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# From the Margins to the Centre

## *Shi'a-Led Grassroots Organisations and the Shaping of an Inclusive Muslim Identity in Britain*

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### Abstract

Despite recent scholarly focus on Shi'a minorities in Britain, there has been little exploration of how Shi'a (re)define what it means to be a British Muslim more broadly. Here, we shift the focus away from inward-looking manifestations of Shi'a-specific identity and towards the diverse ways Shi'a Muslims are actively seeking to promote and enact inclusive ways of being Muslim in Britain. Profiling three Shi'a-led grassroots organisations – Who is Hussain, Love Muhammad and The Muslim Vibe – we explore how the younger generations of British Shi'a are invested in creating and sustaining a sense of inclusive British Islam which, by drawing on what we call an 'Islamically-conscious' ethics, seeks to engage Sunni Muslims and wider society in contemporary Britain.

### Keywords

Shi'a grassroots – British Muslim identity – Sunni–Shi'a relations – inclusivity – Islamically-conscious – ethics

## 1 Introduction

Despite recent scholarly interest in Shi'a Muslim communities in Britain and Europe, the focus of much of this academic inquiry remains on internal community dynamics and especially on Shi'a identity construction in Muslim-minority contexts. As a result, there is a dearth of scholarship examining how Shi'a minorities relate to the Sunni majority in the British context, and especially regarding how they are invested in wider conceptions of British Islam. This article seeks to build on, but also augment, insights from the existing literature on Shi'a identity in Britain by exploring how Shi'a-led grassroots organisations (re)define what it means to be a British Muslim more broadly. As part of an effort to 'de-centre' (Clarke and Künkler, 2018) the study of Shi'a identity formation in Europe, we shift the focus away from inward-looking manifestations of Shi'a-centric identity (Haddad, 2017) to consider the alternative and often complementary ways in which Shi'a Muslims are actively seeking to promote cross-sectarian, inclusive and heterogeneous ways of being Muslim in the British context.

One objective of a recent special issue of the journal *Contemporary Islam* on Shi'a Muslims in Great Britain was to study Shi'a voices and actions 'in their own right' in a non-Muslim, double-minority context (Scharbrodt, Gholami and Dogra, 2019: 234). This endeavour highlights the contribution that a growing body of scholarship has made in carving out a space for Shi'a minorities in the vast literature on Islam and Muslims in Britain and Europe more widely. An important part of this scholarship has been preoccupied with questions related to the nature, (trans)formation and internal contestation of Shi'a diasporic identities, and also how they are articulated and negotiated through engagement with wider British society (Spellman-Poots, 2012, 2018; Shanneik, 2017; Degli Esposti, 2018; Alibhai, 2019; Dogra, 2019; Gholami and Sreberny, 2019; Hashemi, 2022 among others). While the existing scholarship captures the multiple facets of Shi'a identity constructions, including outward-looking ones, it contributes (though not always intentionally) to an image of Shi'a Muslims in Britain as invested solely in Shi'a-centric forms of identity that preclude alternative and more cross-sectarian Shi'a identity formations. By addressing this missing dimension, this article offers a grassroots perspective that complements recent studies on Islamic unity discourses propounded by Shi'a religious elites in London (Corboz, 2019; Scharbrodt, 2020).

Here, we are interested in how Shi'a-led grassroots initiatives propose and enact inclusive ways of being Muslim in the British context. We focus on three grassroots organisations initiated and run predominantly by practising Shi'a Muslims: Who is Hussain (WIH), Love Muhammad (LM) and The Muslim Vibe

(TMV). WIH was founded in 2012 by a group of young British Shi'a and was initially intended as an awareness campaign about the figure of Imam Hussain. Since then, it has grown into an international charity and 'social justice movement' that currently operates across Britain, as well as in more than 20 countries worldwide. LM was established in early 2013 as a Sunni-Shi'a unity campaign at the initiative of three Iranian Shi'a student activists in London, a core team that later expanded to include a broader range of Sunni and Shi'a partners across the country. Active primarily around the annual celebrations of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, it has held a range of joint events for Sunni and Shi'a Muslims and outreach activities directed at wider British society, though its activities seem to have tailed off somewhat since 2017. Finally, TMV is an English-language online media platform directed at young Western Muslims that provides topical content related to religion, spirituality, society, politics and culture. Founded in 2014 by two Shi'a Muslims (one of whom also formed part of the founding team of WIH), TMV is intent on unifying Muslims of any denomination behind a mission aimed to reclaim the narrative of what it means to be Muslim in the West. To conduct this research the authors drew on their experience and contacts from their research on Shi'a communities in the UK over the past decade to identify and engage with the organisations profiled here. The empirical material encompasses primary data gathered from interviews with organisation leaders and participant observation of events or the consultation of recordings, as well as open-source material on the organisations' websites, social media accounts and marketing material. In this way, we foreground the organisations' own conceptions of their mission, as articulated both in interviews and through public-facing material on- and off-line.

