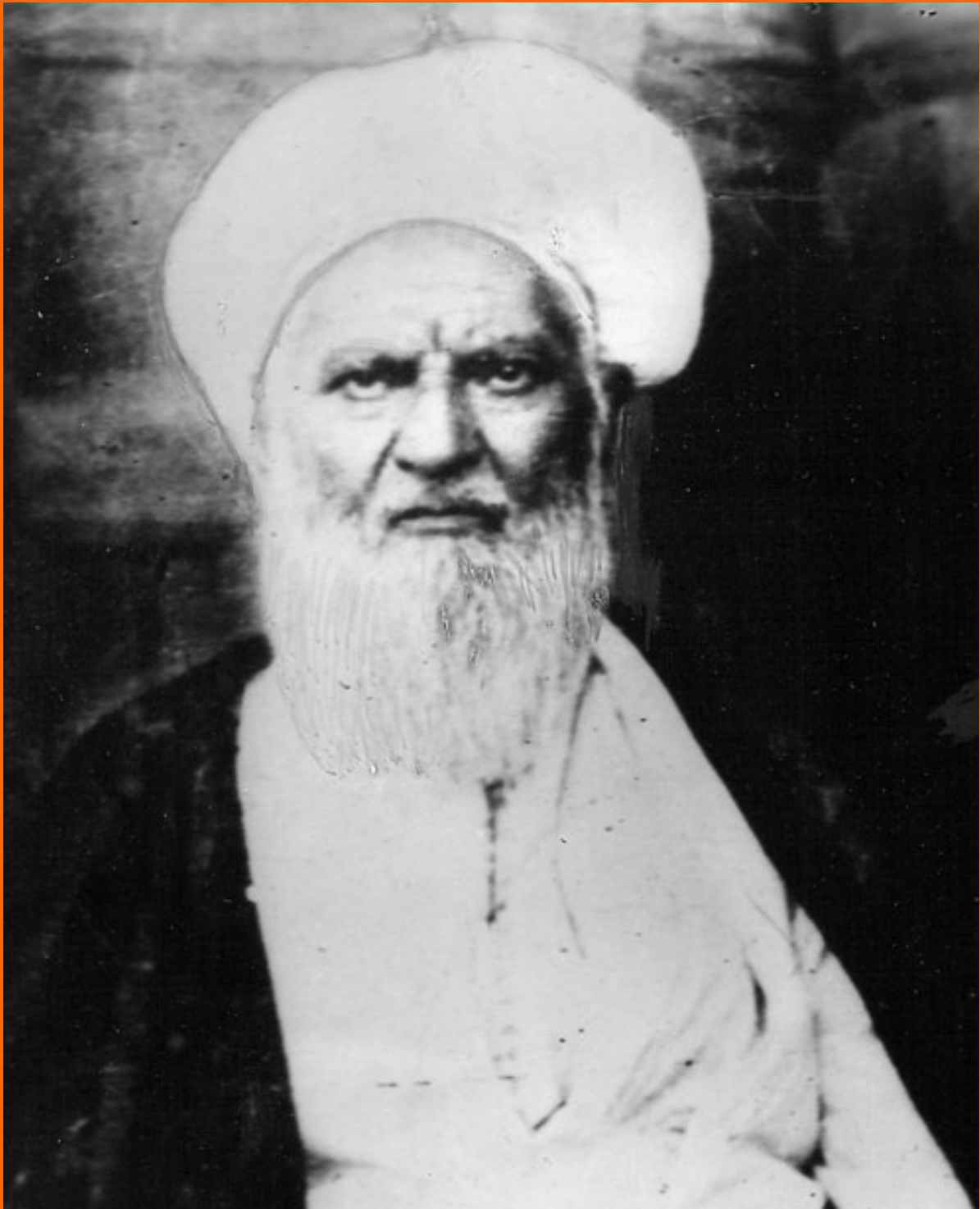


Abd al-Karim Haeri Yazdi

Founder of the Modern Ḥawza of Qom

Fatimah Jaffer



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Abstract

Known for reviving the renowned Islamic seminary in Qom and his disinterest in the world of politics, this paper will seek to provide a brief biography into the esteemed life of Ayatollah Shaykh Abd al-Karim Haeri Yazdi. After providing a brief introduction followed by a transitory overview of his early childhood and his illustrious education, this paper will endeavor to understand more about Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi's character through the critical points of his life including his migration to Iraq, his return to Iran, his role in the renaissance of the *Hawza* in Qom, his family and finally, his death and legacy.

