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Pedagogies of Uncertainty. Navigating Doubts and Disputes in a Lebanese Shi'i Seminary (*hawza*)[1]

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Abstract: This article pays ethnographic attention to the different pedagogies developed and mobilized by seminary (*hawza*) teachers to enable future generations of Shi'i scholars to disclose the shari'a. These pedagogies lead seminarians away from the search for certitudes, truths, or even consensuses that drives much of modern intellectual production. Instead, they stress the frailty and contingency of human knowledge. To support this argument, I examine the role that doubt plays in these pedagogies—the debates it triggers, the disagreements it authorizes, and the scholarly pursuits it makes possible. I emphasize the work of doubt also to show that the ability to perform *ijtihad* hinges not only on expert knowledge and reasoning operations learned in classical treatises. The intellectual aptitudes and agility required to confront the questions of our times through *ijtihad* are also made possible by certain pedagogical techniques and strategies that are best studied ethnographically.
Keywords: Doubt, Epistemology, Islam, Pedagogy, Hawza seminaries, Lebanon

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit den verschiedenen pädagogischen Ansätzen, die von den Dozierenden einer *hawza* entwickelt und eingesetzt werden, um künftige Generationen von schiitischen Gelehrten in die Lage zu versetzen, die Scharia zu vermitteln. Diese Pädagogik führt die Seminaristen weg von der Suche nach Gewissheiten, Wahrheiten oder gar Konsensen, die einen Großteil der modernen intellektuellen Überlegungen bestimmen. Stattdessen betonen sie die Zerbrechlichkeit und Kontingenz menschlichen Wissens. Um dieses Argument zu untermauern, untersuche ich die Rolle, die der Zweifel in diesen Pädagogiken spielt – die Debatten, die er auslöst, die Meinungsverschiedenheiten, die er zulässt, und die wissenschaftlichen Aktivitäten, die er ermöglicht. Ich betone die Arbeit des Zweifels auch, um zu zeigen, dass die Urteilsfähigkeit (*ijtihad)* nicht nur von Expertenwissen und Argumentationsoperationen abhängt, die in klassischen Abhandlungen gelernt wurden. Die intellektuellen Fähigkeiten und die Beweglichkeit, die erforderlich sind, um sich den Fragen unserer Zeit durch i*jtihad* zu stellen, werden auch durch bestimmte pädagogische Techniken und Strategien ermöglicht, die am besten ethnographisch untersucht werden.
Schlagwörter: Zweifel, Erkenntnistheorie, Islam, Pädagogik, Hawza-Seminare, Libanon

At the heart of Beirut's southern suburb, in a maze of narrow streets, sits a modest pink building. Cohorts of industrious young men converge toward the building on weekdays, around 6:45 a.m., and often only half-awake. The building houses a *ḥawza*, a traditional Twelver Shi'i seminary.[2] Those enrolled in its classes study logic, jurisprudence, and hermeneutics (among other things). Their ages range between twenty- and thirty-five years-old. The schooling they receive entitles them to serve as judges (*qāḍī*) in

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[2] Twelver Shi'ism refers to the largest and most influential branch with Shi'i Islam. Other branches include the Isma'ilis and the Zaydis (on the different sects of Shi'ism, see Momen 1985).

religion-based Lebanese family courts. But the vast majority of them will never enter the magistracy. Most will become Islamic jurists (*faqīh*), generalist scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*), or learned Shi'i clerics (*shaykh*). In that capacity, they will help their fellow Muslims confront the challenges and questions of their time. Should we harness the potential of artificial intelligence? Are Bitcoins a licit form of value? Should we trust COVID vaccines?

In *ḥawza* seminaries, pious Muslims learn to derive answers to these questions from the Islamic scriptures, using a specific set of reasoning procedures. Beyond pressing topics such as A.I. and vaccines, this practice of inquiry—called *ijtihād* —has enabled Shi'i scholars to uncover the divinely ordained path called the shari'a under different social and political conditions for centuries. The 19th-century Persian Tobacco Protests and the more recent decision of the Iranian state to recognize sex-reassignment surgeries, for instance, were informed by the *ijtihād* of Shi'i scholars (Keddie, 1966; Najmabadi, 2014). Yet most of these human attempts to discover sharī'a norms begin and end in uncertainty (Calder, 1989; Gleave, 2000; Hallaq, 2009). While the shari'a remains eternally true, Shi'i scholars believe that this truth can only be approached through "disciplined elucidations," which always stay contingent and speculative (Fischer, 1980, p. 89). Scholarly efforts to reveal the shari'a therefore remain approximate, subject to hesitations and ambiguities. *Ijtihād*, the name given to this structure of efforts, is in this sense an exercise in hesitation: an elaborated "methodology of doubt" (Calder, 1989, p. 70).

