

City of Knowledge: The Transmission of Shī'ī Learning in Qom, Iran

Introduction

The *Hawza 'Ilmīya* as the Expression of a Tradition

All theological tendencies within the fold of Islam emphasize the divine command to seek knowledge “from the cradle to the grave.” Over the centuries this sacred duty incumbent on all Muslims has taken various organizational forms across the Islamic world. Generally, studies of Islamic education have focused on the Sunni model of the madrasa in its rich variation, the subject of numerous educational, historical and anthropological accounts in medieval, colonial and contemporary contexts. Given that Sunni Muslims predominate in the global Islamic community, it is perhaps to be expected that the researcher will focus on the most widespread and influential form of advanced Islamic education, the madrasa, while giving somewhat less emphasis to the Qur'ānic primary school, the *maktab*. In contrast Shī'ī institutions of higher learning are largely absent from the academic literature.¹ This gap in the scholarship on Islamic education indicates a concern with understanding majority institutions for their normative character while inadvertently marginalizing those of the minority for their ostensibly sectarian standing. However, a considerable advantage of exploring a minority worldview rests not only in its own illumination but that of the majority perspective, and calls into question assumptions about what has been regarded as universal.

The Shī'ī tradition of learning gave rise to the unique institution known as the *hawza 'ilmīya*, the center of learning, a complex of scholars, students and schools, which manifests specificities of Shī'ī cosmology in educational philosophy, history and politics not in evidence in Sunni educational models. In spite of its exceptionality in the Muslim world, the distinctive intellectual character and sociopolitical influence of the *hawza 'ilmīya* compels a close examination of the institution, for its curriculum embodies important developments in Shī'ī intellectual history that are relevant to understanding the Shī'ī world today. Moreover, by investigating the insufficiently theorized *hawza 'ilmīya*, this study proposes an alternative methodology that helps to rethink the ways in which Islamic education has been conceived.

In the city of Qom, Iran, the principal focus of this study, the *hawza 'ilmīya* forms a constellation of madrasahs, universities, schools, study circles and research institutes under the loose administrative authority of a body of *'ulamā'*, combining formal and informal aspects of learning in private and public settings. The *hawza* is involved principally in legal production, in

¹ Shī'ī, used throughout this study, is the adjective corresponding to the noun Shia, the partisans of 'Alī b. Abi Ṭālib, who accept his spiritual and temporal authority as the first Imam, successor to the Prophet in preserving, advancing and implementing what they consider to be the original teachings of Islam. “Shiite,” the Anglicization of both words, is not used here, and neither is “Imāmī” so as not to confuse matters. Furthermore, while there are other groups which fall under the category Shia, particularly the Zaydīs and Isma'īlīs, this study concerns the Twelver Shī'ī branch (*ithna 'asharī*), constituting the largest segment, found in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon.

teaching Ja'farī jurisprudence, training scholars and transmitting texts, to advance the tradition of Islamic law, which governs the lives of massive numbers of observant Shī'ī Muslims. At the most advanced levels, the teaching institution trains students in the methodology of jurisprudential interpretation (*ijtihād*) to derive rulings from scriptural sources.

However, while legal production is a primary function of the *hawza*, many other academic endeavors in the revealed and rational sciences contribute to its position as arguably the foremost center of Islamic learning in the world today. The *hawza* merits this distinction for several reasons; because of the underlying educational philosophy of Shī'ī Islam, which views knowledge as expansive and evolving rather than discrete and static; for the high value placed on rational argumentation and demonstration; in its focus on jurisprudential principles and applications; and for the recent inclusion of contentious subjects – notably philosophy and theoretical mysticism. Above all, its curriculum and pedagogy, resting on a foundation of Arabic linguistics and informal logic, provides a classical training based on textual mastery which gives the *hawza* its distinctive character.

This study examines several interrelated themes, including Shī'ī views on the Islamic philosophy of education, the historical antecedents of the *hawza 'ilmīya*, its organization of learning with regard to curriculum, and change in Qom since the Islamic revolution. Given its centrality within Shī'ī education and law, and its remarkable influence in world affairs over the last quarter century, notably in Iran and to a lesser degree Iraq, the *hawza 'ilmīya* deserves a thorough elaboration. This discussion has a larger significance in broadening an understanding of Islamic education from a philosophical, historical and organizational perspective, while contributing to comparative education studies and Islamic studies.

