

THE SHI'A HAWZAS BETWEEN CONSERVATISM AND REFORM

**Abd al-Jabbar
al-Rifa'i***

Religious education in Islamic life emerged in mosque. The Prophet's Mosque in Madina was the first venue utilized by the Prophet Muhammad to teach Quran and Hadith and disseminate Islamic teachings. His companions followed his way. Hence, The Prophet's Mosque in Madina became the place where discussions about reading and interpreting Quran took place, in addition to narrating Hadith and learning 'Sharia.' Later, Mosques in Kufa, Basra, Damascus, Fustat, and so on followed the same path. Eventually, mosque became a space for the study of Arabic grammar, theological discussions around matters of Imamate, fate and destiny, and other categories of '*Ilm al- Kalam.*' In Basra mosque, the first Mu'tazili argument emerged in a panel discussion of Wasil Ibn 'Ata' (700-748 AD).

Shia religious teachings followed the same approach. Since the first half of the first century of Hijra; Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib (599 AD - 661 AD) during his 'Ruling era' delivered his speeches and sermons at Kufa Mosque. At a later stage in the second century of Hijra, his grandson Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (732 AD - 979 AD) followed his footsteps. Then his son Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (702 AD - 765 AD), disseminated Hadith and Imamate belief principles at the same mosque. However,

In Basra mosque, the first Mu'tazili argument emerged in a panel discussion for Wasil Ibn 'Ata' (700-748 AD).

mosques were not always the best places for religious education for Shia, because they were usually under the domination of non- Shia Hadith readers, commentators and scholars who were representing the official doctrine of Sultans and Caliphs while Shia theological position did not match that. Some of those scholars even considered Shiite out of religion/Islam.

At all stages of history, mosques were not protected from the Caliphs and Sultans interfering, rejecting the Shia positions and beliefs. Therefore, Shia Hadith scholars sometimes resorted to their Imams shrines and their own places to run their religious teachings gatherings. The base of Shia religious teachings originated in Madina, probably, in the Prophet's Mosque. It consolidated its first foundation in Kufa Mosque at Imam al-Baqir and al-Sadiq era. After the foundation of City of Baghdad and the transmission of the Abbasid Caliphate capital to it, some Shia scholars had migrated to it, such as Hisham Ibn al-Hakam (815 AD), later on Kulayni

Muhammad Ibn Yaqub al-Kulayni (941 AD) and al-Mufid Muhammad Ibn Muhammad Ibn al-Nu'man (948 -1022 AD) and others.

Hawza in Najaf

The history of Hawza in Najaf goes back to approximately one thousand years ago, when Abu Ja'far Muhammad Ibn al-Hasan al-Tusi (1068 AD) launched his first lessons there. Al-Tusi was forced to migrate to Najaf from Baghdad in (1056 AD) because of the persecution by Seljuks. Since that date, Najaf had become a scholarly capital for Islamic studies students, who came from all over the world. Study in Najaf experienced growth and flourished at specific historical stages, but it shrunk at some other historical stages, depending on political, social, cultural and economic changes in Iraq and neighbor countries where the students historically came from. In conjunction with Hawza in Najaf, other scholarly capitals were emerged and disappeared constantly in Aleppo in current Syria, Hilla, Samarra and Karbala in Iraq, Jabal Amel in Lebanon, Isfahan, and Qum in Iran, in addition to the Indian subcontinent, and Central Asia.

Since 1800s, Najaf has become the broader and significant scholarly city for

Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (702 AD - 765 AD), disseminated Hadith and Imamate belief principles at the same mosque

Shia. Especially, after the institutionalization of al-Marja'iyya, and its direct involvement in political and social turning points in the recent history of Iran and Iraq, such as the 'al-Mashruta' movement and the drafting of 1906 constitution in Iran. Another earlier example is the popular protest movement against the British tobacco company, resistance to the British occupation in 1914-1917, and the 1920 Revolution in Iraq.