This article discusses the pedagogies mobilized by *ḥawza* professors to prepare future generations of scholars to uncover the sharī'a. Its focus is less on *ijtihād* than on the pedagogical practices that make it possible. I show that these pedagogies lead Shi'i seminarians away from the quest for certitudes, truths, or even consensuses that drives much of modern intellectual production. Instead, the pedagogies repeatedly and persistently insist on the tentative quality of human efforts at discovering the will of God. The following pages illuminate these pedagogies of uncertainty by paying attention to the kind of doubt informing them, and the role it plays in class: the debates it triggers, the disagreements it authorizes, and the scholarly pursuits it enables. I also emphasize the role of doubt to show that the ability to perform *ijtihād* does not hinge solely on expert knowledge and advanced reasoning operations learned in classical treatises, as the literature on the topic tends to suggest (Hallaq, 1997; Richard, 1995). I argue that the intellectual skills and moral aptitudes required to confront the questions of the day through *ijtihād* also arise from certain pedagogical techniques and strategies that are best studied ethnographically.[3]

The training discussed below typically comprises three stages. During the first one, called *al-Muqaddimāt* (trans.: preliminaries), seminarians focus on three disciplines which, together, formed the trivium of late antiquity: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. *Al-Suṭūḥ* (trans.: surfaces), the middle stage, provides them with the skills necessary to explore the gaps and ambiguities that plague the human knowledge of the shar'īa. The seminarians who reach the third and last stage, *Baḥth al-Khārij* (trans.: externals), embark on an independent inquiry, using the skills and tools acquired during coursework. It is common to describe *ḥawza* curriculums by sketching out the key features of these three stages and listing the treatises assigned in each of them (Abisaab, 2006; Calmard, 1996; Litvak, 1998; Mervin, 1995; Mottahedeh, 1995; 2016; Nasrollah, 2008; Sakurai, 2011; Sindawi, 2007; Zubaida, 2003).

Using this approach would shed light on the curriculum of the seminary where I conduct the bulk of my ethnography, *al-Maʿhad al-sharʿī al-islāmī*, which follows this tripartite division. But describing *ḥawza* training as a succession of stages pulls us away from the crucial role that doubt plays in the seminarians'

[3] I conducted fieldwork in Lebanese Shi'i seminaries during the years 2012 and 2013, most intensively at *al-Maʿhad al-sharʿī al-islāmī*. I also visited the seminary since then. I attended the daily classes, realized interviews with teachers and seminarians, completed the readings and assignments, but not the exams.

scholarly journey. Learning to perform *ijtihād*, as Norman Calder stresses, requires "a general acknowledgement of doubt, if not a complete abandonment of certainty" (Calder, 1989, p. 72). To follow this process as closely as possible, I substitute the three-stage approach with an analysis of three overlapping tasks by which seminarians learn to uncover the shar'īa: (1) linking the sciences together, (2) reckoning with doubt, and (3) augmenting the tradition. My ethnographic account of the pedagogical strategies by which seminarians learn to navigate this epistemological terrain does not challenge the existing literature on the *ḥawza* curriculum. It does, however, illuminate specific pedagogical practices by which this curriculum is approached, delivered, and engaged. It also provides us with more clarity on the kind of doubt that informs, shapes and drives Shi'i scholarship. In order to situate these learning and teaching efforts, I begin with a brief historical sketch of traditional *ḥawza* training, emphasizing the oft-forgotten role that the stretch of land comprising modern-day Lebanon has played in it.