Introduction

Located some 150km south of Tehran near the Dasht-e Kavir salt desert, the holy city of Qom is one of the most important politico-religious centers not only in Iran, but around the world. Qom is primarily known for two things; the holy shrine of Lady Fatimah al-Ma'sumeh, the sister of the 8th Shi'a imam, Imam Ridha, and the *Hawza 'Ilmiyya* (Islamic seminary) of Qom. The *Hawza* in Qom is considered as the largest theological epicentres of Shi'i Islamic knowledge alongside the *Hawza* in Najaf. Great *maraji'* (jurisprudents) and '*ulama*' (religious scholars) teach classes ranging from different tenets in Islamic science. Today the *Hawza* in Qom is home to over 200 education and resource centres and organisations, catering for over 40,000 scholars and students from over 80 countries around the world as they are drawn to this city to acquire knowledge¹. Additionally, a widespread of research in a number of Islamic fields is carried out in these seminaries. The origins of Shi'i teachings in Qom traces back to as early as the second half of the 8th century and gained wider prominence during the Safavid empire in the 16th century when Shi'a Islam was instated as the official religion in Iran. However, after a long period of decline and deterioration, the *Hawza* in Qom was once again rejuvenated by Grand Ayatollah Abd al-Karim Haeri Yazdi. Subsequently this paper will seek to study the life of Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi - the man who is credited with the restoration of the *Hawza* and the teacher and mentor of the founder of the Islamic republic of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini. It will do so by illustrating his education and life from Iran to Iraq and then back to Iran, his personality and family. We will also seek to understand his political or rather apolitical stance and most importantly, the process of his restoration of the *Hawza* in Qom to its grand prestige.

Childhood & Education

Abd al-Karim Haeri Yazdi was born in 1859 in the village of Mehrjard in the Meybod district in Yazd, south-eastern Iran. As an ancient city that goes back to pre-Islamic Iran, Meybod is one of the major cities in Yazd. It was also the capital of Iran during the 14th century during the Mozaffarid period. Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi was only six years of age when he lost his father and was subsequently brought up by his mother. From a young age, he was a notably keen student and was always interested in reading and writing. However, at the time there were no schools at his village. Hence, like most of the children of his age at the time, Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi helped as a young shepherd working on the farms. After a few years, his fate was to change when a relative of the family, Mohammed Jafar, arrived at the village. Mohammed Jafar was a respected scholar himself and soon recognised Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi's bright potential. Consequently, he expressed his interest in becoming his guardian and took him to Ardakan.

Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi was soon on his way to Ardakan. Established in the 12th century, Ardakan is the second major city in the Yazd Province. The city of Ardakan has many historical religious attractions such as the Grand Mosque of Ardakan (*Masjed-e Jame*) and the shrine of Imam-Zadeh Mir Seyyed Mohammad. Despite most religious scholars

¹ Masuma Jaffer, *Lady Fatima Masuma* (Raleigh: Lulu Press, 2014), p.87.

migrating to Qom, Ardakan had still managed to maintain its status as a centre of education. Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi spent the next few years of his youth commuting between Meybod and Ardakan as he pursued his traditional education under Majd-al-Olama Ardakani in a *maktab* (religious school) learning the basics of the sciences, literature, and Qur'anic recitation². He lived in Mohammed Jafar's home during the week and visited his family in Meybod on the weekends. In order to further pursue his education, Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi eventually moved to the city of Yazd. During his time in Yazd, he studied under scholars such as Hajj Sayyed Yahya Bozorg and Hajj Mirza Sayyed Vameq. He completed the *muqademāt* (introductory) and *ṣutuḥ* (intermediate) stages of the traditional curriculum under their esteemed supervision³.