While its limited number would make the *hawza* a seemingly obscure subject of research, its theoretical discussion provides rich insights that reach well beyond the institution's actual visibility. These insights are significant for several fields, including educational philosophy, literacy studies, comparative education, Shī'ī intellectual history and Islamic philosophy. Investigation of the *hawza* is relevant to literacy studies for illuminating its distinctive reading practices based in legal hermeneutics and its emphasis on word-by-word textual analysis and philological mastery. The study contributes to Islamic scholarship by offering an account of Shī'ī views on the Islamic philosophy of education, the character of the *hawza* as an institution, and debates on the development of the madrasah. For comparative education studies, it broadens the view of Islamic institutions with regard to higher learning, philosophy, social organization and state-society relations. In historical perspective, the *hawza* sheds light on the transmission of knowledge, a movement of ideas that collapses some of the misconceptions about Islamic education prevalent today, for example the indoctrination of fanaticism and intolerance, a preoccupation with the method of rote memory, and a perceived absence of logical, rationalist thought. With regard to philosophy, the *hawza* represents a rare example of the living tradition of Islamic philosophy in the Muslim world, in its study and teaching, with special consideration given to the concerns of ontology and epistemology. From the vantage point of educational philosophy and social organization, the *hawza 'ilmīya* presents a unique educational paradigm,

animated by broad philosophical concerns and encompassing a wide range of teaching and learning practices related to legal studies and theology in particular. While not a focus of this study, the *hawza* is also known to function as the seat of the most senior clerical authorities, the *marja'īya*, whose activities include issuing legal rulings and redistributing religious taxes, *khums*. Through this intertwined educational and legal role, the *hawza* continues an older tradition of scholasticism, while maintaining its jurisprudential relevance in engagement with contemporary legal issues facing Muslim societies around the world.

A Note on Terms

Before embarking on a discussion of Islamic education it is necessary to clarify the issue of nomenclature. 'Islamic education' is a general, contemporaneous term that is most often applied to primary and secondary schooling in the Muslim world. It has become synonymous with the much misunderstood madrasa while excluding important tendencies and features of different institutions. Conversely, the term Islamic education can be used too broadly. Given that the goal of Islamic teachings is to train humanity, perfect moral character and impart knowledge, one can consider the entire endeavor of religion to be essentially educational. Islamic education can include many kinds of religious practice – such as reading the Qur'ān, attending Friday prayers, performing the Hajj pilgrimage – at all levels and settings, private and public, individual and collective, formal and informal. For example, the sermon delivered at Friday prayers, the most widely attended form of regular instruction, can be considered educational in the sense that it involves direct explanation and exhortation, although the gathering precludes discussion on the part of those in attendance, making it qualitatively different from a class. Such a sweeping definition of Islamic education has merit, but it is ultimately impractical to include virtually all facets of religious life within the purview of the concept. 'Islamic education' is better suited to bounded types of formal education with common features such as a teacher and students, curriculum and classes - the *halaqa*, *maktab*, madrasah, *hawza*, Islamic university, weekend school, and so forth.

This narrower definition helps to elaborate what is distinctive about Islamic education, its variations and continuities, including those it shares with other educational philosophies and systems. Just as our understanding of education presently has a secular, liberal character colored by modern thought, Islamic educational trends also reflect historical and geographical specificities and are by no means uniform. Nonetheless, an overarching set of values, an approach to learning, teaching and scholarship, can be discerned from primary scriptural sources, influencing the multiplicity of educational traditions in the Sunni and Shia worlds. In this broader, unified sense Islamic education can be seen as a comparative term, in contradistinction to Buddhist education for example, engaged with a wider project of demystifying world traditions, and traversing fields of Islamic studies, comparative education and history.

Another significant point is that the terms 'learning,' 'teaching,' 'school' and 'knowledge' in current Western educational discourse have accrued specific theoretical meanings that do not necessarily mirror their Islamic equivalents. An objective of this study is

to examine the Islamic philosophy of learning without imposing contemporary definitions of education and projecting them back into history. To achieve this goal requires using language (in Arabic, Persian and English) that is considered the domain of 'religious,' 'moral' or 'values' education in the present scheme of Western educational disciplines. Explanations of divinity, prophethood, eschatology, the unseen, mystical experience and so forth will seem inappropriate in a field of social science in which such matters are beyond the pale of modern discourse as governed by the epistemes of materialism and empiricism. Yet the religious phenomena depicted here are accepted within Islamic studies and fields of research that not only reflect a collective worldview but the epistemic framework of institutions operating at mundane, technocratic levels of policy and administration. The two are not to be separated. Awareness of the worldly and otherworldly commingles in daily life as religion pervades social and political structures.