1. Territories of Learning

Shi'i Muslims call their clerical seminaries *ḥawza 'ilmiyya*, which means "territories of learning."[4] These *ḥawza* seminaries appeared on the Eastern shore of the Mediterranean five hundred years before the colonial founding of the Lebanese Republic. Historians have pointed out that Shi'i learning institutions emerged in 11th-century Mesopotamia and helped spark a revolution in Iran nine hundred years later (Fischer, 1980; Mottahedeh, 1982). Yet seldom do studies mention that somewhere between these two moments—in the 15th and 16th centuries, to be precise—the foremost hub of Shi'i thinking stretched like an archipelago across the high plateaus of what is now Southern Lebanon. Students came from Mesopotamia and Persia to study with the luminaries settled in this area called Jabal ʿĀmil, known today for its resistance to the Israeli occupation (Abisaab, 1999; Khayyat, 2023). By the mid-sixteenth century, when Shi'ism's best minds started migrating to Iran, this region of the Ottoman Empire had already attracted over 400 seminarians and produced 158 scholars (Momen, 1985).

Ḥawza instruction returned to the Levant region some four hundred years later, in a profoundly transformed political context. In the second half of the twentieth century, Iraq-trained clerics established new learning centers in Lebanon's southern heights as well as in Beirut, the country's capital (Mervin, 2003). By the 1950s, however, the Shari'a of the Eastern Mediterranean had begun to understand themselves as both a state-recognized sect and a marginalized segment of the young Lebanese Republic (Weiss, 2010; Mervin, 2000). The first *ḥawza* seminaries that reappeared contributed to this new identity (Sankari, 2005). But they also helped fuel the popular mobilization by which the Lebanese Shi'a forced themselves out of the margins and, from the 1960 onward, arose as a force to reckon with (Deeb, 2006; Shaery-Eisenlohr, 2008). Influential political figures were trained in these seminaries, which became intellectual laboratories for what is often called the Shi'i awakening in Lebanon (Abisaab & Abisaab, 2014; Clarke, 2016; Kassim, 2016; 2018; Landry, 2016; Mervin, 1995).

By the end of the 1990s, the country had sixteen seminaries, hosting more than 1300 seminarians and scholars altogether (Abisaab, 2006). Beirut's southern suburb alone is now home to ten seminaries and two *ḥawza* branches for women (on this, see Mervin, 2003; Künkler & Fazaeli, 2012; Sakurai, 2011). In what follows, I pay special attention to the oldest seminary, *al-Maʿhad al-sharʿī al-islāmī* (henceforth *al-Ma'had*); the observations and claims I make about *ḥawza* pedagogy below are grounded in ethnographic work conducted there, but many may also apply to other seminaries as well—in Iran, Iraq or elsewhere in Lebanon. Established on the eastern outskirts of Beirut in 1967 by the late Muhammed Hussein Fadlallah (1935–2010 AD), *al-Ma'had* was stormed by the civil war's Phalange militia in 1976

[4] The word *ḥawza* functions slightly differently in Lebanon than it does in Iran and Iraq. In Lebanon, the word is used to describe a seminary, like *al-Maʿhad*. In Iran and Iraq, the word most often describes a group of seminaries (Abisaab, 2006, p. 231).

and soon relocated to Beirut's southern suburb (Sankari, 2005). There, it has served as the intellectual heart of an extensive network of social services (schools, orphanages, libraries, hospitals) developed by its founder. Today, this fertile territory of learning sits in a pink building with a garden, where I enjoyed the shade of walnut trees while typing up my fieldnotes. The seminary has remained independent from the Iranian *ḥawza* network that was established in Lebanon and elsewhere (Abisaab, 2006). It has also maintained a careful distance from the Lebanese state and does not receive governmental funding. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education refuses to recognize the credentials it issues, in stark contrast to the government's recognition of Sunni colleges' diplomas.

Like these Sunni colleges, *ḥawza* seminaries provide their graduates with extensive training in the shari'a tradition (Berkey, 1992; Litvak, 1998; Makdisi, 1981). This time-honored curriculum aims to equip future clerics with the erudition, sensibility, and the moral aptitude necessary to orient the "conduct of the individual and the community according to God's commands" (Tibawi, 1976, p. 187). Shi'i scholars, however, pursue this goal in a distinct manner. Unlike practitioners of other denominations, the Shi'a follow the guidance of *living* Islamic authorities—at least in theory. While many Sunnis pray, marry, and cook in accordance with the scholarship of 8th and 9th century jurists, committed Shi'is regard sharī'a norms as binding only during the lifetime of whoever extrapolated them from the Islamic scriptures (Amanat, 1988; Walbridge, 2014). This principle implies that every generation of scholars leaves a pastoral void in its wake. *Ḥawza* seminaries fill this void by training new cohorts of clerics in the task of issuing shar'īa-based precepts that will govern the lives of their contemporaries. For this reason, Shi'i higher education places a strong emphasis on the set of methods whereby one derives rules and norms through a hermeneutic of the scriptures, namely *ijtihād*.