After the migration of Abdul Karim al-Ha'iri al-Yazdi to Qum, Hawza in Qum has grown gradually and reached its peak more than fifty years ago by Hussein Borujardi, the well known marja', and the great commentator on the Quran, Muhammad Hussein Tabataba'i. The two scholars founded Qum philosophical sessions in 1952. The scholarly dimension of Qum's Hawza has been reinforced after the 1963 uprising led by Ayatollah Khomeini that ended with 1979 Islamic Revolution victory, and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Since then, the religious education in Qum has expanded and opened

to new horizons and suddenly the theological question that has been absent for several centuries has flared.

There is no doubt in the religious identity of the 1979 Revolution and the contribution of Hawza in Qum towards its leadership, public mobilization, the coining of its slogans and promises on independence, freedom, security, prosperity, and progress. In addition to advocating that *fiqh* and *kalam* and other inherited Islamic knowledge are enough for conceptual framing to fulfill those promises. The embodiment of *fiqh* and *kalam* in social life put Hawza for the first time in a direct confrontation with people's different needs. In addition, the social change in the last two decades was also a challenge before Hawza; this change was due to a combination of factors such as information technology, genetic engineering and the discovery of genome for humans, geopolitical (Saddam Hussein wars, and the spread of Salafist groups terrorism), and economic (the failure of development projects, and the expansion of poverty,

At all stages of history, mosques were not protected from the Caliphs and Sultans interfering, rejecting the Shia positions and beliefs

ignorance and illiteracy), and demographic (population doubled) and (wide immigration from Afghanistan and Iraq because of the war). All these factors have led to a variety of imbalances that affected the traditional religious and cultural structures of society, and challenged statements and opinions that have been established for hundreds of years.

However, Hawza in Najaf could not keep up with the pace of the mentioned transformations and then it turned inwards. For the Hawza in Najaf there was no other option but to walk on this wrenching path because of the tyranny of Saddam Hussein, which was demonstrated in the most horrendous picture in the eradication of the most prominent clerics such as Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, and Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, as well as the deportation of a group of distinguished scholars to Iran under the pretext of their Iranian origins, and emptying Najaf from students coming from Arab countries, on top of them the open-minded Lebanese, who have had an active and influential role in initiating religious thinking renovation in Najaf's Hawza half a century ago. The Baath Government under Saddam Husain actively worked on closing the Islamic studies schools and colleges, undermining and destroying the educational system reform projects of Hawza, and closing down of Fiqh

Faculty in Najaf, and the Faculty of Theology in Baghdad. The today Hawza in Najaf works effectively to resume its historical prominent role in modernizing religious education in Islam.

The history of Hawza in Najaf goes back to approximately one thousand years ago, when Abu Ja'far Muhammad Ibn al-Hasan al-Tusi (1068 AD) launched his first lessons there

Levels of Study and Teaching Methods in Hawza

Studying in Hawza is free. Students can choose any scholar for the subject they study. They may enroll for a session with a specific scholar. The textbooks are full of specialized terms, their language is mainly the classical Arabic, and perhaps written in a vague and

The embodiment of fiqh and kalam in social life put Hawza for the first time in a direct confrontation with people's different needs

ambiguous manner, they usually require long training and experience to be understood. The scholar usually reads a phrase from the book and then begins explaining it; it takes great effort to illustrate the concepts with examples and comparisons. Because of the complexity and difficulty of the textbooks, the discussion 'mubahathah' has developed among Hawza students. At the 'mubahathah' is about a group of students get together after attending the official session with a scholar, they discuss what they learnt using a special method; each one of them has a turn to lead explaining the text to the others, the turns changes every day. Scholars usually encourage students strongly to do 'mubahathah' stressing on its significance in the Hawza educational system.

The student is assessed based on three levels:

1. *Muqaddimat* (Introduction Level):

At this level, students study the Arabic language, *sarf* (philology), *balagha* (rhetoric), *mantiq* (logic), *kalam*, *fiqh*, and *usul al-fiqh*. In Grammar and philology, they study *al-Ujrumiyyah* by Ibn Ugrum (1242 AD), *Qatr al-Nada Wa bal al-Sada* by Ibn Hisham (1360 AD), and *Alfiyyat Ibn Malik* (1273AD), the student may study one explanation such as Ibn Aqil's, Suyuti's, or Ibn Nadei's, he may study *Mughni*

