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The Clerics of Jabal 'Âmil
And the Reform of Religious Teaching in Najaf
Since the Beginning of the 20th Century

The rationalisation of higher religious studies, which is at the centre of the reformist project had, and has today, fundamental and problematic implications for the Shii clergy. What is at stake for the clergy is not just its adherence to the ethics of the century but the saving of its independence and that of the *marja'iyya* vis-à-vis the State. This question will be treated here through the participation of the clerics of Jabal 'Âmil to the reform of the teaching system in Najaf. But before we get to Jabal 'Âmil, it is necessary to remind the reader of the main characteristics of the teaching system in Najaf and other holy shiite cities which constituted the hub of knowledge in the Shii world at the beginning of the 20th century.

The teaching was scattered among several independent schools, each directed by a *mujtahid* whose knowledge and charisma attracted a certain number of students. The schools called *hawzât* were the more flexible since no organisation headed or regrouped them: hence, there was no bureaucratisation. In addition, these schools had no program to follow but certain customs that were in use to monitor the progress of the students in each discipline. Nevertheless, the students were entirely free to choose the courses they would attend and there was no exam at the end to sanction their curriculum: the best students and those better prepared would get to *ijtihâd* while others would remain at a more mediocre level. It is thus that the religious aristocracy insured its reproduction and continuity. The absence of bureaucratisation in the system, its independence vis-à-vis the State and the fact that it was entirely based on the *mujtahid* made it difficult to reform.¹

¹ On the subject, see Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994, chap. 9; Meir Litvak, *Shi'i Scholars of nineteenth-century Iraq. The 'Ulama' of Najaf and Karbala'*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, chap. 3 et 4; Sabrina Mervin, « La quête du savoir à Nagaf. Les études religieuses chez les chi'ites imâmites de la fin du XIXe siècle à 1960 », *Studia Islamica*, 81 (1995), p. 165-185.

In Jabal 'Âmil, religious schools had become more popular after the 1880s, due to the efforts made by a few *mujtahid* that we will call the "protoreformists". These clerics who had been educated in Najaf by the disciples of Murtadâ al-Ansârî, revived the local teaching tradition by opening schools in small towns and villages. Thus, the movement of students going to finish their studies in Iraq was intensified and the links between the 'Âmilî clerics and the religious milieus in Najaf became stronger.

Simultaneously, in Jabal 'Âmil, certain '*ulamâ*' and intellectuals started to entertain reformist ideas especially on the question of education. As of 1909, they were able to express and broadcast them through the channel of the Shiite magazine *al-'Irfân* that was edited in Saïda.

From the end of 1909 *al-'Irfân* started publishing a first call to the reform of higher religious schools. The article was signed by the initials of Sadr al-Dîn al-Sadr: it is true that he was not a 'Âmilî cleric, but he had family ties linked with the Sharaf al-Dîn family, on the greatest *buyût al-'ilm* in Jabal 'Âmil; his son Mûsâ was to come to South-Lebanon at the end of the 1950s to follow up the work of 'Abd al-Husayn Sharaf al-Dîn.

Sadr al-Dîn al-Sadr's article ² already had in it the elements of a debate that would last the entire century: he criticised mainly the lack of organisation of the curriculum and the absence of a program. He found the number of students too important and thought the state should participate in their selection. The author also blamed the clerics who would compete in public. Hence, Sadr al-Dîn al-Sadr not only called for an organisation and a rationalisation of the studies, but he also accepted, for that reason, an interference of the State in the affairs of religious schools. In addition, through his talk on the competition between the clergy, he did not hesitate to criticise the mode of selection of the *marja'*, who had to stand out in the circles of *mujtahid* to "emerge" as the more learned among them.

These critiques brought up two fundamental questions: the rationalisation of the system and the interference of the State.