Through these organisations we showcase how Shi'a Muslims are actively involved in shaping and sustaining a sense of inclusive British Islam that engages both Sunni Muslims and also wider British society. This can be understood as part of a wider trend among the younger generations of practising British Shi'a whereby they are reimagining Shi'a Muslim identity in contemporary Britain (Spellman-Poots, 2018; Ali, 2019; Degli Esposti and Scott-Baumann, 2019). More specifically, we explore the ways in which inclusivity functions as what we call an "Islamically-conscious" ethical frame as part of what it means to be a 'good' Muslim according to the three organisations. Although each approaches it in a different way, and draws on different theological and ethical paradigms, they are all invested in creating ways to be Muslim in Britain that speak to the internal dynamics of Shi'a communities as well as to Sunni-Shi'a and Muslim-non-Muslim relations more broadly. The article begins with a brief overview of the dynamics that have shaped Sunni-Shi'a and Muslim-non-Muslim relations in contemporary Britain, as a way of

contextualising the emergence and evolution of the three Shi'a-led grassroots organisations, before moving on to a discussion of the ethical frames they have mobilised and enacted. We should stress at this juncture that we are not attempting to offer a complete picture of these multifaceted organisations, but rather specifically to highlight and explore the ways in which they promote the idea of inclusivity in their framing and enactment of what it means to be a 'good British Muslim' today. In this sense, this article is not intended as an in-depth empirical examination of each case study, but as a corrective to the current academic literature that often portrays Shi'a Muslims in Britain as being solely invested in sect-specific identity constructions.

## 2 Being Muslim in Contemporary Britain

The Shi'a-led grassroots organisations presented in this article each have their own trajectory, objectives, modes of activism and, ultimately, their respective ways of envisioning and enacting inclusive modes of being Muslim in Britain. Yet, they share the wider socio-political context of the past decade, in which they are situated. Of particular interest are the challenges that have affected Sunni–Shi'a relations on the one hand, and relations between Muslims and wider British society on the other.

While our knowledge about the nature of relations between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims in Britain is scant, relations seem to have been overall immune from deep-seated tensions (Clarkson, 2013: 3). There may be the occasional conflict pitting some local Sunni and Shi'a communities against each other, but such conflicts are likely to be motivated by internal rivalries and competition over resources, not by religious strife (McLaughlin, 2005: 1052–3). Equally, cleavages between diasporic communities that arise in tandem with wider geopolitical trends and civil conflicts in the Middle East speak above all to political struggles for self-determination and governance (Kadhun, 2019). At the grassroots level, Sunni and Shi'a Muslims may hold negative perceptions and stereotypes about their denominational other, as captured in a (however methodologically flawed) survey amongst Muslim university students in the country (Thorne and Stuart, 2008: 49–51). In line with Elvire Corboz's word of caution in the introduction to this special issue, such stereotypes do not translate automatically into antagonistic action by the individuals to whom they apply.

The early 2010s witnessed troublesome developments in Sunni–Shi'a relations in Britain, however. The rise of Islamic State (ISIS), coupled with conflicts in Syria and Yemen, had polarising effects at home (Wyatt, 2015). The sectarian propaganda disseminated by Sunni and Shi'a 'hate preachers' in

Britain (Clarkson, 2013: 23–4) was also both a sign of and a trigger for increased intra-communal antagonism. Several high-profile anti-Shi'a incidents took place during this period (ibid.: 13–14; Mahmood, 2016). Tensions, or at least their most public manifestations, seem to have waned in recent years and relations between the two communities to have normalised. They may still flare up, however, as we are reminded by the Aya Hashem affair of May 2020, which saw a broad Muslim solidarity movement formed in response to her killing later fracture along sectarian lines. While the actual deterioration in Sunni–Shi'a relations of the early/mid-2010s remains hard to gauge, parts of the Muslim community have felt the need to address it, with intra-faith and anti-sectarian initiatives gaining currency (Clarkson, 2013: 30–3; Bowen, 2014: 160–2; Corboz, 2019). The emergence of such initiatives in the context of increased Sunni–Shi'a tensions was probably not coincidental, as is the case with the grassroots organisations under study here.

In the context of multicultural Britain, where Muslims from different ethnic, cultural, national and socio-economic backgrounds have increasingly come together within the parameters of religiously-defined spaces, it is possible to see how a communal sense of 'British Muslim identity' has been able to crystallise as a result of cross-pollination amongst hitherto separate communities (Abbas, 2007; Modood, 2009; Meer, 2010; Bowen, 2014, among others). On the other hand, from the perspective of wider (non-Muslim) British society, to whom Islam often appears as a foreign import, differences between Muslims from diverse national or ethno-cultural backgrounds are often glossed over while their 'Muslimness' is emphasised as an expression of difference. Moreover, such conceptions of a unified 'Muslim identity' in Britain have become increasingly securitised and problematised as a result of the UK government's focus on counter-terrorism policies following 9/11 and the 7/7 bombings (Hussain and Bagguley, 2012). Numerous studies have highlighted the trend towards the 'securitisation' of Islam (Cesari, 2009; Coppock and Mcgovern, 2014), whereby counter-terrorism initiatives and policies such as Prevent have resulted in 'enforcing the otherness of Muslim communities' (Thomas, 2010: 446–7), thereby contributing to both '*structural* and *cultural* Islamophobia' (Abbas, 2019: 396). Practising British Muslims are 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.