al-Labib by Ibn Hisham. In *balagha*, students study *Mukhtasar al-Ma'ani* by al-Taftazani (1389AD), *al-Mutawwal* by al-Taftazani too. In *mantiq*, they study *al-Mantiq* by Muhammad Riza al-Muzaffar (1964 AD), *Hashiyat Tahdhib al- Mantiq* by Mullah Abdullah al-Yazdi (1573AD), *Sharh al-Shamsiyya* by Najm al-Din al-katebi al-Qazwini (1276 AD). In *kalam*, they study *al-Bab al-Hadi Ashar* by Allama al-Hilli (1326 AD), his explanation of the *Miqdad al-Sayuri* (1423 AD), *Kashf al-Murad fi Sharh Tajdid al-I'tiqad* by Allama al-Hilli. In *Fiqh*, students study *al-Mukhtasar al-Nafi'* by Muhaqqiq al-Hilli (1277 AD), *Shara'it al-Islam* by Muhaqqiq al-Hilli too. In *usul al-fiqh*, they study *Ma'alim al-Din* by Hasan Ibn Zain al-Din, the second martyr (1602 AD).

However, Hawza in Najaf could not keep up with the pace of the mentioned transformations and then it turned inwards

2. *Sutūh* Level:

At this level, the study focuses on deductive *fiqh* and the *usul al-fiqh*. In deductive *Fiqh*, students study *al-Rawda al-Bahiyya fi Sharh al-Lum'a al-Dimashqiyya*, the text *al-Lum'a al-*

Studying in Hawza is free. Students can choose any scholar for the subject they study

Dimashqiyya by the first martyr, Muhammad Ibn Makki al-Jazini al-'Amili (1384 AD), and the explanation of *al-Rawda al-Bahiyya* by the second martyr, Zain al-Din Alameli (1559 AD), and *al-Makasib* by Murtaza al-Ansari (1864 AD).

In *usul al-fiqh*, students study *usul al-fiqh* by Muhammad Riza al-Muzaffar (1964 AD), *Farā'id al-usul* by Murtaza al-Ansari, *Kifayat al-usul* by Muhammad Kadhim al-Akhund al-Khurasani (1911 AD).

In philosophy, some students study *Bidayat al-Hikma* by Muhammad Hussein Tabataba'i (1982 AD) and perhaps *Sharh al-Manzuma* by Mulla Hadi al-Sabizwari (1872 AD), *Nihayat al-Hikma* by Muhammad Hussein Tabatabai, *al-Asfar al-Arba'a* by Mulla Sadra al-Shirazi (1640 AD).

In *ʿIrfan*, some students study *Tamhid al-Qawa'id* by Ibn Turk al-Isfahani, and *Fusus al-Hikam* by Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi (1240 AD).

3- *al-Baḥth al-Kharij* Level (abroad research level)

It is called abroad research because it is a

level for free research outside the textbooks that the student needs to study in the previous two levels. At this level, the study is limited to *fiqh* and the *usul al-fiqh*, the student may stay many years in order to reach *ijtihād* degree. The student usually writes essays, and presents them to his supervising scholar, for his ability to reach '*ijtihād*' to be assessed by the scholar.

Students do not receive any certificate, but the scholar issues *ijāza* ('a license') to indicate that the student has achieved the degree of *ijtihād*. However, this tradition has not been practiced for almost half a century, and the scholars are seldom keen to issue such a license nowadays.

Obstacles to the modernization of Hawza

Below are the most important obstacles to the modernization of Hawza:

- 1- Traditional institutions are inherently resistant to any attempt of modernization. Modernization becomes very difficult and it may require a special effort if it is a religious institution. Hawza is a traditional religious institution which has deep roots in Shia theological and spiritual memory. The religious

Marja'iyya in Hawza is considered as an extension to Imamate and has a holy place in Shia consciousness. Al-Marja'iyya controls all matters relating to religious education and textbooks in Hawza. Moreover, the Marja'iyya is the only authority to protect the educational system from any changes whether through changing the textbooks or changing teaching methods.

- 2- The textbooks are not ordinary that the teacher and students deal with objectively. As over time, a holy aura has been composed around the textbooks based on the religious status of their author, legacy, the number of generations of students who have studied them, and scholars who were keen to repeatedly teach them.
- 3- Although the textbooks are written in a way that does not forbidden criticism and discussions, but criticism has specified limits.
- 4- Loyalty to Turath (tradition) is the most

In 'Irfan, some students study Tamhid al-Qawa'id by Ibn Turk al-Isfahani, and Fusus al-Hikam by Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi (1240 AD).

