

# An Introduction to Islamic Seminaries of Qum<sup>1</sup>

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Shi'ite seminaries or what is known as "Hawzāt (plural for Hawzah) 'Ilmiyyah" have historically played a significant role in developing Islamic as well as pure and empirical sciences. Its institute has been central in educating people and providing the Shi'a community with spiritual, communal, and political guidance and leadership. In what follows, the significance of knowledge in Islam and development of Islamic sciences will be examined and this will be followed by an exploration of how Shi'ite seminaries historically developed. The paper will end with a discussion on the current situation of the Islamic Seminaries of Qum and the way it operates.

## Significance of Knowledge in Islam

The era before Islam is known as the Age of Ignorance (*Jāhiliyah*). The number of the people who were able to read and write in that society were marginal and most people were interested in business, warfare, and traveling, rather than in learning. Islam, however, placed a considerable emphasis on education right from the beginning. Indeed the very first verse of the Qur'an which was revealed to the Holy Prophet was the command: "Read!" in Sura Al-'Alaq (The Clot; 96:1). Additionally, one of the chapters within the Qur'an is called "Al-Qalam" (the Pen) and commences with "Nun. By the pen and what they write (68:1)."

The Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) had the overwhelming and difficult task of transforming such a society where knowledge and education had very little value, into a society that placed knowledge and education in the highest ranks. As Shi'ite followers of the Prophet (PBUH) and his household, we have diligently tried to preserve these teachings in our daily lives. For example, the Prophet (PBUH) emphasized the limitless nature of learning, and external qualities such as age cannot be used to justify one's ignorance. The Prophet (PBUH) said:

"اطلبوا العلم من المهد إلى اللحد"<sup>2</sup>

"Seek knowledge from cradle to grave!"

Therefore, you cannot say: I'm too young or I'm too old to learn, on the contrary, there is always an opportunity to learn.

The Prophet (PBUH) also expressed that knowledge is not bound by distance:

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<sup>1</sup> This lecture was delivered by Dr Shomali on the 28<sup>th</sup> October 2012 in Qum at the University of Religions and Denomination to a group of 22 visitors from Germany.

<sup>2</sup> Nahj al-Fasahah P.218

"اطلبوا العلم ولو بالصين"<sup>3</sup>

"Seek knowledge even as far as China!"

China at that time was not as accessible as it is today, and despite that the Prophet ordered us to seek knowledge all the way in China if that is where knowledge resides.

With reference to gender, the Prophet (PBUH) said:

"طَلَبُ الْعِلْمِ فَرِيضَةٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ وَ مُسْلِمَةٍ"<sup>4</sup>

"Seeking knowledge is necessary for every believing male and believing female"

This established that learning and seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every faithful person, regardless of their gender and that the quest for knowledge is not just a mere recommendation but that it is mandatory.

As far as who should be a teacher, it is impermissible to say 'I only want to learn from my fellow Muslim brothers and sisters'. Rather, you have to be receptive to learning from any person. The Prophet instructed:

"فَاخُذِ الْحِكْمَةَ وَ لَوْ مِنْ أَهْلِ النِّفَاقِ"<sup>5</sup>

"Take wisdom though it be from a hypocrite!"

Such examples from Islamic hadiths demonstrate that even if you encounter a hypocrite who possesses pieces of wisdom, then you are required to learn these pieces of wisdom. The Prophet clarifies this by stating:

"الحكمة ضالة المؤمن، أينما وجدها أخذها"<sup>6</sup>

"Wisdom belongs to a believing person, no matter where you find it. Wherever he finds it he will take it."

Therefore, it is crucial to recognize that although wisdom may exist in an objectionable situation (such as a hypocrite), it is necessary to take the wisdom but separate it from the personality or environment. All wisdom belongs to God Almighty, and while a person may have it temporarily, its origin and essence is from God.