The root *ḥ-w-z* means obtain, achieve or receive, and *ḥawza*, the precinct. The verb form of *ḥawza*, *ḥawaza*, from the Arabic root *ḥ-w-z*, means to obtain, achieve, or receive. As a noun, *ḥawza* means "property," "possession," "container," "precinct," "district," and "wellspring," and in this context, *ḥawza 'ilmīya* means "the precinct of knowledge." Alternate spellings based on the Arabic include *ḥawza* and *ḥauza*, while from Farsi it is usually transliterated as *ḥowzeh* or *ḥowze*. I use the conventional Arabic transliteration into English, *ḥawza 'ilmīya*, and the common shorthand *ḥawza* for ease.

In lieu of a precise translation of *ḥawza 'ilmīya* this study interchanges the terms "theological establishment," "teaching institution," and "center of learning." Some writers borrow "college" or "university" as equivalents to *ḥawza*, but this is an inaccurate comparison and confuses matters because of the presence in the Muslim world of a separate university system modeled along secular Western lines. Likewise, "seminary," although frequently used in the literature, is vague because it typically refers to a single school and has become synonymous with Christian learning and monasticism. In Iraq, but not Iran, *ḥawza* refers not only to the teaching institution, but to the clerical leadership, the *marja'īya*, although the present discussion does not invoke this connotation.

Representations of the Hawza in Popular and Scholarly Literature

Like depictions of Islam in general, Islamic education suffers from common misperceptions which are not the considered results of observation, but rather political constructions that reflect a variety of interests on the part of the observer and the context of observation. The most prominent misconception can be seen in the ubiquitous representation of the madrasa as a "school of hate," which bars girls from attending and indoctrinates boys in scripturalist justifications for "holy war." This caricature serves the belabored point that Muslims blindly hate the West, an irrational and incurable hatred which therefore justifies force against those violently opposed to a Western, secular way of life. Once the generalization takes permanent shape in popular discourse, the evidence effortlessly serves to justify the point. Take the images of youth swaying in madrasa classrooms, memorizing verses of the Qur'ān. The

spectacle of rhythmic movement and recitation has come to signify indoctrination, a mind-numbing uniformity that cultivates fertile grounds for violence and terrorism. This impression arises from the constant rehearsal of media narratives on the subject of terrorism and Islamic schools, the two usually conflated. However, such totalizing interpretations obscure the subtleties of educational life in these Islamic schools, institutions that defy facile categorization. While it takes little effort to indict the Islamic world, the challenge of serious scholarship is to contextualize particular schools and identify their relationship to the tradition.

Critical of portrayals of the Middle East, Edward Said coined the term “positional superiority” to question the ways in which Western academic discourse stigmatizes Muslims and Arabs without questioning the political location of the critique. He interrogates the nature of the implicit comparison being made between the normative West and the essentialized East, which reinforces assumptions about each and mobilizes sentiment towards their inescapable state as respectively superior and inferior, and in opposition. In this connection, jihad, perennially translated as “holy war,” actually means striving, exertion and struggle, and extends to armed self-defense against foreign occupation. One can make the point that Western universities too are contested sites of imperial power and resistance; however, madrasas are not seen with reciprocal clarity and sensitivity to complexities. Due to their cultural position equated with enlightened reason, Western higher education inherently defies definition as universities of death or similar epithets, in spite of weapons research and military contracts for example. Comparative perspective challenges researchers to weigh the implications of their judgments and hold up a mirror to the society from which they observe.

The open hostility in public discourse, including academic literature, toward the Shī'ī clerical class, pejoratively called “mullahs,” is a response to the Islamic revolution in Iran. To the detriment of rigorous scholarship, this political bias has contributed to a misapprehension of the complex life of Shī'ī institutions. While the “mullahs” remain a target, the *hawza* is hardly known as an educational system, although several misconceptions about it have been repeated in the media and academia.

Again, Edward Said criticizes Middle East experts for projecting Western interests, fears and fantasies onto representations of Islam, and notes, by way of contrast, the importance and mastery of interpretive reading required of Shī'ī jurists to derive an authoritative Islamic ruling:

Whole institutions, whole traditions, whole schools of thought are built out of such things as a system of commentary, a linguistic theory, a hermeneutical performance. Not that we do not find the same things in other religious traditions; we do, but it needs to be remembered that the oral and verbal experiences in Islam developed with less competition, with more exclusiveness of domain, than elsewhere. No wonder, then, that the new Iranian constitution specified a *faqīh* as the nation's guide, a *faqīh* being, not a philosopher-king as the media seemed to believe, but literally a master of *fiqh*, of jurisprudential hermeneutics—in other words, a great reader.²

² Edward Said, *Covering Islam* (New York: Vintage, 1981) 62.