Migration to Iraq

By his late teens, Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi, had grown a strong yearning to visit the holy Shrines in Iraq that are particularly reverent for Shi'as. Thus, by the age of 18, together with his mother, he joined a caravan and left for Iraq. When he reached Iraq, he instantly sought out to contact the scholars there. Subsequently, he spent the next few years of his life at the *Hawza* in Karbala and studied under Ayatollah Fadhil Ardekani⁴. Fadhil Ardekani was the head of the *Hawza 'Ilmiyya* in Karbala. During the time Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi spent there, his obvious talent and genius became known to other scholars, and particularly to his teacher, Ayatollah Fadhil Ardekani, who had taken a keen interest in his development. Thus, after spending two years under his supervision, Ardekani realised that the seminaries in Karbala were not enough for the growth and progress of his flourishing student and therefore he sent Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi, to Grand Ayatollah Mirza Shirazi⁵. Thus, with his recommendation Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi, got accepted to the famous *Hawza 'Ilmiyya* in Samarra where he continued to pursue his studies. Ayatollah Ardekani wrote a letter praising Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi's, character and scholastic capabilities to Grand Ayatollah Mirza Shirazi who at the time was not only the head of the *Hawza* in Samarra but also the main *marji'* that Shi'as around the world emulated. Thus, Grand Ayatollah Mirza Shirazi offered to accommodate Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi, in his own house and take him under his wing⁶. Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi spent a total of about 12 years in the *Hawza* in Samarra and acquired his knowledge from Ayatollah Syed Muhammad Fisharky, Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Shirazi and Ayatollah Fadlullah Nuri.

Unfortunately, the passing away of Grand Ayatollah Mirza Shirazi in 1895 signalled the decline of Samarra as an important centre of Shi'i learning. Subsequently, Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi made his way to Najaf alongside Ayatollah Fisharky and continued his studies there under the esteemed Ayatollah Mohammad Kazem Khorasani⁷. Following his time in Najaf, Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi felt that his services were needed at the *Hawza* in Karbala, and thus made his way to the city of Imam Hussein where he gained the

² Hamid Algar, 'Ha'eri, 'Abd-al-Karim Yazdi', <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/haeri>, 2016.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Rasoul Khoshku, 'The History of the Islamic Seminaries of Qum, Part 1', <http://www.hawzaengland.com/res/8.pdf>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Islamic-Laws, 'Sheikh Abd al Karim Haeri', <http://www.islam-laws.com/marja/haeri.htm>, 2016.

⁷ Hamid Algar, 'Ha'eri, 'Abd-al-Karim Yazdi'

approval of Ayatollah Mirza Mohammed Taqi Shirazi and henceforth began to teach independently⁸. During this time, he taught at the *Bahith al-Khārij* (advanced) level and eventually reached the status of *Marji' al-Taqlid* (source of emulation)⁹.

Return to Iran

There are conflicting reports as to when Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi made his way to the city of Arak in Iran. According to his grandson, Abd al-Hadi Haeri, Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi left Karbala and temporarily established himself in Arak, formerly known as Soltanabad, as early as 1900. However, to avoid the political involvement and unrest in Iran surrounding the Constitutional revolution in 1906, Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi returned to Najaf. Unfortunately for him, political unrest erupted again whilst he was in Najaf and so once again he moved, this time to Karbala. Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi finally made his return to Arak in 1913¹⁰. This account by Abd al-Hadi Haeri contradicts others sources, most of which place Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi continually in Karbala until his arrival in Arak in 1913-14¹¹.