2. Linking the Sciences Together

Throughout their first years of study, *ḥawza* seminarians strive to become conversant in the concepts, principles, and methods that inform the Islamic sciences. The introductory course of *fiqh* provides a useful vantage point to observe the seminarians' first steps. Often translated as Islamic jurisprudence, *fiqh* is the scholarly result of the Muslim jurists' efforts (*ijtihād*) to discover the shar'īa. *Fiqh* lessons follow a consistent routine: on weekdays, between 7 and 8 a.m., incoming seminarians decipher and memorize the jurisprudential rulings (*aḥkām*) that the founder of *al-Ma'had*, M. H. Fadlallah, derived from the sacred texts. These norms cover nearly all facets of human activity, from praying and paying religious taxes to mundane endeavors such as selling goods, eating, fishing, and hunting.

Facing about twenty seminarians sitting behind twin wooden desks, the teachers spell out a daily section of the 3154 rulings listed in Fadlallah's 2009 jurisprudence treatise (abridged in the 2011 version of the handbook). Students listen carefully, ask questions by raising their hand, and scribble notes in the margins of their copy of the treatise. Of course, Shi'i seminarians are not alone in the habit of filling in the margins of their books and manuals, but in doing so, they reproduce a learning practice that has a long and rich history in Islam and Shi'ism in particular. A number of treatises used in advanced classes consists of a main text (the *matn*) supplemented by the annotations and counter-arguments of another scholar in the margins. The questions posed by novice students rarely challenge the norms under consideration; most frequently, they aim at clarifying the scope of a given ruling or the meaning of a term. The teaching clerics address these questions with definitions, illustration, and occasionally anecdotes. Clerics neither promote nor defend Fadlallah's jurisprudence; rather, they work to ensure that seminarians properly grasp its implications and applications. "Our goal," a teacher told me, "is to have the students read one treatise of jurisprudence in its entirety. We want the students to understand the terminology, but also the structure and the form of these treatises. Once they have learned to read one treatise, they can read any of them."

In fact, these introductory lessons serve a double purpose. On the one hand, they aim to make seminarians familiar with the lexicon and structure of Shi'i treatise of *fiqh*. In class, students acquaint themselves with the products of *ijtihād*: precepts meant to help the faithful obey the divine will in the midst of contemporary challenges. On the other hand, clerics seek to enable the seminarians to address the queries of fellow Muslims. As Mohammed, an advanced student from South Lebanon, explained to me: "A treatise of *fiqh* offers responses to a series of practical questions. Studying allows us to answer questions coming from the faithful. Students are therefore able to help people practice a better Islam." Mohammed is implying here that *ḥawza* seminarians are not only expected to develop knowledge and intellectual skills; professors, scholars and laypeople also expect them to intervene in the milieu and orient the conduct of those around them—a set of ethical commitments that I have theorized elsewhere as "community fashioning" (Landry, 2023).

Despite the importance of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) in the *ḥawza* curriculum, novice seminarians also explore other fields of knowledge. Twice a week, they learn the rudiments of Quran interpretation (*tafsīr*), gradually becoming familiar with its technical vocabulary and some of the questions it raises. Islam's holy book has never been considered a self-explanatory text, but as the primary source of the sharʿīa, its interpretation is of prime importance to future jurists. In the classrooms of *al-Maʿhad*, seminarians first discover the subtleties of the Quranic revelation by studying the interpretation that M. H. Fadlallah offers in his work of *tafsīr* (Fadlallah, 1979). Teachers open their lessons by writing a number of verses on the whiteboard riveted to the classroom wall; then, after having ritually invoked the blessing of the Prophet, they spend the rest of the class time explaining the meaning of each clause of the verses, as Fadlallah extrapolated it. Here again, seminarians take copious notes and ask for clarification. I never saw a seminarian dispute the meaning of the verses under examination.

The study of *manṭiq* (trans.: logic) is another key component of the first learning sequence. In class, logic is described as "a general methodology aimed to ensure healthy reasoning and prevent the mind from falling into error." In conversation with me, teachers emphasize that this methodology helps *ḥawza* seminarians systematize their thinking and articulate their ideas with rigor and clarity. "It is crucial that principles of logic are passed down across generations, because these principles represent the foundations of all the Islamic sciences, and more specifically the legal sciences; it is in light of the science of logic that all the others were established," a cleric told me.

