse authority and ethnic-national variety

among Muslims in Europe), which also underlies this essay's institutional understanding of hierarchy.

24. 'The original sense of the term concerned religious ranking. We shall keep to that sense here.' (Dumont, 1980 [1966]: 65).
25. http://en.miu.ac.ir/index.aspx?siteid=4&pageid=1321 (accessed 24 June 2010).
26. http://www.almostafaou.com/en/Page.asp?Id=130 (accessed 21 June 2010).
27. http://www.hawzah.net/FA/newsview.html?NewsID=61982 (accessed 13 June 2012).
28. http://Hawza.Net, reported in April/May 2008 (*ordibehesht* 1387) on the appointment of the President of Al-Mustafa University, Hojjatoleslām ᶜAlirezā Aᶜrāfi, by decree, by the Leader, read out by the Head of his Office, Hojjatoleslām Mohammad Mohammadi-Golpāyegāni (http://www.hawzah.net/fa/magart.html?MagazineID=5658&MagazineNumberID=6358&MagazineArticleID=71406, accessed 13 June 2012).
29. See http://www.al-islam.org/index.php?t=258&cat=258 (accessed 13 June 2012).
30. http://en.miu.ac.ir/index.aspx?siteid=4&pageid=2068 (accessed 13 June 2012).
31. *AMI Newsletter* 1(1): 4.
32. http://www.islamic-college.ac.uk/index/hawzah.html (accessed 21 April 2010).

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