Nonetheless when Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi entered Arak, no formal *Hawza* existed. At first he would only lead the congregation prayers at the Masjid-e-Buzurg Aga Zia and gave various talks about the norms of *shari'a* (Islamic canonical laws) after the prayers. However, within a short time as his popularity began to grow, he managed to attract large crowds so much so that Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi had to move his talks classes from the Masjid Aga Zia to Madrasa 'Imiyya Sepahdar¹². Eventually he sought to quickly establish a school of theology which would rival the theology school in Isfahan which at the time was the best in the country¹³. He served in the *Hawza* of Arak for eight years and educated hundreds of students towards Islam. Elsewhere, during this period the young Ayatollah Khomeini was deciding where to go for his next stage of education. Upon consultation with his brother, Ayatollah Khomeini made the decision to go to Isfahan which was not only the best but the nearest important town to Khomein¹⁴. However, the young Khomeini heard about a certain pious and learned Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi, who had created a theological college of outstanding quality in nearby Arak. Thus, it was not long before Ayatollah Khomeini abandoned his decision to go to Isfahan and instead made his way to Arak which is 60 kilometres away from Khomein.

Once in Arak, Ayatollah Khomeini studied Shi'i theology under great scholars such as Shaykh Mohammad Ali Borojerdi and Agha Shaykh Golpayegani. After continuously impressing his teachers for three years, Ayatollah Khomeini was introduced to Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi¹⁵. Before his first full complete year with his mentor, Ayatollah Khomeini had managed to become Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi's personal companion and

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Iran – Ziarat, 'List of Ulema buried in the Holy city of Qum',

http://www.iranziarat.com/downloads/lives_of_the_ulemas_buried_.pdf

¹⁰ Abdul-Hadi Hairi, *Shi'ism and Constitutionalism in Iran* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977), p.136.

¹¹ Hamid Algar, 'Ha'eri, 'Abd-al-Karim Yazdi'

¹² Islamic-Laws, 'Sheikh Abd al Karim Haeri'

¹³ Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (London: I B Tauris & Co Ltd, 2009), p.22.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p.261.

scribe¹⁶. Whilst studying under Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi in Arak, Ayatollah Khomeini managed to impress his mentor so much that Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi later asked Ayatollah Khomeini to accompany him to Qom and rapidly became Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi's most distinguished protégé. Despite their age difference of over 40 years, the two men grew particularly fond of each other and developed a special friendship.

The renaissance of the *Hawza* in Qom

The history of propagating Shi'ism in Qom began in the 8th century C.E (83AH) when some Arab Ash'ari tribesmen of Yemeni descent migrated and settled in Qom and embarked on remarkable efforts in spreading Shi'ism by laying the foundations of Islamic learning in the city¹⁷. This coincided with the period of the 6th and 7th Shi'i Imams. This was perhaps the first era of the dissemination of Shi'i traditions being established in Qom. During this period, the main fields of knowledge that were common in the Islamic seminaries of Qom were jurisprudence and ethics, both communicated using the sayings of the Ahlulbayt¹⁸. The second era occurred from the 10th century when the *Hawza* in Qom had gained a superior stronghold in Islamic teachings particularly in fields of *Ilm al-Rijāl* (Science of Narration) and *Fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence) with scholars such as Ahmad ibn Isa Ash'ari, Muhammad ibn Isa Ash'ari Qommi, Shaykh as-Saduq amongst others¹⁹. Shaykh as-Saduq's treasured books which were written during this period are some of the most prominent Shi'i scholarly resources to date.

The third era coincided with the Mongol invasion of the 13th century. During this period, the city of Qom experienced extensive destruction, leaving the land in ruins for years to come. Therefore, the scientific decline of the seminaries of Qom occurred from this period²⁰. The fourth era corresponded with the Safavid dynasty in the 16th century and their proceeding conversion of Twelver Shi'ism as the official religion of Iran. During this era, the city of Qom regained its former glory and prospered under Shah Abbas, the Safavid King, who also rebuilt the Fatima Massoumeh shrine on a grand scale. The Safavid kings sought to make Iran the spiritual bastion of Shi'a Islam and ensured the supremacy of the Twelver sect within Shi'ism. They provided great financial assistance for the construction of new Islamic schools. Additionally, the presence of great scholars such as Mulla Sadra Shirazi, Shaykh Bahai and Mirza Qomi, who were theologians as well as philosophers, paved for the expansion of intellectual sciences such as philosophy, Islamic theology, logic, and principles of jurisprudence²¹. Mirza Qomi was known as the reviver of the science of *Usūl al-Fiqh* (Principles of Jurisprudence) and was the *Marji' al-Taqlid* for the Shi'a Muslims at the time.