Historians and philosophers have rightfully noted that the rules of logic taught in Shi'i seminaries are Aristotelian in origin and structured around the figure of the syllogism (Hallaq, 1997; Mottahedeh, 1995). Syllogistic reasoning is the backbone of the analytical principles that enable jurists to derive shari'a rules from the scriptures. Although seminarians only learn these analytical principles in advanced classes, they lay the groundwork by studying syllogistic logic during their elementary years. Throughout the first year, seminarians spend most of class time developing a toolbox of concepts necessary to perform syllogistic reasoning: deduction, induction, categorization, and analogy. Teachers define these terms, and illustrate the most abstract elements by drawing schemas on the whiteboard; students demonstrate their understanding of the material through monthly quizzes. As they progress in the curriculum, seminarians will learn to use these concepts to solve more complex equations, going to the front of the classroom to approve or correct the syllogistic operations that teachers sketch on the board. "No one," a teacher said to me, "can undertake to uncover the rules of the shari'a [*i. e.*, produce *fiqh*] without analytical principles [*uṣūl al-fiqh*; see below], and the analytical principles entirely rest on these operations of logic. You see, the Islamic sciences form a linkage—each science depends on another one."

3. Reckoning With Doubt

One morning, a professor of logic opened his class with a bleak piece of poetry: "*That with intellect suffers in bliss with his mind. And the ignorant in misery lives blissfully*." He pointed out that these words, by the Arabic poet al-Mutanabbi (915–965), epitomize the predicament in which seminarians should soon find themselves. "Students come to me and complain that as they advance on the path of knowledge they begin to doubt everything," he said. "I want to warn you that this sense of doubt is likely to intensify, but it is not a bad thing." Before resuming his lesson, he added that while doubt might be difficult to bear, *ijtihād* is impossible without it.

The Sheikh's remark echoes a common observation made by scholars of Shi'ism that performing *ijtihād* presupposes an acknowledgement that the shari'a is shrouded in doubt. Historically, Shi'i Muslims have developed different approaches to what Gleave (2000) calls the "inevitable doubt" that undermines most human inferences of the sharī'a. In the mid-17th century, numerous Shi'i thinkers come to argue that the potent layer of doubt surrounding the will of God cannot, and should not, be confronted through inquiry (*i. e,. ijtihād*). Many of them thought that Muslims can actually overcome the perils of doubt by acting with utmost (and perhaps excessive) caution, especially when stepping onto a terrain where the shari'a is unclear (Gleave, 2000; 2007b; Newman, 1992; Cole, 1985). However, this approach, known as "Akhbarism," quickly declined in the late-17th century, making room for another conceptualization of doubt that continues to prevail among most Twelver Shi'i to this day (including the scholars of *al-Ma'had*). Instead of trying to overcome doubt, this "Uṣūlī " approach embraces the intellectual and moral challenge emerging from this epistemological condition in which true knowledge is quasi-impossible. And in order to reach not the truth, but the most probable and credible inferences of the shar'īa, Shi'i scholars have developed an impressive apparatus of rules and principles, called *uṣūl al-fiqh* —on which we will come back shortly.

For now, we can already appreciate how the Usuli approach to doubt and disagreement inform the teaching of *fiqh*. Once they reach the second year, seminarians set aside Fadlallah's treatise of jurisprudence. Instead, they cut their teeth on a classic work of Shi'i thought, *Sharā'i' al-Islām,* written by the prominent jurist Muhaqqiq al-Hilli (1180–1254 AD). While doing so, they never miss a chance to point out where, how, and to what extent al-Hilli's work conflicts with that of Fadlallah. Throughout the second, third, and fourth years of study, seminarians dwell at length on these points of contention. Teachers not only list the different positions, they also spend considerable time discussing the rifts, breaks and gaps that characterize the Shi'i disciplines of inquiry, explaining how different reading strategies lead to disagreements among jurists. As a result, the students' focus slowly shifts from the jurisprudential norms themselves to the different and sometimes contradictory pieces of evidence that support these norms.