WIH, LM and TMV have emerged within this context where, on the one hand, differences between Islamic sects are glossed over in public discourse and the emphasis is placed instead on negative stereotypes regarding Islam, while, on the other, intra-Muslim relations have fluctuated in response to local

and international grievances, and communities have mostly tended to keep to themselves. Shi'a organisations in Britain have sought to respond to these circumstances and challenges, and more broadly to the community's double minority status, in diverse ways that reflect their heterogeneity and multivocality (Scharbrodt, 2019, 2020). In the case of the three grassroots organisations under study here, although they pursue different core missions and activities, they share similar goals of increasing public awareness of Islam and promoting intra-religious engagement, while creating positive messages for practising British Muslims.

For example, WIH first began in 2012 as an awareness campaign to promote wider public knowledge about the figure of Imam Hussain. It represented an attempt by British Shi'a to improve public perceptions about Shi'ism, especially in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring protests, the perceived geopolitical threat from Iran and the conflict in Syria (Spellman-Poots, 2013). While WIH has transformed from an awareness campaign into a global charity, there is an important sense in which it remains rooted in this idea of promoting a positive vision of Shi'ism and of Islam more broadly. By bringing together Muslims and non-Muslims of different or no religious affiliations through volunteering and outreach, WIH is contributing to a (re-)shaping of British Muslim identity that 'transcends any kind of sectarian denomination, or even any religion'<sup>1</sup> and instead focuses on universal human values of 'compassion, justice and dignity'.<sup>2</sup> They achieve this through various outreach and charitable activities, many of which are specific to the locations in which they operate. In the UK, where homelessness is a significant social issue, WIH volunteers organise food drives, free haircuts for homeless people and public awareness and fundraising campaigns such as sleep-outs.

Unlike WIH, whose core concern is to promote wider social cohesion and solidarity, LM was initially directly concerned with the issue of intra-Muslim relations. According to its co-founder Muhammad Reza, the catalyst behind its creation in 2013 was an event at London's Regent Park Mosque in honour of the 'martyred rebels' of Syria (i.e. anti-government forces). Such events that were 'taking sides', as he characterises them, epitomised the political and increasingly sect-based cleavages growing amongst Britain's Muslim community, which LM set out to counter by holding annual Sunni-Shi'a unity events on the occasion of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, LM has not been immune from the socio-political context that affects relations between

1 Interview with Esmat, London, 18 December 2018.

2 <https://whoishussain.org/about/story> (accessed 5 May 2021).

3 Interview with Muhammad Reza, London, 25 March 2016.

Muslims and wider British society. The Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015 in Paris prompted it to engage the wider British public and promote a more positive depiction of the Prophet Muhammad and Islam by means of a Roses for Peace distribution campaign held annually in various cities. The intra-Muslim unity agenda thus became intertwined with an outreach dimension. The latter came to dominate LM's activities while Sunni–Shi'a unity events lost momentum after 2017. Reflecting on this shift and LM's next steps, Muhammad Reza explained: 'We have to update ourselves with the new challenges facing our community. And right now, it is mainly Islamophobia. So now it's time to come up with a plan to stand against Islamophobia'.<sup>4</sup>

TMV represents yet another type of initiative that speaks to the multifaceted context laid out above. For Salim, one of its co-founders, two sets of issues animate its central mission of helping shape a strong Western Muslim identity. One threat is external, namely Islamophobia, which TMV seeks to combat by reclaiming the narrative about being Muslim.

The whole point is that we fight the fight from within; we create that sense of pride about being Muslim, about our morals, about our values, and everything else. But then it's not just about being insular [...] It's about being ambassadors and role models in wider society.<sup>5</sup>

The second threat, which also feeds partly into external prejudices against Muslims, is posed by internal cleavages – ethnic, sectarian, ideological, political – within the community itself. Salim is adamant that TMV is not a Shi'a platform but a platform for all Muslims. Unity is central to its mission and TMV seeks to promote it through a culture of mutual understanding, dialogue, and ultimately respect.<sup>6</sup> TMV achieves this through online content, including articles, podcasts, as well as holding live-streamed discussions.

As this brief introduction to the three organisations suggests, each of their respective core missions demonstrates a strong preoccupation with the dynamics that shape intra-Muslim and Muslim–non-Muslim relations in contemporary Britain, albeit with different orders of priority and approaches. By engaging with the question of what it means to be a 'good' Muslim, as we discuss next, they also all seek to promote inclusive visions of British Islam, whether that be across sectarian, religious or cultural divides.