Students do not receive any certificate, but the scholar issues *ijāza* to indicates that the student has achieved the degree of *ijtihād*

significant characteristic in 'Hawza'. 'Hawza' is keen to preserve and guard Turath and opposes all the efforts that try to change it. It warns of using the modern 'human sciences' in critically studying and sifting Turath as this kind of approaches is feared to produce theological arguments and opinions that do not match with ancient concepts in Quran, Hadith, Kalam, Fiqh, and the principles of Fiqh.

- 5- Hawza is a deep, self governed theological, intellectual, cultural, social, economic and anthropological structure that deters strongly any effort threatening its structure. A series of religious families dominates Hawza. The religious families are interwoven into relatives' fabric since decades ago, and new relations have been added consistently through marriage between the new generations of these families. The 'Marja' often belongs to these

families. These families usually control most of Hawza's economy which is a very specific economic pattern and unique in its financial sources, and its methods of reproduction and trading of funds, and its spending and saving means. '*Al-khums*' constitutes the basis for Hawza's economy. It is the fund that the loyal Shiites give to the 'Marja' as a religious duty. The efforts and calls for modernization threaten the economy of Hawza which is controlled by a set of *fiqh fatwas*.

6- '*Al-khums*' is given by Shia as a religious obligatory. 'Hawza' has to take into account the wishes of the public, their beliefs and understanding in order to strengthen the religious trust between them. This means any destabilizing of the foundations of the 'religious belief system' could result in the stopping of the '*khums*' which is the most important financial resource in 'Hawza'.

7- Immature 'Hawza' students who dislike the religious education in Hawza and declare, rather, immaturely, their oppositions to the 'Hawza' with oversimplified understanding of religion and '*turath*' contribute to derailing the reformation of 'Hawza'. The radicals,

the Marja'iyya is the only authority to protect the educational system from any changes whether through changing the textbooks or changing teaching methods

who think social change is possible through flashy slogans and loud voice only, are also contributing to this delay in reform, not appreciating the complex nature of social transformation and change, in addition to those who injure the religious conscience of others

8- The reduction of religion into one dimension that equalizes Islam to '*fiqh text*' only, this reading of religion excludes its symbolic, moral, spiritual, aesthetic, artistic and ethical diminutions.

The Ground for Reform in 'Hawza'

Reform requires a suitable ground for formulation and several inherited and presented elements interact with each other to create a specific environment for the reform process. A set of these items has become available in Hawza. Therefore, the reform process of the educational system in Hawza became possible; it is not far away from the cultural and historical context of Hawza.

Below are the reform elements, attributions in the renewal spirit in 'Hawz'a:

- 1- Remnants of rational thinking tendency inherited from the classical currents of 'Itizal' and 'Shiiasm', the unity and rapprochement of *kalam* positions on issues of rational beauty and ugliness, and the related divine justice, freedom and human will, and the other theology of justice in *kalam* heritage.

Hawza is a deep, self governed theological, intellectual, cultural, social, economic and anthropological structure that deters strongly any effort threatening its structure

- 2- The continuous teaching of philosophy, logic, theology, *kalam*, and *usul al-fiqh* as they are all classified as rational sciences in '*turath*'. Their continuous presence in 'Hawza' has profound impact on the launch of thinking process and its development.
- 3- The prevalence of studying Sufism, theoretical 'Irfan, the texts of Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi specially. These texts are

overflowing humanitarian trend and conciliatory position with other religions and cultures and working on discovery of similarities while going through the essence of religions. As a result, it made a theologian such as Allama Muhammad Hussein Tabataba'i to deal with great respect with the texts of Asian religions. The philosophical Sufi texts create an environment that welcomes interpretation, multiplicity of readings, and the diversity of understanding.