The fifth era concurred with the emergence of Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi and continues to this present day²². In 1920, after the death of Mullah Mohammed Kazem Khorasani- the

¹⁶ Amir Taheri, *The spirit of Allah: Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution*, (London: Hutchinson Ltd, 1987), p.480.

¹⁷ Rasoul Khoshku, p.89.

¹⁸ Rasoul Khoshku, p.90.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Rasoul Khoshku, p.94.

²¹ Rasoul Khoshku, p.97.

²² Rasoul Khoshku, p.99.

Grand Ayatollah at the time- Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi was viewed as the obvious heir. For a few years before this, a group of *‘ulama’* had been busy refurbishing the *Hawza* of Qom which having been a major force of religious learning, had fallen into decline after the death of Mirza Qomi in 1815²³. Nonetheless, the city still retained its importance for Shi’a Muslims around the world primarily because the shrine of Fatima Massoumeh. According to Baqer Moin, it was only when the British authorities expelled the Shi’i leadership from Najaf in 1920 that a collaborative effort was made to revive the center in Qom²⁴.

Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi initially made a trip to Qom just to visit the holy shrine of Fatima Massoumeh²⁵; however, his appearance was treated as a significant event by the scholars and residents, and hence efforts began to convince him to stay. Thus, the clerical community officially invited Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi over with the hope that his presence would help revive the Islamic seminary in Qom and restore its prestige as an important centre of learning and an alternative to the *Hawza* in Najaf. Among the prominent scholars urging Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi to stay was Ayatollah Bafqi. He tirelessly sought to convince him to make the move and reminded him of the famous traditions narrated by Imam Ja’far al-Sadiq that foresaw a central role for Qom at the end of time²⁶. At first Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi was unsure, however after a discussion with a select number of pupils, he agreed to move and revive the *Hawza* in Qom. Ayatollah Khomeini was one of his selected pupils and he too enthusiastically supported the idea. Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi was also mindful that in order to excel to the highest degree he had to make the move to Qom as Arak, despite being a pleasant town of orchards, vineyards and sweet springs, lacked any special religious or political significance²⁷. Subsequently, he left the city of Arak and migrated to Qom.

Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi arrived in Qom towards the end of 1921 with his eldest son, Shaykh Morteza Haeri Yazdi and Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Khonsari, and purchased a large mud-brick house near the holy shrine of Fatima which henceforth marked the beginning of the renaissance of the establishment in Qom. According to, Taheri, Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi came with a distinct plan to revitalize the city and give it a complete theological school²⁸. He managed to find strong support in the bazaar merchants. The bazaars merchants are traditionally very important in Iranian society. Additionally, they exercised a considerable amount of influence over the regular masses and had financial, political, ideological and historical links with the religious establishment. The merchants recognised the potential of turning Qom into the religious capital of Shi’ism. Through their financial support, Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi began to work on rebuilding the *Hawza* without having to sell some of his land in Yazd, as he had originally planned²⁹. Within a few months, the city of Qom began to buzz with activity as Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi continued to lay the foundations of a major religious institution with teachers in all branches of Islamic learning. Eventually most of the leading clerics from around the country set out to join him.

²³ Baker Moin, p.25.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Hamid Algar, ‘Ha’eri, ‘Abd-al-Karim Yazdi’

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Amir Taheri, p.46.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid, p.48.