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<sup>3</sup> Al-Kāfi V.8 P.65, Nahj al-Fasahah P.217

<sup>4</sup> Al-Kāfi V.1 P.30 & 31 & 32, Nahj al-Fasahah P.217

<sup>5</sup> Nahj al-Balāqah p.481, Bihar al-Anwar V.2 P.99

<sup>6</sup> Az-Zari'ah ilā Hāfiz al-Shari'ah V.1 P.231

Thus, there are no restrictions regarding age, gender, distance, or from where or from whom knowledge should be obtained. One must always be on the lookout- prepared to learn.

It is interesting that although the Prophet (PBUH) was sent to establish a moral and just society that emphasized the performance of worship and prayer in particular, but when a comparison was made between worshipping with learning and solely worshipping, the Prophet gave preference to worshipping and learning. There is a well-known incident where the Prophet entered the mosque and found two groups of people: some were involved in worship and some were discussing scientific matters. The Prophet said: both are worthy of respect and honor, but I shall join the group discussing scientific matters since God has sent me as a teacher. The Qur'an establishes and demonstrates the Prophet's role as a teacher.

We have many hadiths where the Prophet says: doing something related to knowledge whether it is teaching or learning is better than solely worshiping. Of course such an implication should not be misunderstood as knowledge substituting the prescribed acts of worship. On the contrary, such hadiths illustrate a complementary component to the prescribed acts of worship which serves to complete and unify a believer's being. In other words, rather than concentrating solely on routine worship, God prefers that a believer engages in both worship and obtaining knowledge since knowledge combined with worship further advances our understanding of Reality.

Once the Prophet established a conscientious society that valued education, we see historically that there were times when a person was taken captive, and if he was able to teach 10 Muslims how to read and write, he would be set free and would be absolved of any prison sentence or slave-status.

### **Subjects of learning in Islam**

There is a great emphasis, in Islam, on learning, but an immediate challenge that comes to mind is: What should be the topics and subjects of learning? Islam answers this by stating that there are no restrictions when it comes to learning but that caution is needed in the application of knowledge. In addition, Islam does not have any banned sciences or any banned knowledge but there are preferred sciences in Islam. Such examples are found in our narrations and are referred to as “*‘Ilm-e Nāfi*” or “beneficial knowledge.” Therefore, priority is given to topics that are either beneficial by nature or that positively impact people's lives.

The Prophet has provided us with general guidelines in a well-known hadith. Once the Prophet saw a group of people gathering around one individual amazed by his knowledge. The Prophet asked: who is this man? They responded: “*‘Allāmah*”, he is very knowledgeable man, an expert on the genealogy of Arabs, so if you ask him about your ancestors, he gives you answer right away – e.g. who was my grand grandfather or who was the founder of this tribe, he knew everything about genealogy of Arabs. So, they were very impressed. The Prophet said: this is pleasant, but such topics do not offer any essential information, whether or not you are acquainted with this information does not

add value to your being. He went on to explain that topics of importance included those matters of fundamental belief, such as, who is the Creator? What acts are obligatory? And questions regarding morals and values.

These guidelines created clear grounds for development of three major canons of sciences in Islam. These three canons relate to the doctrines of theology, morality, and jurisprudence. This has helped to discern between essential and trivial information. Although religion is central to a believer's life, Islamic hadiths also identify and lay great emphasis on learning other disciplines as well. Examples include, learning medicine, architecture, urban planning, farming, and so on. Accordingly, our jurists have stressed the value and necessity of having sufficiently qualified individuals in every field of science (i.e. Engineers, mathematicians, doctors, etc), otherwise, an Islamic society is deemed incompetent and incomplete. If this situation were to occur, Islam places liability on each individual within the society to support the institutions and the individuals capable of filling these deficiencies. This concept, whereby, it is an obligatory collective responsibility to help fill a particular societal void is called "*Wājib Kifā'ī*." It should be noted that if a group of individuals dedicate themselves to reconcile these inadequacies (in, for example, education) that affect society and possibly mankind, all other personal are absolved of this responsibility.