- 4- The geographic diversity of Hawza's students as they come from Iran, the Arab countries, Afghanistan, Central Asia, India, and Pakistan, and so on means differences in cultures, traditions, their represent of Islam, and their interpretation of *tradition*.
- 5- The opening up of Hawza to the modern universities and the involvement of a group of graduates of social sciences, humanitarian and natural studies in religious studies, and also the transmission of some distinguished

Al-khums' constitutes the basis for Hawza's economy

scholars of Hawza to Islamic studies faculties.

6- The regression of *Akhbariyyin* movement on the last two centuries in Hawza. The followers of this trend call themselves (*Akhbariyyin* and *muhaddithun*) refer to *akhbar* and *hadith*. The trend that opposes the rational thinking in different Islamic knowledge and it freezes up at the literal meaning of the texts and rejects any attempt to interpret the Quran.

7- The Islamic state project was one of the dreams of Hawza's students for a long time. Hawza was able to eventually mobilize the masses under the banners of the application of Islam and praise the justice government through reshaping the social life on the light of *fatwas* and judgments on *fiqh* tradition. It had been achieved by the victory of the revolution and the announcement of

Therefore, the reform process of the educational system in Hawza became possible; it is not far away from the cultural and historical context of Hawza

As a result, it made a theologian such as Allama Muhammad Hussein Tabataba'i to deal with great respect with the texts of Asian religions

Islamic State. The inability of traditional *fiqh* to meet the requirements of the contemporary Islamic state and society led to the emergence of a range of questions which have been absent for long centuries. Thus, the traditional *fiqh* failed to accommodate the aspirations of the revolutionaries and accomplish their dreams and achieve their promises and hopes. Therefore, a group of elites tried to judge the *fiqh* tradition and held accountable in the traditional *kalam* and sifted their concepts and arguments. The certainties were no longer their convictions, but some of them turning into doubts.

8- On the last 20th half-century, a broad shift in Arabic language in Hawza in Qum has occurred. It gradually became the second language after the Persian has crossed to seminars, panel discussions, courses, education and authoring. The change in the religious education

language means a change in semantic symbols and concepts statement mode. There is no doubt that the formulation of religious concepts, visions, opinions and knowledge into another language will lead to the formation of an alternative semantic field and the emergence of a cultural environment derives its components and elements of the legacy of this language and its literature. It is because each language has its specific lexicon, structures, and the circumstances of its creation and transformations.

Conclusion:

Hawza is one of the Societal ' institutions, and its change and development is inseparable from the diverse and wide human world. It is not out of time and place, and also not transient human history. Human societies are no longer governed by the inherited methods and means, and the communities exceeded the pattern which has been shaped by the ideas, ideologies, thinkers and heroes after the shift in favor of the virtual world, and the influence of information technology on all matters relating to masterminding mundane matters and reshape the human community in a different context. The genetic engineering may

the traditional fiqh failed to accommodate the aspirations of the revolutionaries and accomplish their dreams and achieve their promises and hopes

work on different genetic codes of the human species, as well as the other matters of biology, in addition to the promise of «nano» technology and the variety of other prospects of technology. The accelerating pace of climate change and the unexpected natural disasters have also an impact on dismantling societies' structure and their transformations. The demographic problem and the random reproducible population made our countries unable to provide decent living for people. All that rearranges the actors in building communities, and the fundamental and traditional factors in society movement are subject to a

On the last 20th half-century, a broad shift in Arabic language in Hawza in Qum has occurred. It gradually became the second language after the Persian has crossed to seminars, panel discussions, courses, education and authoring

different sequence.

Translated and prepared by Abrar al-Rifa'i

Note: This article is a lecture that had been presented to the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies in Rome in April 4th 2014.

Notes

* **Abd al-Jabbar al-Rifai** is an Iraqi intellectual specializing in Islamic Philosophy. He teaches graduate courses in Islamic Philosophy, Logic, Theology, Jurisprudence and Juristic Methodology. He is currently the director of the Institute for studies of philosophy of religion in Baghdad. In 1997, he founded *Contemporary Islamic Questions* and the *Contemporary Islamic Questions* book series, among others. His books include, *Saving the Humanistic Tendency in Religion* (2012), *Contemporary Islam and Democracy* (2005), *An Introduction to the New Theological Question* (2005), *We and the West: the dialectic of conflict and coexistence* (2002), *Principles of Islamic Philosophy*, vols. I & II (2001).