Said's point about entire institutions resting on a system of commentary echoes throughout this study. While "great reader" is an intentional simplification to counter the demonization of the clerics, Said correctly focuses on the broader context of the tradition and its immersion in textual analysis. Incidentally, the idea of the philosopher-king is not as remote as Said would lead us to believe, for the Platonic heritage remains central to the Islamic philosophical tradition, from which came the framers of the Islamic constitution – who after all opted to establish a republic rather than an emirate.

Some writers contrast the Shī'ī *hawza* with its ostensible counterpart, the Sunni madrasah, but this is an uneven comparison. The *hawza* does not directly correspond to the madrasah, it is comprised of distinct madrasahs, each with its own history, culture and spirit of inquiry. The *hawza* is used here in the collective sense to refer to not just to a particular school within its confines, but to the whole environment of learning, within which a range of formal, that is institutionalized, and informal activities fall. This inclusive meaning lends an entire city, or a district within it, recognition as a center of learning.

A sophisticated form of the madrasa did spread in part as a response to Shī'ī influence, when Sunni *madhahib* attempted to establish legal hegemony under the Seljuks. However, it is all too easy to view the Muslim world through the distorting lens of Sunni-Shia polemics to obscure commonalities and moments of historical cooperation as well as mutual influence. To define the madrasa as a Sunni form and the *hawza* as its Shī'ī counterpoint mistakes the fluid, informal character of both institutions, although as aforementioned there is no precise Sunni equivalent of the *hawza*.³

Contrary to popular accounts, the *hawza* cannot be reduced to being a relic of the medieval era, in the sense of a static institution that transmits an archaic curriculum. Rather, the *hawza*'s legal outlook requires engagement with contemporaneous issues. Indeed when this researcher visited religious scholars in Qom, the very first issue presented treated the subject of genetics and the legality of cloning. Furthermore, the *hawza* contains numerous scholarly rivalries and internal contestations over curricula, pedagogy and ideology, while contending with external change at several levels. As this study relates, when senior scholars within the institution proposed sweeping reforms to the *hawza*'s organization, they met with resistance from colleagues and administrators. Similarly, the *ulamā*' class has reacted with ambivalence to government imperatives to centralize control of the teaching institution. Meanwhile, the advent of digital technologies and international student populations also pose challenges to the *hawza*, which has made adjustments to inevitable change. The *hawza*'s complex relationship with the state underscores its power, and tensions between private and public, and quietism and political engagement.

Among other mischaracterizations, the *hawza* is not simply a "Shiite Vatican," in the singular, hegemonic sense this misnomer implies.⁴ While recognizing the concentration of

³ Al-Azhar in Cairo bears a resemblance to the *hawza*, and even has Shī'ī origins in the Fatimid dynasty, but its obeisance to contemporary governments compromises its legal influence and gives it a significantly different character.

⁴ Craig Smith, "Iraqi City Imagines Itself as Shiite World's Vatican City." *New York Times*, Sept 22, 2005.

political power and cultural capital emanating from the seat of religious authority, this appellation obscures the educational purpose of the madrasahs that form the *ḥawza 'ilmīya*. Furthermore, while Catholic power is concentrated in Rome, there are multiple Shī'ī centers of higher learning in the Muslim world, notably in Qom and Najaf. Thus, while the Vatican issues authoritative, albeit contested, decrees, multiple Shī'ī jurists produce rulings that taken together demonstrate the breadth of interpretation and the complex process of legal derivation from the sources. This diversity suggests implicitly that the legal tradition *in toto* does not exert a monopoly on knowledge but incorporates critical space for discussion, explanation and contestation, which should not obscure the fact that rulings from Najaf and Qom indeed exert significant authority over those communities adhering to Ja'farī jurisprudence.