These two themes will later on be taken up again. But it was not until the end of the 1920s that the reformist clerics formulated again a systematic criticism of the higher religious education that was given in the schools of Najaf and other holy cities. Two 'Âmilî clerics called for the reform: one was a famous *mujtahid* who lived in Damascus, Muhsin al-Amîn (1867-1952); the other was a young cleric finishing his studies in Najaf, Muhsin Sahrâra (1901-1946).

Muhsin al-Amîn enclosed this call to the reform of the schools in a dense work tackling varied topics, a sort of *kashkûl*, which appeared in 1929.³ But his reflections on the schools had matured for several years. They were the product of his own experience in Najaf, where he had studied for ten years. He reused these remarks in the

² « Nazra fî al-madâris al-dîniyya » (A point of view on religious schools), *al-'Irfân*, vol. I, pp. 587-591. Sadr al-Dîn al-Sadr (1882-1953) regularly sent articles to *al-'Irfân* from Karbalâ', where he resided; this one was signed S. N.

³ Muhsin al-Amîn, « Islâh al-madâris », *Ma'âdin al-jawâhir*, vol. I, 1929, pp. 33-39.

autobiography he wrote in 1951, just before his death.⁴ As any good reformist, he fought against the disorder (*fawdâ*) created by the total liberty the students had in their choice of professors, subjects, timetable and level of courses. He wanted to rationalise the teaching in establishing a regulation for the schools. As an experienced pedagogue, he advised a change of the manuals, suggesting books that were more accessible to the students and adapted to their needs.

This call did not entail any reactions in the clerical milieu.

By contrast, a few months before, Muhsin Sharâra had triggered the anger of the conservatives in Najaf, to the point where he was declared an “infidel” by some *mujtahid*. Muhsin Sharâra belonged to a group of young clerics issued from the great families of science in Jabal ‘Âmil who were achieving their studies in the religious schools of Najaf. In 1925 they were joined by Iraqis⁵ in an association called al-Shabîba al-‘âmiliyya al-najafiyya (‘Âmilî-najafî youth). Among these young clerics, we can name ‘Alî al-Zayn, Hâshim al-Amîn, Muhammad and Muhsin Sharâra. These young clerics called for a renewal of literature and in general, professed modern ideas. Several among them will later on drop the turban and embrace communism.⁶ That was not the case for Muhsin Sharâra.

In 1928, he had already a reputation in Najaf: literary circles discussing “avant-garde” ideas were meeting at his place; he had also followed English and mathematics courses in parallel to his religious curriculum. Moreover, he supported the reforms of the rituals of ‘Âshûrâ’ called for by Muhsin al-Amîn in Damascus and Mahdî al-Qazwînî (d 1939) in Basra.⁷ During the summer of 1928, he published a series of three articles in *al-Irfân* where he called for a recast of the teaching system and the coming of a shiite Muhammad ‘Abduh to start it.⁸ In brief, it was also a call for rationalising teaching and adapting it to the modern times: thus the necessity to introduce modern sciences like sociology, psychology, foreign languages and the comparative study of religions.

The religious circles of Najaf were divided: certain accused Muhsin Sharâra, others defended him and started arguing for the same cause. At the beginning of the 1930s, a debate started: the Iraqi Ja‘far al-Khalîlî expressed himself in the magazine al-Hâtîf, in addition to ‘Âmilî clerics such as Husayn Muruwwa, Muhammad Sharâra, or Muhammad Hasan al-Sûrî. Then it was ‘Alî al-Zayn who, in South-Lebanon, called for a reform of the schools in Najaf: first, in 1937, in a Cairo magazine⁹, then in 1939, in *al-*

⁴ Muhsin al-Amîn, *Autobiographie d'un clerc chiite du Jabal ‘Âmil*, translation and annotations by Sabrina Mervin and Haïtham al-Amin, Damascus, IFEAD, p. 110-111.

⁵ ‘Abd al-Razzâq Muhyî al-Dîn, Sâlih al-Ja‘farî ‘Âl Kâshif al-Ghitâ’, Muhammad Sâlih Bahr al-‘Ulûm.