4 Interview with Muhammad Reza, London, 1 August 2019.

5 Interview with Salim, Zoom, 20 April 2021.

6 Ibid.



### 3 Towards an Inclusive British Islam

While the religious and social self-cultivation in which these three organisations are invested entails other ethical dimensions, we are specifically concerned here with how inclusivity functions as an ethical frame through which they articulate what it means to be a 'good' Muslim in the British context. Indeed, all three organisations are all preoccupied with cultivating a version of British Islam geared towards inclusivity and that might in turn be more universally recognised, whether within the Muslim community itself or by British society more broadly. Their attempt to envision and promote inclusive ethical ways of being Muslim in Britain does not go without challenges. In general terms, it speaks to what Nadia Fadil calls the 'double epistemological impasse' that haunts the study of Islam in Europe, and 'which revolve[s] around the desire to account for the distinctiveness of ethical subjectivity of Muslims, while at the same time downplaying it' (Fadil, 2019: 118). The epistemological burden of attempting to prove the humanity of European Muslims while attending to all their nuances and complexities thus infuses not only the scholarship on Islam in Europe, but also the discourses and practices that Muslims – Sunni and Shi'a alike – are themselves using to define their place in European society.

Furthermore, the 'good Muslim/bad Muslim' dichotomy (Mamdani, 2004), which has been so potent in Western public and policy discourses in the post-9/11 world and post-7/7 Britain, constitutes an additional challenge, with implications for intra-Muslim relations. The pressure on Muslims in Europe to 'speak up' against violent extremism has led them to adopt and even reify this binary portrayal of Islam (van Es, 2021), while also using it to categorise themselves and other co-religionists (Yildiz and Verkuyten, 2012). The good/bad Muslim dichotomy creates a polarisation that can easily become conflated with denominational affiliation. As a double minority, Shi'a Muslims in Europe face the dilemma of differentiating themselves from the majority (Sunni) Muslim presence or, in contrast, aligning with it. Some seek recognition by constructing their public image as the 'good', 'moderate' Muslim citizens in explicit or implicit contradistinction from Sunni Muslims (Scharbrodt, 2011; Spellman-Poots, 2018; Degli Esposti, 2021). The inclusive ethical constructions of the three grassroots organisations represent an alternative approach that goes beyond purely Shi'a-centred portrayals of the 'good' Muslim. By foregrounding inclusivity as a mechanism through which to build a cross-sectarian British Muslim identity, they also attempt to transcend the public debate on extremist/moderate Islam by reimagining what it means to be a 'good British Muslim' on their own terms.

### 3.1 *Imagining Inclusivity*

For the purposes of this article, we draw on the notion of 'Islamically-conscious' frames (Morris, 2016) to characterise the inclusive ethics propounded by these grassroots organisations. Drawing on research conducted amongst Muslim musicians in Britain, Carl Morris uses the term 'Islamically-conscious music' as a counter to 'Islamic music', which is directed inwards and sustains Muslim communal solidarity through specific references to Islamic beliefs, practices and traditions. In contrast, Islamically-conscious music 'is marked by a desire to universalise the values and beliefs of Islam – to take an Islamic/Muslim worldview and produce music that will resonate with both Muslims and non-Muslims' (ibid.: 70). Accordingly, the notion of an 'Islamically-conscious ethics' helps to shed light on the ways in which WIH, LM and TMV understand and enact ideas of inclusivity. They all draw heavily on presumed universal ethical values such as peace, love, humanism, compassion, (social) justice, unity, equality and hope, which, on the flip side, offer a framework to resist hate, prejudice, oppression, injustice and social inequality. These values are rooted in Islamic tradition without being, from an outsider perspective, *prima facie* 'Islamic'. This is not to suggest that the organisations do not also rely on explicitly Islamic referents, but they frame such referents as ingrained in, and in support of, these universal values. Therefore, the distinction between Islamic and Islamically-conscious referents is actually blurred in a way that promotes inclusivity both within the Muslim community and between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The inclusive ethical constructions of LM and WIH are centred, as the names of these organisations suggest, on the Prophet Muhammad and his grandson Hussain, the latter also being revered as the third Shi'a Imam. While both LM and WIH use referents that are rooted in Islamic history, they frame them in ways that emphasise their universality, such that they come to transcend any particular religious or sectarian affiliation. For example, WIH uses the figure of Imam Hussain as a model for 'social justice and equality'.<sup>7</sup> The organisation draws heavily on the history and mythology of the Battle of Karbala, in which Hussain and his supporters fought and were defeated by the army of the ruling Caliph Yazid, to make a broader ethical statement about the need to 'speak up, take a stand, and make a real difference'.<sup>8</sup> They explicitly link this episode in Shi'a history and theology to a wider global trend towards combatting inequality and fighting for justice that encompasses all religions and cultures:

7 <https://whoishussain.org/who-is-hussain/the-day-of-ashura> (accessed 14 April 2021).