Toward a Global Framework of Educational History

This study attempts to take a comprehensive, global view of the *ḥawza 'ilmīya* of Qom, thus situating its epistemic and structural organization in philosophical, historical and religious context to explain the relationship of intellectual and institutional developments relevant to the transmission of knowledge in the Shī'ī tradition. Because the teaching institution emerges from developments shaped in broad historical context, a comprehensive approach to the subject is best suited to apprehend the diverse phenomena associated with Shī'ī higher learning. This means taking the *longue duree* view, in Braudel's words, to excavate the roots of the institution over the centuries. To this end, the study untangles somewhat selectively several themes that are present in *ḥawza* history and literature, including the pursuit of knowledge, ethical dimensions of learning, the teacher-student relationship, informal context of education, and organizational dimensions of education. These phenomena, which cannot be neatly divided into spiritual practices and 'conventional' education, can be examined from a number of theoretical perspectives without essentializing or objectifying them. To avoid imposing interpretations based on inappropriate standards requires understanding the teaching institution holistically. Therefore, in addition to broad historicization, the successful treatment of the topic requires crossing disciplinary boundaries. Contemporary education studies have become highly specialized to the extent that there are separate disciplines with extensive literatures and theoretical instruments investigating the areas of philosophy, history, literacy, curriculum and instruction, cognition, organization, finance and so forth. To compartmentalize the research into one of the specialized fields of education, while rewarding for focus and detail, risks neglecting the institution as the culmination of a whole system of thought. For this reason, this study takes a multidisciplinary approach consistent with the aims of comparative education research and attempts to look at all of these aspects of education within a single institution in order to illuminate a tradition of learning.

In recent years scholars have begun to explore non-Western conceptions of education with the intention of re-mapping traditions submerged, distorted or marginalized during colonial rule of much of the world. The argument follows the logic that, like Western models of economic development, the social cultural and political interests of a country's population are

not served by retaining the inherited national educational systems imposed to school the country in a colonial image. Just as independence from colonial rule represented some level of change in governmental and institutional structures, a thorough decolonization and restoration of sovereignty requires rethinking epistemic structures. Recovering or rehabilitating traditional worldviews demonstrates that dominant systems are themselves particularistic although they exert disproportionate influence which leads to the universalizing gesture. The terminology of this project is most often called decolonizing knowledge but other terms address the concepts with various ways – including precolonial, postcolonial, decolonial, traditional, nonwestern, or indigenous education. The educational researcher Daniel Wagner uses the term ‘indigenous’ to mean native to the region, in contrast to modern schools which French colonial authorities established during colonial rule in Morocco. The term ‘indigenous’ is somewhat contentious, because it commonly refers to first, native or aboriginal peoples. Later studies extend this concept of indigenous knowledge systems to look at religions with their own epistemologies and curricular goals. Among these authors are Reagan, Seana McGovern and Linda Tuhuvai-Smith. More studies are collapsing the epistemological divide with regard to Islamic education as in Josef Progler’s work and Marina Aminy’s study of American Islamic schools as a form of bilingual education through student participation in dual systems. In anthropology, ethnographers have entered the field to understand knowledge in local contexts, reconceptualizing ideas of science as in the work of Roberto Gonzales whose *Zapotec Science* presents an indigenous Mexican epistemology. It must be said however that highlighting epistemological difference does not preclude recognizing commonalities across school systems, from classroom practices to the structure of education ministries, as educational systems adapt to international norms and reflect diffuse policy borrowing. The idea is not to reify difference and rebuild binary oppositions but to look at the complexities of education in truly global perspective, not just that of Westernized globalization.

Given this study’s textually-based methodology and concern with the transmission of knowledge, the entry point into the discussion of the *hawza* is philosophical, to elucidate the epistemological foundations of the institution, that is the conception and classification of knowledge that serves as its intellectual structure. A critical engagement with the question of methods in epistemology can be seen in the thinking of the contemporary ‘*ulamā*’. This engagement reflects the awareness of the clerical class with the broader context of Sunni and Western thinking. In his first lecture on *Sharḥ Tajrīd al-‘Itiqa’id* (Commentary on Creed), Sayyid Kamal al-Ḥaydarī, a leading thinker in the *hawza ‘ilmīya* in Qom, makes the following point about methodology, relevant to the present discussion for its succinct overview.

If the subject of a science is material, the method of discovering it must also be based on material causes. Whereas, if the subject of a science is immaterial, it is not possible to use material means to discover its realities. In the West, the common misconception is that God does not exist because He can neither be observed by the senses nor proved through empirical evidence. If it is said that God is an existent being above and beyond the material realm, one cannot use empiricism to discover Him. Therefore, the method of

establishing proofs, whether they are empirical, rational, or transmitted, depends on the nature of the subject itself.

Sayyid Kamal al-Ḥaydarī provides a metacritique of methodology, establishing limits and localizing premises based on the subject of research. He dispatches the guiding logic of the Western social and natural sciences by drawing attention to a fallacy within its system of reasoning. While using simple language the reasoning is lucid, itself the product of the methods he proposes. Rationalist argumentation leads to conclusions based on the syllogistic demonstration, an informal logic that is a central methodology in the teaching institution. Transmitted proofs refer to scriptural sources, the Qur'an and ḥadīth, which through another set of proofs function as authoritative sources. The researcher cannot be confined to a particular methodology based on a misunderstanding of the subject of study. The subject defines the methodology used to understand it and not the other way around. This incisive grasp of methodology in various disciplines reflects its own comparative approach to knowledge, and an awareness of competing claims, consistent with the field of theology (*'ilm al-kalām*).