⁶ Cf. Sabrina Mervin, *Un réformisme chiite*, chapter V.

⁷ Cf. Werner Ende, « From Revolt to Resignation: The Life of Shaykh Muhsin Sharâra », pp. 68-69; Sabrina Mervin, *ibid.*

⁸ “Bayna al-fawdâ wa al-ta‘lîm al-sahîh” (Between the disorder and the correct teaching), *al-Irfân*, vol. XVI, 1, pp. 95-100 ; pp. 201-207 ; pp. 331-337.

⁹ « Al-ijtihâd lâ yazkû ma‘a al-fawdâ », *al-Risâla* (Cairo), 25/10/1937, p. 1 734.

'Irfân.¹⁰ In it he elaborated on the experience of the school founded by Muhammad Husayn Âl Kashif al-Ghitâ' who constituted the first step towards the necessary reform. For 'Alî al-Zayn, this reform went through a total reorganisation of the studies, the religious institutions and the cultural life in Najaf. His project, well-thought and plausible, remained on paper. But it did not trigger the outcry Muhsin Sharâra's project had unleashed ten years before. The mentalities had started to change.

In that same year, 1939, *al-'Irfân* published a letter written by Muhammad Ridâ al-Muzaffar, the founder of the association Muntadâ al-nashr.¹¹ After fifteen years of procrastinations, Muhammad Ridâ al-Muzaffar had estimated that it was possible to open a "reformed" religious school (with programs, time-tables, classes, etc.) that taught the students until the end of the cycle traditionally known as *al-sutûh*. It had 150 students, amongst whom the sons of a good number of Najaf 'ulamâ' but also the sons of 'ulamâ' of Jabal 'Âmil such as Muhammad Husayn Fadl Allâh. Today Fadl Allâh says he does not remember why he left the school of Muntadâ al-nashr before the end of his schooling.¹² It is in fact because the school had closed down. The founder attempted other experiences and opened other schools clashing with the conservatives for twenty or so years.

Finally, in 1958, the association Muntadâ al-nashr opened a higher religious teaching institution, Kulliyyat al-fiqh, the diploma of which was recognised by the Iraqi State. Its functioning was copied on that of a university. Later on, Kulliyyat al-fiqh was linked to the Iraqi University as of 1974 and that until 1991, when it was abolished by the government. To the traditional religious sciences, the school added other courses such as literary criticism, English, sociology and psychology. It also gave courses of comparative usûl al-fiqh: it was the field of its first Dean, Muhammad Taqî al-Hakîm, and that of Lebanese clerics teaching there, the brothers Muhammad Mahdî and Muhammad Ja'far Shams al-Dîn.¹³

Kulliyyat al-fiqh was the only religious Shiite school integrated in the State educating system. In fact, as of the end of the 1950s, other religious schools opened in Najaf: they were reformed schools but contrarily to the Kulliyyat al-fiqh, they remained in the model of the *hawza*. They only asked for recognition from the State allowing their students to be exempted from the obligatory military service. Thus, for example, the

¹⁰ « Bawâdir al-islâh fî jâmi'at al-Najaf aw nahdat Kâshif al-Ghitâ' », *al-'Irfân*, vol. XXIX, 2, pp. 179-185 (April 1939).

¹¹ Letter from Muhammad Ridâ al-Muzaffar, "Muntadâ al-nashr", *al-'Irfân*, vol. XXIX, 8-9, pp. 856-857 (Dec. 1939- Jan. 1940).

¹² *Al-Murshid*, n° 3 and 4 (1995), p. 19.

¹³ Ahmad al-Wâ'ilî, "Hawla muntadâ al-nashr", *al-'Irfân*, XLIX, 5, pp. 468-469 (1962); 'Abd al-Hâdî al-Fadlî, *Dalîl al-Najaf*, pp. 76-78; Ja'far al-Khalîlî, *Mawsû'at al-'atabât al-muqaddasa, al-Najaf*, vol. II, pp. 183-185.