8 WIH info pack.

Hussain's revolution was not just against the unjust ruler of his time and place: it was a universal declaration against immorality, injustice and corruption across all ages and all spaces. It is comparable to how Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X didn't just protest against racism in the USA and Mandela didn't just rail against South African apartheid. Despite their difference in tactics, these inspirational figures all stood for something greater than themselves – just like Hussain 1400 years before.<sup>9</sup>

WIH thus draws inspiration from the figure of Hussain to reimagine him as a universal symbol for social change. While the universalisation of Hussain encompasses individuals of other religious faiths (and of no faith), WIH also envisages its mission as one with cross-sectarian potential. As WIH Press Secretary Esmat articulates: 'the Sunna do hold Imam Hussain in very high esteem, so we're kind of pushing on an open door.'<sup>10</sup> Muntazir, WIH's Director and CEO, and one of its founding members, further explains this intra-faith potential:

The point is that at the end of the day what brings people together is, as the father of Hussain [i.e. Imam Ali] said: 'You are either my brother in faith, or my equal in humanity'. It's one of those two things. And that's really, again, this ethos that the Holy Family have, which is so cohesive.<sup>11</sup>

In this way, WIH's scope to engage across the Muslim community ultimately comes back to its wider mission of universalising the message of Hussain and the *ahl al-bayt* (Prophet's household). Although Muntazir was keen to stress that WIH's team included volunteers from both Sunni and Shi'a backgrounds, the organisation's vision of inclusivity is not explicitly targeted at improving Sunni–Shi'a relations at the grassroots level. As Esmat notes, they have resisted being classified as a 'Muslim organisation' because they do not want to be seen to be pursuing a religious agenda: 'Our goal is not to convert someone but to share opportunities to do good [...] We're more Samaritan-like in our approach than evangelical'.<sup>12</sup> Within such a framework, WIH imagines and articulates the idea of inclusivity as something that encompasses the entirety of global society (which, by default, includes Sunni Muslims). In the words of Muntazir: 'I think that the concepts and the ethos of, quote unquote "Hussainism", is something that definitely transcends faiths, time and

9 Ibid.

10 Interview with Esmat, London, 18 December 2018.

11 Interview with Muntazir, Zoom, 7 April 2021.

12 Interview with Esmat, London, 18 December 2018.

any, any other barriers: gender, ethnicity race [etc.].<sup>13</sup> In this sense, the imagery and frames mobilised by WIH can be said to be Islamically-conscious in the way in which they draw on (Shi'a) Islamic theology to present a universal understanding of values such as equality, justice, tolerance and hope that is globally recognisable and culturally transferable.

LM also seeks to shape an ethos of inclusivity, here by drawing inspiration from the Prophet Muhammad. From the perspective of its core Sunni–Shi'a unity agenda, this figure has unifying potential. As Muhammad Reza puts it: 'Our idea is really to concentrate on similarities rather than on differences; Muhammad is the main focus of love for Muslims'.<sup>14</sup> There are limits, however. Celebrating the Prophet's birthday – the occasion selected by LM to organise unity events – is a contested practice amongst Muslims (Katz, 2007). In effect, LM's unity project can unite only those Sunni and Shi'a Muslims who accept the practice, but excludes others who, for instance, follow the puritan trends within Sunni Islam that denounce it as an innovation. Furthermore, LM adopted the practice of marking Islamic Unity week on the occasion of the Prophet's birthday, which is closely associated with the Islamic Republic of Iran and its agenda of *taqrib* (rapprochement between Islam's schools of thought) (Buchta, 2001; van den Bos, 2018).<sup>15</sup> This makes LM's appeal subject to the politics of division about Iran that fracture both Shi'a and Sunni communities. The community envisaged by LM of Sunni and Shi'a Muslims unified around the figure of the Prophet does not cater for all possible theological and political differences.

The way LM promotes unity, at least for those Sunni and Shi'a Muslims who can relate to its agenda, is not just about celebrating the Prophet's birthday. It is about uniting Muslims around a project of ethical self-cultivation that draws on lessons from the Prophet's life and the values he embodied, especially in his interactions with others: mercy, kindness, love, tolerance and peace, to name the most recurrent tropes. In the words of a Shi'a scholar speaking at a LM event: 'If you want to see how good you are in Islam, how close you are to people in the way that the Prophet was, check how much *rahma* [mercy] you have, how much love you have'.<sup>16</sup> At another event, a Sunni imam narrated stories about the Prophet's ethics of respect towards others to support his call

13 Interview with Muntazir, Zoom, 7 April 2021.

14 Interview with Muhammad Reza, London, 15 August 2016.

15 Sunni and Shi'a traditions recognise different dates for the birth of the Prophet. The dates are one week apart, which the Islamic Unity Week is designed to bridge. While Iran marks this week with an international conference attended by Sunni and Shi'a scholars and other prominent figures, LM was designed as a grassroots-oriented unity campaign.

16 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHDlIUkE2-s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHDlIUkE2-s) (accessed 30 March 2021).

for Muslim unity: 'We as Muslims should remind ourselves of our Prophet's values, in this specific time, with the political situation around the world, we should accept one another and become one Ummah [community]'.<sup>17</sup> The emphasis placed on ethical ways of interacting with others indicates that LM's foregrounding of commonalities between Muslims does not mean that unity is a homogenising project aimed at diluting denominational differences. Rather, their vision is one of an internally diverse Muslim community unified around common values critical to coexistence. By the same token, the ethical values embodied by the Prophet serve as universal frames when engaging wider British society: 'We have not sent you [the Prophet] except as a mercy for all mankind', as says the Qur'anic verse (21:107) often used for LM's outreach activities. The organisation thus draws on the figure of the Prophet to create an Islamically-conscious ethical frame that can work in support of both intra-Muslim and Muslim–non-Muslim relations alike.