The writings of Islamic scholars on the philosophy of education constitute a long-established body of scholarship relating to education but often subsumed in discussion of ontology, epistemology, metaphysics and ethics. An Islamic philosophy of education establishes a broad rubric of ideals and benchmarks for Islamic educational activity, a standard against which to measure current practices. While systems of education vary widely in content all strive toward ideals of the tradition in which they are situated. In practice, individual shortcomings, cultural influences, political imperatives, and economic pressures shape the worldly implementation of models of Islamic education. To take a critical view of current practices, with the intent of measuring the distance between ideals and realities, requires more than the ethnographer's focus on the observed practices of Muslim teachers and students, contributing to the mosaic of global Islamic culture in its brilliant colors as well as drab tones. It requires a familiarity with the sources, the ideals that constitute the instruments of measurement with which to evaluate success or failure. Thus the researcher can make accurate assessments of classroom practices. To return to our earlier example, the practice of preventing girls from schooling contradicts *ḥadīth* requiring both males and females to gain education, and can thus be better understood as a sociocultural phenomenon based on ethnic and tribal customs of a particular region.

The *ḥawza*'s classical roots and inseparability from intellectual history provide an outline of its gradual conceptualization, leading up to the present form. In particular, the institution's history intertwines with the development of the sciences of Islamic jurisprudence (*'ilm al-uṣūl* and *'ilm al-fiqh*). Intellectual history provides insight into the systematization of *ḥawza* methods and the organization of curricula as well as the rise of rationalism, reorganization of the legal framework, and differences over methodology. The ramifications of legal scholarship issuing from the *ḥawza*, in individual verdicts and general consensus, are evident in all spheres of Islamic life, from personal law to geopolitical relations. A major difference between the Sunni madrasa's curricula is its involvement with legal reproduction of the four codified *madhāhib*,

whereas the *hawza*'s major responsibility is both transmission and the ongoing development of Ja'farī jurisprudence.

Thus, the study looks at contemporary curriculum in the *hawza*, focusing on the philosophy of education, transmission of knowledge, methods of teaching and the organization of learning. It leaves aside the issue of the *hawza*'s political functions, and '*ulamā*'-led protest movements, except to the extent that they impinge on teaching and curriculum. Moreover, the categories often used to analyze contemporary education in Western settings, with regard to race, class and gender, are not utilized in the present study, again for lack of access to this particular kind of information, which does not feature, for better or for worse, as analytic frames in the *hawza* '*ilmīya*. It is hoped that further research involving ethnographic fieldwork could provide the kinds of quantitative and qualitative data absent here.

Given their foundational role and ongoing centrality to the *hawza* '*ilmīya*, this study focuses on the various contributions of the Shī'ī scholars ('*ulamā*') to religious education. The scholars of Islam serve as the source of this study in several ways. They are the heart of the institution in terms of being its intellectual foundation. They are the subjects of the study, in contrast to being the objects, in the sense of understanding the institution through their original writings and lectures. Rather than examine them anthropologically as "focal informants" who at best are viewed as representatives of a quaint tradition, they are seen here as scholars in their own right whose scholarship is not subordinated to the theoretical frames of Western scholarship.

An important source of educational material is found in their scholarly writings, biographies and other historical works for details of academic life in the *hawza*, including descriptions of teaching, educational settings, materials and methods, and student life. Of special significance are the writings of several recent luminaries including 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī, Sayyid Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr, Shahīd Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, Imam Khumaynī, Sayyid 'Alī Khāmanē'ī, and Ayatullah Jawādī Āmulī, whose prominence offers access to influential views on religious education, *hawza* history and ideal reforms. All of these scholars are products of the Qom environment, with the exception of Sayyid Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr, who nonetheless has been highly influential in the Iranian *hawza* chiefly for his reformulation of the study of jurisprudence. Another reason for this textual approach lies in the availability of publications for after the Islamic revolution publishers of religious studies in Qom and Tehran increased their production of books and periodicals related to Islam. In particular, the academic journals *al-Taḥqīq* and *Message of Thaḳalayn* offer a rich source of articles by many '*ulamā*' affiliated to the *hawza* '*ilmīya* in Qom.