Furthermore, knowledge-seeking and attainment are Islamic responsibilities and an act of worship if done for the sake of God. Consequently, an indispensable pre-requisite to acquiring beneficial knowledge is intention. If, for example, someone undertakes religious studies and theology to attain high religious ranks solely for the purpose of reverence from peers and society, then while worldly success may be attained, closeness to God is compromised and sacrificed. This is a devastating personal compromise and loss that can affect the public who view such a figure as a role-model. Islam has a low regard for such people and classifies a very knowledgeable person with corrupt intention as being inferior to someone who has negligible knowledge, despite Islam's constant effort to encourage and make mandatory learning and knowledge-seeking. Islamic hadiths state that on the Day of Judgment seventy sins of a lay person will be forgiven before one sin of a knowledgeable person is forgiven.

Historically, prior to secular education, seminaries were responsible for providing education in many disciplines other than theology, and that is why many scholars, even those present two generations ago, were also philosophers, mathematicians, astronomers, and so on. An example for such a historical school, although it is nowadays used for foreign students, is called "Hujjatiya," designed by "Allamah Tabatabaei." This institution used to teach various disciplines ranging from theology to the different sciences all at once.

### **Free education**

Islam promotes education to the masses and specifies that it should be available for everyone. In Islam, monopoly over knowledge does not exist and belonging to certain families recognized for their generations of, for example, scholars, does not earn them priority to scholarly education. Essentially, Islam encourages education for all, regardless

of any socio-economic status. With regards to the seminaries in Qom, this philosophy has been fostered by providing free education. This is to ensure that anyone can have access to education, and to ensure that students are able to study, the seminary provides a modest salary for living costs.

### **Islamic Seminaries of Qum**

Following the development of Islamic sciences throughout the Islamic world, certain places emerged as the main places for learning, even though learning was taking place in all the cities and villages. Medina was the first hub for learning because of the presence of many learned people specially the members of the household of the Prophet, the Imams and we know that in the time of the fifth and six Imam, Imam Baqir and Imam Sadiq (p); they used to teach thousands of students, so they had a big circle of learning and they used to regularly teach them.

The most prominent present-day seminary is the seminary of Qum. One of the distinctive features of the city of Qum is that right from the beginning of embracing Islam, the inhabitants of this city were Shi'a.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, in the late first and second century, it became a place where the hadiths of Imams (a) were narrated and taught. Looking back at Iran's history, we find that Iran was mainly inhabited by the Sunni Muslims up until the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.H. During the beginning of the 10th century, the *Safavids* came to power and the majority became Shi'a. Prior to this mass conversion, pockets of Shi'a communities could be found in e.g. northern Iran under the Caspian Sea, or in central Iran where the *Buwaihids* reigned.

So the center for learning the teachings of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (a) in this part of the world was Qum, even though there were times when Qum's prominence went into a decline. The attack of the Mongols, for example, caused a weakening in the Institution's progress, and although there were ups and downs, the education never stopped. The grand *Ayatollah Sheikh Abd al-Karim Hā'irī*, who was a teacher of *Ayatollah Khomeini*, revived Qum's seminary and therefore is entitled, "*Mu'assis*" (literally meaning founder), since it was through his initiatives, that the seminary was revived. He re-established the seminary and invited many great scholars from other towns to settle and teach in Qum. This attracted many students to the seminary and once again the seminary became a vibrant learning society. Later the grand *Ayatollah Burujerdi* also became influential figure since he was a very well-established authority who had great support from the masses. Using his knowledge and aptitude, he also triggered progress in the seminary and with the presence of people like *Allamah Tabatabaei*, *Ayatollah Khomeini*, *Ayatollah Golpayegani*, *Ayatollah Mar'ashi* and other authorities, the seminary flourished.