Similarly, TMV's core mission to help shape what it is means to be Muslim in Britain, and in the West more broadly, is primarily aimed at the Muslim community, but also has wider application for the place of Islam in Western contexts. It adheres to a vision, which Salim situates right in the middle of a strict conservative Muslim–cultural Muslim spectrum,<sup>18</sup> of 'a united generation of God-centric Western Muslims who observe and uphold authentic Islamic principles and practices, whilst acting as positive role models and leaders in wider society'.<sup>19</sup> For TMV this vision, properly supported by an ethics of unity and dialogue, has the potential to transcend ethnic, racial or denominational differences. So does the range of issues discussed on its platform, which pertain to spirituality and religious practice, matters of life such as health, education or parenting, as well as societal and current humanitarian and political affairs.<sup>20</sup> In this way, the Western Muslim identity at the heart of TMV's mission mobilises an Islamic ethics that also speaks to wider universal values such as inclusivity, diversity and unity.

TMV produces content that directly addresses intra-Muslim differences. Its approach to Sunni–Shi'a unity is of particular interest not only for the purpose of this article but also because of its importance for TMV (Kesvani, 2019). For Salim, intolerance stems mainly from ignorance; accordingly, unity is about

17 As quoted in <https://themuslimvibe.com/western-muslim-culture/events/shia-and-sunni-muslims-unite-to-celebrate-the-birth-of-the-prophet> (accessed 10 April 2021).

18 Interview with Salim, Zoom, 20 April 2021.

19 <https://themuslimvibe.com/about> (accessed 18 April 2021).

20 <https://themuslimvibe.com/category/faith-islam>; <https://themuslimvibe.com/category/muslim-lifestyle-matters>; <https://themuslimvibe.com/category/muslim-current-affairs-news>; <https://themuslimvibe.com/society> (accessed 20 March 2021).

'understanding and celebrating our commonalities; being able to discuss and acknowledge our differences'.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to LM's and WIH's foregrounding of commonalities, TMV has also been willing to tackle doctrinal differences. Referring to an article published on Eid al-Ghadir,<sup>22</sup> the celebration of what the Shi'a consider to be the Prophet's appointment of 'Ali as his successor, Salim explains:

We wanted it to be balanced, so we very specifically presented it from both [Sunni and Shi'a] perspectives, and even presented the controversy and said, this is where the controversy lies, and then stopped there. Because it's not about me convincing you that I'm right or vice versa.<sup>23</sup>

Other content has addressed common Sunni and Shi'a misconceptions and stereotypes about each other, ranging from the more academic and systematic correctives to personal and spontaneous responses, as captured in a 2019 video featuring Sunni and Shi'a Muslims reacting to sectarian narratives circulating on social media.<sup>24</sup> All in all, TMV seeks to normalise differences in line with its vision of a united Western Muslim identity that can tolerate diversity at the same time as speaking to wider concerns about what it means to be Muslim in Britain.

### 3.2 *Enacting Inclusivity*

The three organisations thus draw on Islamically-conscious values of justice, unity, tolerance, equality and hope to articulate visions of inclusivity that cut across sectarian divides and engage people beyond the Muslim faith. These ethical notions provide, on the one hand, a way to shape what it means to be a 'good' Muslim in the contemporary British context and, on the other, a framework for resisting hate, prejudice, oppression, injustice and social inequality. These organisations also seek, either implicitly in the case of WIH or explicitly in the case of LM and TMV, to distance themselves from specifically Shi'a interpretations of Muslim identity and to focus instead on points in common or shared values with both Sunni co-religionists and with the non-Muslim British public. Moreover, they are all invested in enacting this vision of unity and inclusivity. While they privilege an action-based approach, there are differences in

21 Interview with Salim, Zoom, 20 April 2021.

22 <https://themuslimvibe.com/faith-islam/what-is-eid-al-ghadir-ghadeer-and-why-do-shias-celebrate-it> (accessed 22 April 2021).

23 Interview with Salim, Zoom, 20 April 2021.

24 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i49ceiW\\_0aQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i49ceiW_0aQ) (accessed 19 March 2021).

their respective modes of outreach, engagement and ethical action. These differences also speak to nuances in the ways in which the three organisations imagine and articulate their Islamically-conscious vision(s) of intra-Muslim inclusivity.

