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A Hawza of Liberation: Decolonisation beyond both 'Tradition' and 'Modernity'

Over the past years, the Hawza – the classical space of Shia knowledge-making and learning – has undergone significant changes. Amongst these has been the systematic emergence of a 'modernised' Hawza, whose pedagogic form and content collapse classical Shia Muslim and secular westernised university models and content. A key example is the International Al-Mustafa University based in Qom, Iran, with over 100 branches and affiliate schools around the world. This seminary in university dress, for example, was established in 2007 and has been expanding since, as it shapes future generations of Shia scholars. Standardly, this change has been celebrated as a mode through which more 'progressive', critical and present-day relevant knowledge can emerge. Yet, thinking alongside decolonial and anti-colonial critiques and conceptualisations of the 'westernised university' (Grosfoguel 2013; Bhambra et al 2021), this paper grates against this assumption and works to make visible the erasures as well as foreclosures that such a change enacts. It accordingly argues that through the 'modernisation' of the Hawza, liberatory alternatives beyond Eurocentric modern epistemology and normativities are foreclosed. Yet, the Hawza's historical traditional form is itself burdened with inequalities and exclusions. Taking this seriously, the paper reflects on the possibilities and modes through which Islamic knowledge might move towards more liberatory alternatives beyond both its historical form as well as contemporary hegemonic westernised models. The paper closes by inviting a decolonising conversation between the Hawza and other southern modes of knowledge and being.



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