Although there have been large seminaries in *Mashhad*, *Tehran*, and *Isfahan*, they were not at the same level of the seminary of *Qum*. After the Islamic revolution, the "*Hawzah Ilmyiah*" or the "Islamic seminaries of *Qum*" developed in quantity and quality and the number of the students increased and each year enrolment continues to increase. There

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<sup>7</sup> These circumstances were special to certain cities like Qum, Kāshān, and Rey.

are roughly some seventy thousand students currently enrolled in the seminary. There are also more than ten thousand international students from more than a hundred countries who study in Qum. In addition, there are thousands of female students enrolled, making this a very special place. There are no other places in the Muslim world that have this concentration on learning. Throughout the streets and alleyways of Qum, you see a school, a research center, publishing house, a *Madrasah*, but, of course, the most important site is the shrine of a Lady Masuma (a), the daughter of the seventh Imam and sister of the eighth Imam. Not only is the entire city built around this scientific academic entity, that is, the Hawzah ‘Ilmiyya of Qum, but it is also very interesting that this seminary itself is built around the shrine of a very pious and knowledgeable lady, where inspiration and Blessings are drawn from the people of Qum.

### **Different stages of learning**

In *Shi’ite seminaries*, the system of learning is a lengthy process. The novice commences the program at the introductory level called “*Muqaddamāt*”, which places special focus on learning Arabic paying attention to morphology, syntax, and the rhetoric of the Arabic language. In addition, an introduction to basic logic, the basic tenants of belief, and “*Shari’ah*” are taught. The principal focus of the first few years is clearly designated to the Arabic language since the Qur’an and the original texts are all in Arabic. Consequently, it is vital that students obtain a proper understanding of the Arabic language and a good foundation is established to thoroughly examine these in later years.

The intermediate level, called “*Sath*,” is where jurisprudence and principles of jurisprudence are taught in depth. So first, the program starts with the examination of easier textbooks and then progresses to books that are more difficult and deeper. A portion of the curriculum is dedicated to studying the interpretation of Qur’an, philosophy, and theology, but the main focus is on jurisprudence and principles of jurisprudence. Both the elementary and intermediate levels take ten years to complete.

The advanced studies are called “*Dars-e Khārij*” and this stage specializes in jurisprudence and its principles. The lectures are normally based on a succinct text and the teacher and students analyze critically certain judgments and conclusions made by the author. It is possible that a single line in the textbook will be discussed for several weeks to not only analyze the many layers of meaning but to also develop students’ reasoning and critical thinking skills. So gradually you learn how to become an independent scholar. Although a time consuming process, going through the levels of hawza is very enjoyable because you learn how to become an *Ayatollah* – an independent scholar who can develop his original opinion, a noteworthy quality that requires a lot of dedication to achieve. There is no guarantee that every student who completes the Hawza program will reach this level. This quality is, distinctive, exceptional, and rare. Instead, by the end of this process, the majority of students will become experts in Qur’an interpretation, and hadith, and will be able to articulate intellectual arguments and develop their own understanding. This aspect is important because in *Shi’ite* Islam we are encouraged to go back to the Qur’an and *Sunna* with a fresh view, and hence, we are not bound to follow our predecessors. Shi’ite scholars are not obligated to follow verdicts that were made by previous grand *Ayatollahs*. They study that verdict, they study the origin and reason on

which that verdict was made, and finally they go back to the Qur'an and hadith and they make their own judgment. Students at the level of "*Dars-e Khārij*" have sometimes been studying for twenty years or thirty years, and have even become an *Ayatollah*, but they still want to go to increase their qualities.

In summary, on average the introductory level takes three years, the intermediate level takes seven years, and the advanced level varies from student to student.