Sources

Relying on primary and secondary textual evidence from Arabic, Persian and English sources, I have combed the sources for specific references to education – knowledge, thinking, teaching, learning, studying, reading and writing – in a wide array of writings in Shī'ī Islamic

scholarship and secondary studies of Shī'ī Islam. The chapters depend on the following sources. The first chapter outlines a philosophy of Islamic education by examining verses of the Qur'ān and the hermeneutics of distinguished commentators and philosophers, particularly 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī. The second chapter, on the question of literacy and the Prophet's method of teaching, relies on his biographical literature (*sīrah*) and collections of prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*), in particular al-Kulaynī's *Uṣūl al-Kāfī* and al-Majlīsī's *Biḥār al-Anwār*. The third chapter considers modes of transmission employed by the Twelve Imams as a type of instruction (for example, letters, speeches, discourses, debates and conversations) prior to the development of formal education, and uses several Shī'ī texts attributed to the Imams or concerning their lives, including *Nahj al-Balāghah*, *Ṣaḥīfah al-Sajjādīyah* and *Kitāb al-Irshād*. The fourth chapter leaves the era of sacred history and shifts to a conventional historical narrative of the lives of several Shī'ī scholars, synthesizing secondary studies of political, social and intellectual history to understand the roots of the *ḥawza*. The fifth chapter cites as primary materials three sequences of textbooks, comprising the present curriculum in the *ḥawza* 'ilmīya of Qom. The final chapter surveys *ḥawza* reform in the writings and lectures of several scholars, and gathers information on new technologies of transmitting knowledge.

Plan of the Book

Organizing the information in this book into a coherent narrative has posed several challenges. The question of where to begin has led me to present the information within a somewhat teleological framework that moves from scripture to sacred history to material history, or roughly from episteme to concept to structure. This is not to suggest that the development of the institution was inevitable, that the trajectory traced here represents the scientific culmination of a series of necessary occurrences, without which the institution would not have come into existence. The *ḥawza* has developed in historical context, molded by the decisive influence of individual personalities and larger socioeconomic and political forces. However, in my mind the best approach was not only to excavate the historical foundations of the institution but to understand its deeper philosophical impetus embedded in scriptural sources, later intellectual exposition and popular accounts. An example of this relationship between scriptural sources and educational developments can be seen strikingly in the decision of Ayatullah Baqfi to invite Ayatullah Ḥa'irī Yazdī to Qom in the 1920s to help fulfill a particular *ḥadīth*, which predicted the intellectual rebirth of the city, discussed in detail in Chapter Five. This act of interpretation, reading the literal text and the larger social context, while perhaps anomalous, had tremendous influence in initiating the revitalization of the teaching institution and by extension the shaping of the Islamic Republic.

Another difficulty of this study lay in bounding the topic. The teaching institution can be studied from the point of view of intellectual history, philosophy, scholarly biography, philosophy, politics, law, and social history as well as various subfields of education such as literacy and pedagogy. To do justice to each of these areas would require a much longer work devoted to a detailed evolution of the institution and its inner workings not possible here. Thus,

in spite of theoretical claims the work remains a broad overview but hopefully not superficial for its absences.

According then to this conceptual approach to the material, the discussion follows a plan of organization in the following six chapters – each of which could be expanded into a full-length study in its own right. The first half of the study focuses on the philosophy of education while the second half concentrates on the organization of education.

Chapter One presents a Shī'ī perspective on the Islamic philosophy of education, exploring the conception, value and classification of knowledge, as well as attitudes toward teaching and learning. Primary sources include the Qur'ān and its commentary (*tafsīr*), and sayings (*ḥadīth*) from the Prophets and Imams. Several themes emerge and are elaborated over the course of the study in different contexts: the unity of faith and reason as the basis for the intellectual method of rationalism, informal organization of learning based on the teacher-student relationship, ethical dimensions of education, seeking and transmitting knowledge, and the relationship of scholarly pursuits with political arrangements in the form of patronage and public office. This chapter highlights the thinking of several philosophers including Mulla Sadra, Allamah and Ayatullah Jawadi Amuli and Ayatullah Misbah Yazdi.

Chapter Two discusses the Prophet Muḥammad as the “living Qur'ān,” the personification of scripture, to discern a philosophy of instruction in the nascent Muslim community. Prophetic ethics is paramount to an understanding of Islamic education for the entire endeavor is based on establishing the nobility of moral behavior. The status of the Prophet as ‘unlettered’ is curious if not paradoxical in a tradition that stresses the importance of literacy. However, in spite of lacking the ability to read or write, the Prophet established a tradition of education from the early periods in Makkah and Madīnah as evidenced in his ‘teaching methods.’ The *sunnah* or example of the Prophet, as in Sunni Islam, represents an emulative system of training in and of itself in the Shī'ī school of thought. The difference between the two lies in the interpretation of the *sunnah*, and its sources in the ḥadīth.