Since al-Hilli's treatise does not detail these pieces of evidence, however, seminarians rely on the teachers' explanations, which they carefully transcribe in the margins of their copies of the treatise. In so doing, students get acquainted with the sources from which shari'a jurisprudence is derived: the Quran and the *ḥadīth*. While seminarians learn to interpret the *ḥadīth* later in their trajectory, it is here that most of them come to appreciate that the disagreements between scholars are not based on preferences: instead, they result from different treatments of different scriptural sources. In other words, they learn that Shi'i scholars cope with the uncertainty surrounding the shari'a by marshaling different pieces of evidence and using different modes of reasoning—which inevitably leads to different results.

Tall, quiet and slightly intimidating, Sheikh Amin teaches *fiqh* to advanced students at *al-Ma'had*. He explains to me that exploring the spaces of non-resolution is not the only goal of the class. It is also designed, he says, to help the students deal with the plurality of understandings that characterizes Shi'i

thinking. Knowing the precepts that M.H. Fadlallah derived from the scriptures is important, but other sound approaches exist, and seminarians must know them in order to help the faithful .

> [5]Seminarians must understand that what they learned in Fadlallah's treatise is not the whole truth, said Sheikh Amin. They need to be aware that the law is not one thing. In the time of the Prophet, peace be upon him, the law was one. But today, the law has many interpreters: this understanding of the law differs from that understanding. Students have to accept the idea that we are now living in an era marked by a plurality of understandings.

The idea that our era is characterized by multiple understandings of the shari'a does not only guide the study of *fiqh*; it also informs the seminarians' approach to *tafsīr*. Novice seminarians study Fadlallah's approach; those who reach the advanced levels delve into the mechanics of it by studying the methodology of Quranic interpretation. In class, they review the various methodological approaches that have shaped the practice of Quran study. As in the class of *fiqh* described above, seminarians learn to situate Fadlallah's work within a larger field of debates and scholarly traditions.

These classes on *fiqh* and *tafsīr* evince that the kind of doubt valued by Shi'i jurists obliges *ḥawza* seminarians to explore various attempts to decipher the divine will. Yet, according to the director of *Ma'had*, the cultivation of doubt has other implications for seminarians. While conceding that doubt may lead some to drift into "sterile skepticism," he stresses that when teaching is properly done, the acknowledgement of doubt often pushes students to revisit what they thought was true. "Today, this is crucial," said the director, "because some of our legal views need to be reconsidered, and *ijtihād* implies that we put our wisdom to scrutiny." Aware that most seminarians will not reach the level of *ijtihād*, he adds that if students do not inaugurate new norms or rulings, at least they learn to subject human discourse "to revision and critique [*naqḍ*]."

This last remark goes beyond the training of religious leaders or Shi'i jurists. With it, the director implies that by learning to explore religious uncertainties, students develop a different relationship with what they hear and read on an everyday basis. "In an educational climate where we want everything ready, like fast food, this is an important task," he opines.

4. Augmenting the Tradition

In advanced classes, seminarians begin acquiring the skills necessary to uncover the shari'a. At this point, cohorts shrink. The spatial arrangement of the classrooms and the teacher's use of the space show no significant difference, except that the rooms get considerably smaller (and quite cold during rainy Lebanese winters). This third learning sequence, however, indexes more than a shift in size; it inaugurates new disciplines as well as a different pedagogical approach. Among these new disciplines are the sciences of *ḥadīth*. While Uṣūlī scholars consider the Quran to be a reliable legal source, most of Shi'i jurisprudence springs from the second source: the corpus of the *ḥadīths*. The Quran is open to interpretation, but since it was divinely revealed, its authenticity is beyond doubt. The *ḥadīth*, by contrast, were reported by fallible human beings; their authenticity and meaning must therefore be investigated.

Two distinct classes train the seminarians to perform this task. The classes on *'ilm al-dirāya* (trans.: science of understanding) give seminarians a methodology to investigate individual *ḥadīth*, and to classify them into four categories, ranging from authentic to weak. Students learn to measure the reliability of each of the fifty thousand plus *ḥadīths* by examining its chain of transmission. Doing so enables seminarians to establish whether a given *ḥadīth* is sound enough to serve as a source of legislation.[5]

[5] Interview with a hawza teacher conducted on April 4, 2013, in Beirut, Lebanon.

Since all *ḥadīths* were passed down by humans, however, this examination involves scrutinizing the narrators who circulated information. *Ḥawza* seminarians learn to do so in a different class, centered on *ʿilm al-rijāl* (trans.: science of men). In this second course, they mobilize different historical research tools to establish the trustworthiness of the men and women who relayed information about the life of the Prophet and the Imams.