Post-revolution, the seminary took on a more structured curriculum. The above three levels are broken down into different units and stages and all the subjects are examined regularly. There are four stages. The first stage (*sathe yek*) runs for five to six years of study and contains a curriculum aimed to introduce core Islamic values, Hadith studies, and Arabic/Farsi language studies. This is to establish a strong foundation as well as bring the students who come from varying educational backgrounds on par. The second stage (*sathe du*) runs for three years. Here students study more religion especially jurisprudence and principles of jurisprudence even more in depth. The third stage (*sathe se*) runs for a minimum of three years and involves two years of advanced study (*dares khārij*) of jurisprudence and its principles and ends with submission of a dissertation. The fourth stage (*sathe chahār*) runs for a minimum of four years and involves four more years of studying advanced jurisprudence and its principles and ends with submission of a thesis. All students are supposed to study certain subjects like jurisprudence and its principles, but there is a possibility to specialize in other subjects like kalām, philosophy, tafsir, history, etc. Overall, students with enough dedication will study anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five years to become a well-established scholar. Don't be surprised if you ask a student at the Hawza "how many years have you been studying?" and they respond "twenty, twenty-five, or even thirty years!" The reasoning behind such perseverance and commitment is in adherence with the hadith from the Prophet (PBUH): "Seek knowledge from cradle to grave!"

Students in the seminary have a determined attitude towards learning and is not one of rush to finish. Students do not say: "I am going to the seminary for four years and then I want to find a job". On the contrary, many of the students are so devoted to learning that only for reasons such as being sent somewhere to preach because of utmost necessity they interrupt their studying. Surprisingly, it is sometimes a challenge for Ayatollahs to convince students to leave the seminary, because everyone wants to remain and continue enjoying learning and teaching.

### **Teacher-student relations**

That being said, the traditional education system of the seminary differs from other academic institutions. Amongst its peculiarities is the relationship between teacher and student. In Islamic thought, emphasis has been laid upon the sanctity of the student-teacher relationship, the result of which is a very intimate relationship between a teacher and his students. When selecting a teacher, students look not only for teaching style and intelligence, but also for piety and good character because students see their teachers as holistic role models. Traditionally, students have always been able to select their teachers at their discretion, however, recent modifications to the seminary system have reduced

the students' flexibility in lower levels. Nonetheless, students continue to look for teachers that can act as a spiritual father and guide for the student and hence teachers command the highest level of respect by their students.

The reverence that student maintains for his teacher does not infringe on the learning process. In fact, teachers encourage students to question them and consider it essential to the learning process. Within the seminary, the barriers of censorship are virtually nonexistent; students can question the arguments for the existence of God or the authority of the Qur'an because the goal of the seminary is to deliver understanding. This contrasts greatly with much of Eastern culture in which many subjects are considered taboo.

### **Emphasis on intellectual studies**

Another feature of the seminary of Qum is the emphasis on the intellectual sciences, such as philosophy and theoretical mysticism. Although there have been different attitudes towards intellectual sciences, in general the *Shi'ite* school has always favoured the intellectual approach to religion. For that reason, a very active tradition of philosophy has flourished within Shi'ite seminaries, especially in Iran. By comparison, in some Muslim countries philosophy is considered "*bid'ah*" (heresy). As a result, not a single department of philosophy can be found in those countries.

Consequent to the rational approach espoused by the *Shi'ite* school, the seminary of Qum is very open to exploring other philosophies, religions, or schools of thought. Libraries within Qum are filled by the thousands with books from other religions or other Islamic denominations. Unfortunately, this attitude is not always reciprocated and in some parts of the Muslim world books written by *Shi'ites* are banned. In contrast, seminarians in Qum study other religions and even take the initiative in translating books by other religions, for example, the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church was translated in the Persian not by Iranian Christians, but by the seminarians in Qum. Furthermore, academics favoring other philosophies are often invited to lecture and seminarians are encouraged to attend. The open attitude towards others is something that is an Islamic attitude that the seminary of Qum strives hard to maintain.

### **Emphasis on relation with the public**

The seminary of Qum also recognizes the importance of 'grassroots' relations with people. The seminary tries to connect teachers and students to society at large as opposed to remaining in isolation. As a result, it is common practise for students to go to different villages and towns to stay and preach during the holidays. In this way, the seminarians can come to know the needs of society and focus on addressing those needs.