Although WIH began as an awareness and information campaign combating public ignorance about Shi'ism, over time the organisation has developed an action-based approach to inclusivity. They do this through charitable and grassroots campaigns aimed at what they call 'issues of social justice'. In particular, they draw inspiration from the figure of Hussain as a model to shape their own behaviour and that of others. In the words of Muntazir: 'We've always felt that we need to follow [Hussain's] footsteps and walk the walk, not just talk the talk'.<sup>25</sup> This idea of emulating Hussain through action translates into WIH's outreach activities, which mostly comprise campaigns and initiatives such as food drives, food banks and donations to alleviate period poverty, homelessness and lack of access to drinking water. As Esmat articulates: 'We're really focusing on social justice because that's the easiest way to translate what Hussain stood for'<sup>26</sup> – albeit reimagined for the contemporary global age.

This emphasis on social justice and ethical action has also meant that WIH has become involved in wider global campaigns against social and political inequality, such as aligning themselves with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and mobilising against 'COVID inequality'. For example, much of the marketing material for their 'Campaign of Hope 2020' made use of the civil rights symbol of the raised fist, and they held an event in collaboration with Sandy Hudson, the founder of BLM in Canada.<sup>27</sup> WIH also dedicated a section of their website to their COVID response and '40 Neighbours' campaign, whose stated aim was 'empowering neighbourhoods to *protect the most vulnerable* during the Coronavirus pandemic'.<sup>28</sup> These campaigns speak to the way in which WIH as an organisation is actively involved in the reimagining of Shi'a theology and religious practice to promote an action-based vision of unity, inclusivity and tolerance that resonates with people of all faiths, races and cultures around the world.

LM has enacted its vision of intra-Muslim unity through various types of activities. For its first two editions in 2013 and 2014, it organised a single large event in London which featured high-profile speakers and attracted hundreds

25 Interview with Muntazir, Zoom, 7 April 2021.

26 Interview with Esmat, London, 18 December 2018.

27 <https://whoishussain.org/campaign/hope-2020/> (accessed 2 May 2021).

28 <https://whoishussain.org/campaign/40-neighbours> (accessed 8 May 2021, emphasis original).

of mainly Shi'a, but also Sunni Muslims. LM then adopted a new format intended to achieve a deeper reach among local Muslim communities. The London event gave way to an annual series of smaller community-based events and activities held across the country and organised in partnership with local Sunni and Shi'a mosques and organisations. At the height of the campaign in 2015–2017, joint activities ranged from formal panel discussions, arts evenings dedicated to poetry, storytelling and songs about the Prophet, to social action projects such as food drives.<sup>29</sup> To some extent, LM's promotion of unity has entailed a strong didactic dimension, as in the events featuring speeches by Sunni and Shi'a religious leaders or activists on a range of topics related to unity – from the religious to the political. However, even the formal events have offered a space for experiencing unity, be it when Sunni Muslims went to a Shi'a mosque for the first time to attend an event or vice versa; when all joined the prayer closing an event; or just through socialising.<sup>30</sup> 'I believe in the impact of events; I see people interact.'<sup>31</sup> LM's social action and outreach campaigns have also offered a space for Sunni and Shi'a volunteers to practise unity by working together on the preparation and delivery of these activities.<sup>32</sup>

LM's modes of engagement with wider British society also deserve some attention. In addition to other inter-faith and outreach activities, the Roses for Peace distribution campaign has been a flagship activity in this regard. Concerned with the need to rectify misconceptions about the Prophet, and by extension about Islam and Muslims, this campaign seeks to inform and educate the public by distributing roses tagged with ethical sayings of the Prophet and interacting with passers-by – what Ingvild Flakerud (2018) calls 'street theology'. It is also an opportunity to showcase how Muslims themselves embody these ethical values. In the words of a passer-by featured on LM's website, 'After watching the news, I thought there was no hope left in humanity, but you have restored my faith in humanity.'<sup>33</sup> Thus, the project of ethical self-cultivation around which LM seeks to unite Muslims takes on a practical dimension around the common, action-based purpose of external outreach.

'Inspire, Inform and Empower', TMV's motto, encapsulates how the platform enacts its vision of a united Western Muslim identity. Through its articles, podcasts and videos, it seeks to improve the religious, social and political

29 For a video capturing the campaign's highlights in 2015, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUkhqLdZWSc&t=70s> (accessed 28 March 2021).

30 See for instance <http://lovemuhammadmedia.s3-website-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/videos/bdead5bf-4592-431d-90b5-fc06bb682c79.mp4> (accessed 24 March 2021).

31 Interview with Muhammad Reza, London, 15 August 2016.

32 For instance, see <http://lovemuhammadmedia.s3-website-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/videos/7dbc1a81-5e0a-4200-9750-a4722d69b8cc.mp4> (accessed 5 May 2021).