Madrasat al-Najaf, founded in 1957 by ‘Izz al-Dîn al-Jazâ’irî¹⁴ and the Madrasat al-‘ulûm al-islâmiyya, founded in 1963 in Najaf by the *marja’* Muhsin al-Hakîm.¹⁵ This school had 13 professors, 3 Iranians, 5 Iraqis, and 5 Lebanese, amongst who was ‘Alî Makkî, who is today the spiritual leader of the shi’a in Syria (who is officially called *marja’* but, in fact, he is the agent of ‘Alî al-Sistânî).

The purpose of these schools was mainly to renovate the contents of the curriculum: in Muhsin al-Hakîm’s school they taught, for example, economy and philosophy through the works of Muhammad Bâqir al-Sadr, but also Qoranic sciences (in the *tafsîr* of Abû al-Qâsim al-Khû’î).¹⁶ They wanted then to introduce at the same time modern sciences susceptible to open the students to the world and make out of them clerics capable of confronting the century, and to revive the so-called secondary sciences taught in the past at Najaf and abandoned nowadays such as astronomy, geography or medicine. In addition, without copying their functioning on profane institutions as the Kulliyyat al-fiqh, had done, these “renovated” *hawzât* tried to organise the teaching and to guide the students. Those were not free anymore to choose their courses as they were in the traditional system.

Even though the Kulliyyat al-fiqh and other new schools existed in the *hawza*, strong resistance was still opposed to this type of project. Whatever lead to an organisation and a rationalisation of the teaching was often rejected. Ever since the first attempts of Muntadâ al-nashr the detractors of reform had often summarised their position in a motto which said:

If science organises itself, it disperses and if sciences disperses, it organises itself.
al-‘ilm idhâ taba’thara inta’ama wa idhâ inta’ama taba’thara.¹⁷

In other words, organisation is here considered as harmful to science. This meant that the detractors of the reform saw in the organisation projects of the teaching system a threat to what constituted the specificity of Najaf: the freedom of the students and the independence of the teaching system vis-à-vis the State. In 1957 when the *marja’* Burujurdî organised an exam for the students to compete for a scholarship, only one student came to take the test. Muhammad Jawâd Mughniyya told the anecdote in *al-‘Irfân* after having been informed of it by this student, a Lebanese. Not only there was no other candidate but the *mujtahid* had countered the endeavour accusing it of being a renovation (*tajaddud*), or even a blameable innovation (*bid’a*)!¹⁸

Finally, it was the conservative trend which prevailed on the renovating current. Schools, like that of Muhsin al-Hakîm which closed in 1977, disappeared. After the Shii

¹⁴ On this school, see Muhsin Muhammad Muhsin, *Min al-tanzîm al-dirâsî fî al-Najaf al-ashraf*.

¹⁵ ‘Alî al-Bahâdilî, *al-Hawza al-‘ilmiyya fî al-Najaf*, p. 348.

¹⁶ ‘Alî al-Bahâdilî, *ibid.*, pp. 342-343.

¹⁷ This formula is a topos often mentioned in the texts on the reform of religious schools. ‘Alî al-Khâqânî attributes it to the *marja’* Abû al-Hasan al-Isfahânî, but it is not certain that the expression is his. Cf. *Shu‘arâ’ al-Gharî*, vol. XII, Najaf, 1956, p. 459.

¹⁸ « Al-Najaf wa al-imtihân », *al-‘Irfân*, vol. ILV, 1, pp. 22-24 (1957); see also ‘Alî al-Khâqânî, *Shu‘arâ’ al-Gharî*, vol. XII, p. 484.

uprising of 1991, other schools, traditional or reformist, were closed down or destroyed by the Iraqi government. Kulliyat al-fiqh was literally confiscated: it constituted an easy prey to neutralise as it was inserted in the State apparatus. As for traditional schools, more flexible because of their organisation, they could reconstitute themselves elsewhere: that is why *hawzât* have increased in number around the mausoleum of Sayyida Zaynab, near Damascus.