The methodology of *usul al-fiqh* (trans.: principles of jurisprudence) is another new discipline. I have stressed that the two main sources of legislation—the Quran and the ḥadīths—are riddled with ambiguities, gaps, and puzzles. Historically, these areas of uncertainty forced Islamic scholars to elaborate methodological principles meant to help jurists tackle these puzzles through syllogistic reasoning. *Usul al-fiqh* is the product of this elaboration. Yet this sophisticated set of principles does not only help Shi'i scholars work out ambiguities inherent to the sacred texts. It also enables them to determine the legality of practices that were not even envisaged when Islam was revealed and embodied by the Prophets and the Imam: tobacco smoking, organ donation, DNA technology, etc. Sheikh Najib, who teaches *uṣūl al-fiqh* to advanced students, emphasizes that this capacity to derive sharīʿa -based guidelines for new and old practices is of paramount importance today. "Why is the divorce only in the hands of the husband? Why is the son's inheritance bigger than the daughter's? […] All these questions have answers. But are we sure that we have the correct ones? Today, we need new answers to these questions, and perhaps new means to get them." *Uṣūl al-fiqh* offers the means through which jurists reach these answers.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the lessons of *uṣūl al-fiqh* inaugurate a crucial shift. Up to this point, teachers have been delivering lectures, exploring ambiguities, and answering students' questions. In the advanced levels, however, students instead raise questions and engage in debates. Sheikh al-Ulama, who teaches *uṣūl al-fiqh*, always comes to class with a set of index cards on which he has written debate questions. He opens his lessons with these questions—*e. g.*, "Imagine a doubt arises about Friday prayer. You are certain that either the communal prayer or the noon prayer is obligatory on that day, but uncertain about which of the two is obligatory. Do you need to perform both prayers? If so, why?" The Sheikh intervenes in the students' discussion to help seminarians expose their views systematically, and support each step of their argument. Sheikh al-Ulama usually shares his view of the matter toward the end of the lesson, but he devotes most of it helping seminarians construct their arguments and deploy them in a debate. The shift in pedagogy brings the seminarians closer to the disputatious pedagogic style that is the hallmark of *ḥawza* instruction.

The advanced study of *fiqh,* too, is structured around debates. Advanced seminarians are well acquainted with the debates and disagreements inherent to Shi'i jurisprudence; they have also learned to research the sources of the sharīʿa (*e. g.*, the Quran and the ḥadīths) and to deal with ambiguities through deduction. Studying *fiqh* no longer means memorizing precepts or reviewing disagreements. In advanced classes on *fiqh*, seminarians examine and discuss the entire set of operations by which jurists transform strands of evidence found in the sacred texts into precepts. This process (called *istidlal*) mobilizes nearly all the skills and sciences that *ḥawza* students have learned to link together since their first year of study—*e. g.*, exegesis of the Quran, sciences of the *ḥadīth*, logic, and *uṣūl al-fiqh*.

5. *Baḥth Khārij*: Concluding Remarks

Coursework spans over seven years at *al-Maʿhad*, and sometimes more. Upon its completion, seminarians are qualified to conduct their first research. This research, often compared to a PhD dissertation, is called *Baḥth Khārij*: the word *baḥth* means "research" and the qualifier *khārij* signals that those embarking on it extrapolate the divine will without relying on existing treatises of *fiqh* (see also Odabaei, 2019). At this stage, seminarians part ways from man-made jurisprudence and base their argument exclusively on primary sharīʿa sources. Their research most often focuses on problems with which the faithful grapple—*e. g.*, inheritance rules, divorce pronounced by SMS, etc. The *baḥth khārij* represents a first attempt

at *ijtihād*; a first effort to establish the sharī'a norms governing the performance of a given practice. Many students, however, never see the end of this research. Others spend decades working on it while teaching introductory classes.

During my residence at *al-Ma'had*, thirty-five seminarians were conducting *baḥth khārij*. Among them was Mahdi Husseini. Originally from the Bekaa Valley (stretching between Mont Lebanon and the Anti-Lebanon mountains), Mahdi entered *al-Ma'had* in 1996, and has been studying and teaching there since. After completing his coursework, he undertook a research project to determine the Islamic legality of DNA technology (Clarke, 2009). His research was driven by a practical, familial, concern: his uncle was raising a child, but the entire family was unsure whether the child belonged to him. A DNA test could solve the issue, but at the time, most Shi'i thinkers were against this technology.