33 <https://love-muhammad.com/blog/?p=1553> (accessed 1 May 2021).



literacy of its users, while also challenging long-held views: 'For me, generally speaking, it's when content kind of cuts through a particular narrative or a formally held understanding amongst Muslims [that it] is able to make a difference'.<sup>34</sup> Having skimmed through TMV's content of 2020 and early 2021, we qualify much of it as being personal experience-based and action-oriented, in line with TMV's end goals of inspiring and empowering Western Muslims. To take the example of TMV's engagement with BLM, it has been invested in denouncing racism within the Muslim community itself, with the support of personal testimonies, while offering concrete tips and advice about how to counter one's own sub-conscious racial biases.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, TMV's coverage of the humanitarian crises and political causes that affect the Muslim world, or the issue of Islamophobia in the West, offer commentaries that often include suggestions about how Muslims can take concrete action. The sense of an active and empowered Muslim community is further reinforced in articles that showcase 'ordinary Muslims' who embody the values of a good Muslim among their community or wider society, such as in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>36</sup> All in all, TMV projects an image of Western Muslim identity that is both tangible and relatable.

#### 4 Conclusion

This article has examined the diverse ways in which three Shi'a-led grassroots organisations in Britain envisage and enact ideas of inclusivity. In particular, we have focused on how each organisation mobilises Islamically-conscious ethical paradigms that are both centred on and transcend Islamic values to articulate a cross-sectarian, universal and unifying vision of British Islam. While space limitations have prevented us from going into finer-grained details about these organisations, what should be clear from the empirical

34 Interview with Salim, Zoom, 20 April 2021.

35 <https://themuslimvibe.com/muslim-current-affairs-news/muslims-should-solve-their-racism-within-while-standing-in-solidarity-with-the-blm-protectors> (accessed 10 March 2021); <https://themuslimvibe.com/muslim-current-affairs-news/5-ways-muslims-need-to-stand-up-to-racism> (accessed 12 March 2021); <https://themuslimvibe.com/social-issues/the-far-extent-of-subconscious-racism> (accessed 10 March 2021); <https://themuslimvibe.com/muslim-current-affairs-news/blm-my-experiences-of-racism-and-tips-for-being-anti-racist> (accessed 18 March 2021).

36 <https://themuslimvibe.com/muslim-current-affairs-news/coronavirus-in-europe-how-are-european-muslims-responding-and-helping> (accessed 7 March 2021); <https://themuslimvibe.com/muslim-current-affairs-news/muslim-owned-corner-shop-in-scotland-gives-away-free-face-masks-and-hand-gel-amidst-coronavirus-panic> (accessed 8 March 2021).

material presented above is that each is invested in building bridges between both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims on the one hand, and Muslims and non-Muslims on the other; albeit to different degrees and in diverse ways.

More specifically, two broad patterns have emerged. On the one hand, *WIH* is primarily concerned with inclusivity directed at non-Muslim society, a framework under which intra-Muslim inclusivity is (often implicitly) subsumed. Rooted in their Islamically-conscious portrayal of Imam Hussain, the organisation's foregrounding of values such as compassion, dignity and social justice allows them to speak to a variety of local and global issues, and to promote a vision of unity and inclusivity that encompasses all of humanity. While *WIH* acknowledge the resonance of their vision with Sunni Islam, this intra-Muslim dimension comes second to their wider agenda of promoting global social justice. On the other hand, unity amongst Muslims is central to *LM*'s and *TMV*'s missions, but also serves as a springboard for engaging wider British society. Launched as an intra-Muslim unity campaign, *LM* has put this agenda increasingly at the service of a public outreach focused on improving perceptions of Islam in Britain. It is quite noteworthy that the Islamically-conscious ethical framing of the Prophet proposed by the organisation is used in support of both aims. As for *TMV*, while its target audience are Muslims themselves, the Western Muslim identity around which it seeks to unify them revolves around issues of common concern about how to be Muslim in, and engage with, British society more widely. In this sense, and against the backdrop of ongoing Islamophobia, the securitisation of Islam and dichotomous public understandings of what constitute a 'good' or 'bad' Muslim, it is impossible to understand Sunni–Shi'a relations in Britain without taking into consideration the socio-political context that informs relations between Muslim and non-Muslim society.

Moreover, the blurring of boundaries between these two aims (inward-looking and outward-looking inclusivity) speaks to the transformation of what it means to be a practising Muslim in contemporary Britain. In this regard, the very fact that Islamically-conscious referents are being actively mobilised by these organisations to draw attention to wider social issues and universal human values suggests that British Muslims are increasingly preoccupied with how to engage British society, rather than simply with upholding the tenets of their faith regardless of the wider social context in which they live. This mirrors similar patterns that have been identified within Sunni Muslim communities in Britain, as well as within other religious minorities in Western contexts (Modood, 2009; Meer, 2010).

Although we have focused on the ways these organisations seek to promote ideas of inclusivity, it is worth noting that their endeavour does not go without contestation, both from within the Muslim community and from fringe

elements in British society more broadly. While further research is needed, anecdotal evidence suggests that critics coming from various Shi'a, Sunni and far-right circles in Britain are likely to have underlying political motives in their criticism of these campaigns, and should be understood as contributing to wider and ongoing political and theological debates. Nevertheless, the three grassroots organisations are all invested in (re)defining and (re)imagining what it means to be a 'good' Muslim in contemporary Britain in an Islamically-conscious, and hence inclusive and non-sectarian, way, thereby suggesting that Shi'a Muslims are not limited to sect-specific identity orientations.

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