Chapter Three continues the discussion of the archetypal teachers of Shī'ī Islam by looking at the pedagogy of the Twelve Imams of the Prophet's family during the turbulent period of the early caliphs, and repression under the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. The concept of *walaya*, authority or guardianship, invest the Imams with comprehensive leadership of the Muslim community, a status contested by political opponents whose efforts at coercion created a differentiation in the instructional methods of the Ahl al-Bayt. Three modalities of teaching represent the strategic efforts of the Imams to teach openly, in secret (*taqīya*), and under duress, interpreting worldly conditions based on time and place (*ijtihād*), a pattern which the successors of the Imams, the ‘*ulamā*’, continue to emulate.

Chapter Four discusses the ‘*ulamā*’, inheritors of the Prophets and Imams, as the living edifice of Islamic education in general and the *ḥawza* ‘*ilmīya*’ in particular. The chapter presents as an example of the journey in search of knowledge Shaykh al-Kulaynī in Rayy and Qom's early history as a Shī'ī center of *ḥadīth* collection under Shaykh al-Ṣadūq. Another pivotal sequence of scholars built on their work, Shaykh al-Mufīd, Sayyid al-Rāḍī, Sharīf al-Murtaḍā

and Shaykh al-Ṭūsī, pioneering rationalist methods in the Islamic sciences, which established the theoretical and institutional development of the later *hawza*. They are credited with founding what this study reasserts was a prototypical Shī'ī teaching institution in the *Dār al- 'Ilm* madrasa of eleventh century Baghdad, prior to the institutionalization of the madrasa under the Saljūq Wazīr Nizām al-Mulk. The sectarian violence that forced Shaykh al-Ṭūsī to flee Baghdad and settle in Najaf is generally taken to mark the origin of the *hawza* in Iraq to 449 AH/1056 CE.

Chapter Five moves to the 14th/20th century in presenting the modern background of the city of Qom. The teaching institution's revival under Ayatullah Ḥa'irī Yazdī beginning in 1921 follows the migration of scholars and students to Qom and the administrative and financial consolidation of the *hawza* establishment under his successor Ayatullah Burūjirdī. The intellectual revival of the *hawza* can be seen in the contributions of 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī and his student Ayatullah Murtaḍā Muṭahharī in philosophy and mysticism. From 1963, Imam Khumaynī recast the *hawza* as the epicenter of the opposition movement, culminating in the Islamic revolution of 1979. The chapter continues by examining changes in the organization of the *hawza 'ilmīya* in Qom following the Islamic revolution, focusing on administration, new madrasahs, teaching and curriculum. While the informal character of the institution remains, a more regimented structure has developed, with an increase in student attendance leading to more regulation, particularly of foreign students. However, degrees of formality vary by school and a multitude of intellectual activities continues outside madrasahs in the shrine of Ḥaḍrat Fāṭimah Ma'ṣūmah, mosques, *husaynīyas*, private homes, libraries and research centers. New kinds of institutions have developed, combining features of secular universities in the areas of examinations, curricula and methods, while incorporating aspects of *hawza* methodology and ideas.

Chapter Six surveys two dimensions of institutional change beginning with proposed reforms of the *hawza* in the thought of the aforementioned scholars, focusing on debates around organization, specifically curriculum, matriculation and funding. The second aspect of change deals with new ways that information technology provides for transmitting and preserving traditional curriculum, including the digitization of text and audio storage of class lectures. A closely related theme is efforts to translate Arabic and Persian texts into English, which make them widely available to a global audience. These developments raise new questions not only about materials and methods of learning, but copyright, globalization, and ownership of the *hawza*'s heritage as it gains greater prominence and influence.

In conclusion, the *hawza* manifests a distinct form of the Islamic tradition of learning by advancing legal scholarship, reviving Islamic philosophy, and elaborating theoretical mysticism, but is by no means a monolithic institution. While the *hawza* embraces the methodological trivium of Qur'ān, *burhān* and *irfān* – revelation, rationalism and mysticism – of which the last enjoys growing respect in its theoretical exposition, these methods are highly contested within Shī'ī scholarly circles. Yet no other Islamic institution houses this diversity of intellectual methods today. In the larger view, Shī'ī cosmology pervades the institution and represents a critical tradition, a minority view at odds with aspects of Western thought as well as that of

Sunni Islam. The discussion of the *ḥawza* helps to understand alternative models of knowledge, education and scholarship and presents a new chapter in the history of the Islamic transmission of learning.