### **Administrative structure & finance**

The last point to address is in regard to the administration of Qum's seminary. Historically, when the seminary was comparatively small, administration was a simple matter and hence the *Grand Ayatollahs* or "*Marāji*", meaning religious authorities, were in charge of the administration. In recent decades the seminary has rapidly expanded, and a new system has been developed. The current system is run by "the high council of the



Islamic Seminaries” whose members are agreed upon by a group of *Grand Ayatollahs*.<sup>8</sup> The high council is in charge of all of the general matters of the seminary, but they do not manage the day to day affairs. Instead, the high council has a system of directors. The head director of all seminaries is *Ayatollah Husseini Bushehri* and under him there are directors for different provinces. The director in charge of the seminar in Qum is *Hujjatul Islam wa-l Muslimin Farrokh Fal*. Under the directors are deputies in charge of various departments, for example, the deputy of education, the deputy of finance and administration, the deputy of research and so forth. Underneath these deputies are different schools, research centres, and institutes for specialization. However, there are also independent institutes that work along the same lines, but are not officially affiliated with the seminary of Qum. These institutes finance and manage themselves independently, however, any certification that they wish to give must be coordinated with seminary in order to insure that they meet the official standards of education.

In regards to the budget, seminaries have always been independent from governments and therefore they finance themselves. The main source of finance for the seminary comes from donations and religious taxes which are given to *Ayatollahs* who sponsor the seminary. Independent institutes get their finances from independent investors. That being said, the Iranian government occasionally gives grants in some years to help the seminary support itself; however, it does not constitute the main budget of the seminary and some years they do not receive any government grants. Hence the seminary is not dependent on the Iranian government in terms of finances.

## Conclusion

Islam places great emphasis on education and the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) had the overwhelming and difficult task of transforming a largely uneducated and illiterate society into a society that placed knowledge and education in the highest ranks. According to the teachings of the Prophet (PBUH), there is no limit for learning. Neither age, distance and gender of the learner, nor the beliefs and characteristics of the teacher can limit the value of learning or should be allowed to become a barrier. In Islam, there is no banned science, but there are preferred sciences. In hadiths, such examples are referred to as “*Ilm-e Nāfi*” or “beneficial knowledge.” Therefore, priority is given to topics that are either beneficial by nature or that positively impact people’s lives. There are three sciences that every person should be familiar with: theology, morality, and jurisprudence, but Islamic hadiths also identify and lay great emphasis on learning other disciplines as well. Islam promotes education to the masses and specifies that it should be available for everyone. Following the development of Islamic sciences throughout the Islamic world, certain places emerged as the main places for learning.

The most prominent present-day seminary is the seminary of Qum. There are some seventy thousand students currently who study in the seminary. There are also more than ten thousand international students from more than a hundred countries who study in Qum. In addition, there are thousands of females students enrolled. There are different stages in studying Islam in the seminary. There are four stages. Overall, students with

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<sup>8</sup> Shurāy-e Ālī

enough dedication will study anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five years to become a well-established scholar. Students in the seminary have a determined attitude towards learning and very intimate and at the same time respectful relation with their teachers.

Another feature of the seminary of Qum is the emphasis on the intellectual sciences, such as philosophy and theoretical mysticism. The seminary of Qum also recognizes the importance of 'grassroots' relations with people. The current system of the seminary is run by "the high council of the Islamic Seminaries" whose members are agreed upon by a group of *Grand Ayatollahs*. However, there are also independent institutes that work along the same lines, but are not officially affiliated with the seminary of Qum. These institutes finance and manage themselves independently, however, any certification that they wish to give must be coordinated with seminary in order to insure that they meet the official standards of education. In regards to the budget, seminaries have always been independent from governments and therefore they finance themselves. The main source of finance for the seminary comes from donations and religious taxes which are given to *Ayatollahs* who sponsor the seminary.