Today in the clerical milieu, the outcome of the Kulliyat al-fiqh experience is often seen as negative and that for several reasons. First, it is compared, explicitly or not, to the model of the traditional *hawza* which has proved itself. It is then clearly compared to the training that the *marja'* Abû al-Qâsim al-Khû'î had on his own insured: a majority of the great clerics of the Shii world today were at one time his disciples. In addition, the level of the studies is criticized. And last, the opening up to profane sciences is seen as quite relative: it is said that they were introductory conferences more than real courses.

Even the more ardent defenders of reform go back on their words. For example, Muhammad Taqî al-Hakîm who was one of the founders of Kulliyat al-fiqh and who taught then in Baghdad at the Kulliyat al-Dîn has declared that between the system of the traditional *hawza* characterised by freedom and the reformed system, characterised by modern methodology, he would adopt a median position. He based his position on his attachment to the freedom in the traditional model.¹⁹ Other clerics of Lebanese origins have given me similar opinions.

True, freedom (*hurriyya*) leads to anarchy (*fawdâ*), so much criticised by the reformists. It is clear that I have to justify my translation of (*fawdâ*) by anarchy. The word, in Arabic, belongs in fact almost to the same semantic field as anarchy. In both cases, for the common meaning anarchy-*fawdâ* is first disorder but etymologically speaking, it is the lack of command. This etymology leads us to the militant understanding of the concept of anarchy, summarised in the well-known slogan: anarchy is order without power. In addition, in Shii clerical milieus, they speak of organised anarchy, *al-fawdâ al-munazzamma*, i.e. a willed disorder. This is not surprising since it is the guarantee of several components of the specificity of higher Shii religious education, among which elitism, meritocracy, and independence vis-à-vis the State. The debate goes then beyond the antagonism between old and new or renewed and between tradition and modernity. Nevertheless, there are clerics who refuse to be duped by this apologetic discourse on freedom and disorder. Hence, Hânî Fahs believes it is a primary freedom (*bidâ'iyya*) which necessitates being elaborated and civilised (*tahdîr*); for this cleric, an understanding of the democracy of education is a must.²⁰ The debate is not yet ended, even if we witness a tendency to go back to the traditional model of the *hawza* but the model has more or less been reformed as far the content of the teaching and the organisation of the studies.

¹⁹ Muhsin Muhammad Muhsin, *Min al-tanzîm al-dirâsî*, pp. 62-63.

²⁰ Correspondence of sayyid Hânî Fahs, an answer to a questionnaire I had submitted in Beirut, in April 1999.

In Lebanon, two *mujtahid* share the politico-religious leadership: Muhammad Mahdî Shams al-Dîn, president of the Supreme Shi'a Council and Muhammad Husayn Fadl Allâh, who is seen as a *marja'* by some believers. The two clerics project a modernist image and defend their own conceptions of *tajdîd*. Each runs or supervises *hawzât* of the traditional type in Lebanon and in al-Sayyida Zaynab. Muhammad Mahdî Shams al-Dîn, a partisan of *tajdîd*, seems to have encountered resistance, from his entourage, to introduce it in religious schools. However he founded a university in Beirut, al-Jâmi'a al-islâmiyya, where diverse disciplines are taught.

Muhammad Husayn Fadl Allâh says he is very attached to the *hawza* system and to its "spirit of *ijtihâd*". According to him, the *hawza* should not be transformed into a university but it should be renovated by introducing modern sciences and by organising it without damaging the spirit of liberty which prevails in it. He explains: « There is a trend which considers that the method of the *hawza*, which leaves the student free, to be as far as pedagogy is concerned, the most modern method. »²¹ In other words, Muhammad Husayn Fadl Allâh suggests that on these questions, Islamic tradition has anticipated the development of modernity.

²¹ Salîm al-Hasanî, *al-Ma'âlim al-jadîda li-l-marja'iyya al-shî'iyya*, pp. 104-108.

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