> [6]We used to determine the filiation of a child on the basis of the marriage contract, but now DNA can prove heredity; it can prove that this [person] is the father or the mother of a child. Science says this, but what is the opinion [*raʾy*] of the shar'īa? […] Science has its opinion, but you also have to look at the *ḥadīth*, the [Quranic] *āyāt*, and all these different stands of evidence. You need to know them before you can decide.

While pursuing their individual research, seminarians like Mahdi also participate in the seminar, which meets every weekday at 8 a.m. in the prayer room. Most teaching clerics of *al-Ma'had* are also involved in it; it is where they pursue and perfect their training as scholars and teachers. Unlike in other classes, participants sit on the carpeted floor, forming a large circle around the most learned of all the *ḥawza*'s sheikhs—who conventionally leads the seminar. No whiteboard, textbook, or quizzes are necessary at this stage. And instead of lecturing or correcting the participants, the seminar leader is responsible for hosting a productive disputation [*munāẓara*] around questions of deductive jurisprudence [*fiqh al-istidlālī*]. Samer Mustafa, a scholar born in Algeria, remarks that meetings revolve around a contested area of Shi'i thought. "Most often," he says, "it opens with three conflicting arguments about a particular point. Then the sheikh will share his view and invite the participants to debate these arguments." "These discussions," adds Samer, "are extremely technical and complicated; they are based on many centuries of research and debates. The language is also very technical and dated." Through this language, advanced seminarians exhibit the dialectical skills acquired during their coursework, thereby establishing their eligibility to qualify as *mujtahids*—that is, as scholars ethically and intellectually qualified to echo the voice of God on current problematics.

Over the last century, this learned practice (*ijtihād*) has acquired something of an enchanted aura. Much of this aura derives from the hope that *ijtihād* might enable Muslims to adapt the shar'īa—and sometimes Islam itself—to the civilizational norms of the West. Within and outside academic circles, it is common to hear that the Islamic tradition has ceased to evolve because, historically, something went wrong with *ijtihād*. As early as 1898, the Egyptian modernist Mohammed 'Abduh declared that *ijtihād* would allow Islam "to adapt itself successfully to the modern world" (Coulson, 1964, p. 202). In the 1960s, French philosopher Louis Gardet (1962) saw in *ijtihād* the linchpin for a renewal of Islamic humanism. And in today's Lebanon, where Sunni and Shi'i jurisprudence is enforced as family law, lawyers, judges, and ordinary citizens often remark that "Shi'i law" is more modern because it evolved through *ijtihād* (Landry, 2019).

In an effort to complicate the view that frames *ijtihād* as the product of bookish erudition, I tried to show that the ability to uncover the sharī'a also rests on a distinct pedagogy—and beyond it, on a particular practice of doubt. [6]

[6] Interview with a hawza teacher conducted on April 4, 2013, in Beirut, Lebanon.

To address the demands of the day, *ḥawza* seminarians learn to discover God's way by turning upside down the modern epistemology that deems knowledge valid and valuable insofar as it is free or immune from doubt. Instead, they learn to approach even the most erudite attempts at attaining knowledge and understanding (including their own) not only as contextual and historical, but also as profoundly uncertain and forever tentative. How this approach to erudition cohabits with a faith in the wisdom of God, Mohammed the Prophet, his daughter and the Twelve Imams is what I have tried to explore ethnographically.

Such an ethnographic account casts an instructive light on the enchanted aura surrounding *ijtihād.* This article has shown that *ḥawza* scholars are not necessarily trying to modernize or liberalize Islam. Rather, they aim at extending the Islamic legal tradition into the present by offering guidelines to help the faithful approach unprecedented events or innovations from within an Islamic perspective. "Contemporary problems," as the director of *al-Ma'had* likes to put it, "should not be left to politicians only; *ḥawza* scholars must also provide adequate [Islamic] responses to them." The daily business of those with whom I shared cold classrooms was driven less by the will to reform Islam than by the aspiration of *augmenting* a tradition of thinking developed by their predecessors—and ensuring it stays responsive to the times. Like the translator in Walter Benjamin's essay (1996, p. 361), they learn to understand the "pure language" of God, and to disseminate their understanding through what their teachers call the language of the era.

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