In 1923, a few the leading Shi'i scholars from Iraq including Ayatollah Mirza Ḥossein Naini and Ayatollah Sayyid Abul Hasan al-Esfahani, were expelled from the country because of their resistance for the imposition of a British mandate. Thus, they relocated to Qom and Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi welcomed them warmly, encouraging them to teach in his place during their tenure in Qom³⁰. Not only did his visible association with these prominent exiles enhance his own prestige, but this temporary time away from his teaching obligations gave him the opportunity to concentrate on the organisational matters during the early months of the revival of the *Hawza*. Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi had brought with him his wealth of experience from his time in the Islamic seminaries in Iraq and consequently made several changes to improve the academic system. He also improved the teaching methods by applying the curriculum used in Najaf and introducing annual examinations into the seminary. As with most great leaders, Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi understood the importance of delegating responsibilities to his closest aides. Nevertheless, he personally involved himself in the welfare of the students, often informally visiting them in their rooms. Additionally, he fixed a monthly stipend at three tomans and fifteen tomans for unmarried and married students respectively³¹. He stimulated and advocated discussion circles and deep critical thinking.

His other main achievement was the restoration and development of libraries and schools such as Dar al-Shifa and Madrasa Faiziyah. Aside from his work in the *Hawza*, Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi extended his efforts to the general population of Qom. When the devastating floods that overflowed through the city in 1934, many houses were destroyed. Subsequently, Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi used his efforts and influence to obtain from the Islamic endowments office a ninety-nine-year lease on land at Mobarakabad, a suburban village of Qom, and organized the construction of new houses on the land for the victims³². Additionally, he was also instrumental in establishing the Sahami and Fatemi hospitals within the city.

However, Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi's initiatives were not always received with approval. He envisioned expanding the seminary into a university with faculties of traditional medicine and mathematics, but it was confined to mainly the religious sciences and Arabic³³. One of his famous proposals was to send some graduates to Europe to learn foreign languages and modern sciences whilst they propagated Islam abroad. Unfortunately, his idea was viewed as a negative innovation and so the traditional Tehran bazaar merchants threatened to cut off their financial payments to the *Hawza* if he persisted with this plan³⁴. Nonetheless, Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi's leadership, religious and organisational skills enabled him to elevate the *Hawza* in Qom to a position of centrality within the religious discourse of life in Iran and almost if not fully competitive with the cities of Iraq.

³⁰ Hamid Algar

³¹ Ibid.

³² Michael Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution*, (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), p.96.

³³ James Buchan, *Days of God: The Revolution in Iran and Its Consequences*, (London: John Murray, 2013), p.82.

³⁴ Michael Fischer, p.85.

Apolitical Nature

Despite a theologian with high rank, Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi, made a conscious point of living a modest life in line with his principles. He led ascetic lifestyle which shunned worldly luxuries and avoided the world of power and politics as much as possible. Unlike other leading clerics of his generation, he had not actively been involved in the constitutional revolution (1906-1911). Rather he pursued a policy of quietism and disapproved of clerical involvement in political affairs³⁵. Quietism is contrasted with "activist" Islam within Shi'i political doctrine³⁶. Shi'a Islam had been 'quietist' in nature since the 6th Imam, Jafar al-Sadiq, preached quietism in the wake of the Abbasid dynasty in 750 CE. Since the occultation of the 12th Imam, Shi'i clerics have long debated their role in politics. The "quietist" school was rooted in the sect's tradition of seeking to avoid confrontation with powerful rulers and argues against direct engagement in political matters³⁷.

Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi always tried his best to avoid politics, however he was not always successful. As mentioned above, he first migrated from Iran to Najaf and later to Karbala to ensure his distance from the clergy's involvement in the Constitutional Revolution. Later, his time in Qom coincided with the dictatorial rule of Reza Shah (1925-1941). Life for the scholars in Qom under Reza Shah had become relatively challenging as they were systemically affected by the Shah's anti-clericalism and secularism policies³⁸. The Shah's forced policies were somewhat inspired by the Turkish leader, Mustafa Kemal's model of an authoritative and secular government.

Nonetheless, despite being deeply concerned by Reza Shah's vehement policies, due to either his evident apolitical nature or simply because he did not have the means to openly challenge the Shah, Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi refrained from being politically active and openly denouncing the Shah. He even abstained from publicly reacting to the arrest and banishment of Ayatollah Bafqi on March 1928 and continued to remain patient during the 1935 Goharshad Mosque massacre when a number of people protested the Shah's policies of which between 800-1200 died, 100-500 wounded and 800 arrested³⁹. Seeing as the *Hawza* was on its way to regaining its former glory, Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi was aware that opposition to the government could have potentially damaged the renaissance of the *Hawza*. When Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi was questioned by his students on his silence to the Shah's policies, he responded that they had a higher priority which was to safeguard and ensure the survival of the *Hawza*⁴⁰. However, Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi finally reacted in 1935 during the Kashf-e hijab era when the Shah issued a decree banning all veils including the headscarf and chadors which was enforced by police and even led to some violent episodes. This provoked Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi to send a

³⁵ Baqer Moin, p.22.

³⁶ Bernard Lewis, *Islamic Revolution*, Retrieved from The New York Review of Books: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1988/jan/21/islamic-revolution/>

³⁷ Rainer Brunner, 'Shiism in the Modern Context: From Religious Quietism to Political Activism' in *Religion Compass*, 3, 1, 2009.

³⁸ Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, p.261.

³⁹ Steven Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces* (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2009) p.140.

⁴⁰ Mehdi Khalaji, 'Shiite Clergy's Silence toward Syrian Crisis' The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 2016.

telegram to Reza Shah protesting his policies. The only reply he received was a message from prime minister Mohammad Ali Foroughi who commanded him to attend himself with his own affairs⁴¹.

In contrast to Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi, Ayatollah Khomeini's attitude to politics in his later years was the opposite to his teacher. Ayatollah Khomeini refrained in engaging in any political activities during the 1930's as he believed the highest religious scholars should be the ones in engaging in political activities. At the time, he was a still junior figure in Qom and hence would not have enough credibility have been to mobilize the masses on a national scale⁴². Thus, Ayatollah Khomeini bitterly observed the monarch's anti-Islamic measures, he shunned politics and concentrated on his theological studies. The calm academic lifestyle that Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi had created in Qom enabled Ayatollah Khomeini in becoming a mujtahid. Therefore, Khomeini was obliged to follow Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi's decision to remain relatively passive toward the measures taken by Reza Shah against the traditions and culture of Islam in Iran.

As with most high ranking academic institutes, religious seminaries often have competitive atmosphere. Most clergy men competed for influence and status within the seminaries. They did so by vying for the best seats at a meeting or ensuring that they had a number of followers accompanying them wherever they want; however, Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi was different. Despite having around 300 students who regularly attended his talks, he would often walk unaccompanied with his cloak under his arm – a style Ayatollah Khomeini would later emulate⁴³ – and was more concerned about caring for his blind wife, personally attending to all her needs⁴⁴. His simple aesthetic lifestyle later had a profound impact on the way Ayatollah Khomeini led his personal life.

Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi

Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi had two sons by the names of Morteza Haeri Yazdi and Mehdi Haeri Yazdi. Both of his children went on to become distinguished scholars in their own right. Ayatollah Morteza Haeri Yazdi remained in Qom and taught in the seminaries. One of his most distinguished students is the current president of Iran, President Hassan Rouhani⁴⁵. Ayatollah Morteza Haeri Yazdi also became a close associate and supporter of Ayatollah Khomeini during the revolution. His daughter was married to Ayatollah Khomeini's oldest son, Mustafa, who passed away before the revolution.

Elsewhere, Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi, chose a somewhat different path for himself. He studied Islamic jurisprudence and Islamic philosophy under his father and other prominent scholars. At the age of twenty-eight he received his ordination as an Ayatollah from Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi, who had become the main Shi'a authority after the death of his father⁴⁶. However instead of remaining in Qom, Ayatollah Mehdi

⁴¹ Hamid Algar

⁴² Abdar Rahman Koya, *Iman Khomeini: Life, Thought and Legacy* (Malaysia: Islamic Trust, 2010), p.27.

⁴³ Edward Willett, *Ayatollah Khomeini*, (New York City: Rosen Publishing Group, 2003), p.17.

⁴⁴ Baqer Moin, p.23.

⁴⁵ Mehran Tamadonfar, *Islamic Law and Governance in Contemporary Iran: Transcending Islam for Social, Economic, and Political Order*, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), p. 257.

⁴⁶ Meysam Badamchi, 'Reasonableness, Rationality and Government: The Liberal Political Thought of Mehdi Ha'eri Yazdi' in *Iranian Studies*, 47,5, 2014.

Haeri Yazdi chose to move to Tehran⁴⁷. He earned his doctorate from the University of Tehran in the field of theology and became a member of faculty at Tehran University's theology department⁴⁸. He was reportedly sent to Washington by Ayatollah Borujerdi to provide for the religious needs of Persian students where he established the Islamic Education Centre (IEC) in an effort to spread Islam in North America⁴⁹. He also worked as a visiting professor at Georgetown University where he taught Eastern Existentialist Philosophy, a topic only few were familiar with. Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi was just one of three individuals in the world at the time who had specialized in this field and had written books on it. During his time in the Western hemisphere, he increasingly developed a strong interest in Western philosophy, particularly the works of Immanuel Kant and David Hume. After spending time in the United States, Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi moved to Canada where he earned a doctorate in analytical philosophy from the University of Toronto in 1979⁵⁰. He later returned to Iran to teach Islamic philosophy at the university of Tehran ⁵¹.

Thus, Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi occupies an unrivalled position amongst debates on modernity and Islam, particularly in Iran. A combination of his knowledge and expertise on Islamic philosophy and theology together with his secular education in modern Western philosophy enabled him to explore the fundamental issues of modernity and Islam through a unique lens⁵². Additionally, he is one of the rare jurists to approach governance from a philosophical perspective, as he believed politics belongs to a branch of practical ethics⁵³.

Aside from his philosophical endeavours, Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi is perhaps most known for his proclaimed opposition to Ayatollah Khomeini's theory of *Velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist) – the constitutional structure of Iran since 1979. Despite having once studied mystical philosophy under Ayatollah Khomeini, including the famous al-Asfar al-Arba'a (The four journeys), a mystical text written by Mulla Sadra, the two men later shared a somewhat complicated relationship⁵⁴. Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi also objected other policies implemented by Ayatollah Khomeini such as the uncompromised position to end the Iran-Iraq War during the 1980s when he personally went to visit him at his house and asked him to bring an end to the blood shed between Muslims⁵⁵.

With regards to the political doctrine of *Velayat-e faqih*, Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi specifically rejected the justification for rule of an Islamic state by "Islamic jurists". Subsequently, he went on to publish his objection to *Velayat-e faqih* in his book *Hekmat va Hokumat* (Philosophy and Government). The book was published in London but was denied permission to be published in Iran. Even with this fact, the book has since been

⁴⁷ Farzin Vahdat, *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity*, (London: Anthem Press, 2015), p.142.

⁴⁸ Meysam Badamchi

⁴⁹ Yasin Al-Jibouri, *Mary and Jesus in Islam*, (Indiana: AuthorHouse, 2011), p.19.

⁵⁰ Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity*, (Maryland: Lexington Books., 2004), p.52.

⁵¹ Farzin Vahdat, p.142.

⁵² Ramin Jahanbegloo, p.51.

⁵³ Hamid Mavani, *Religious Authority and Political Thought in Twelver Shi'ism: From Ali to Post-Khomeini*, (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2013)

⁵⁴ Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2007), p.119.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

widely distributed in Iran⁵⁶. Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi argues that in traditional Shi'a Islamic jurisprudence, guardianship is only applicable in the cases of minors (*saghīr*) and people with an incompetent mind (*majnūn*), not for autonomous individuals who can claim the right of property and citizenship⁵⁷. He further argues that the concept of *Velayat-e faqih* is misleading both philosophically and theologically. Philosophically, it deprives individuals of their rights and denies their human autonomy. Consequently, this can lead to despotism. Theologically, Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi questions the validity of the guardianship of the jurist theory within Islam. According to Shi'i Islamic teaching, the divine right to rule is bounded solely to infallibles and they are the only ones who have access to a mystically illuminated knowledge about reality and existence⁵⁸. Therefore, he argues, no fallible person, including a Muslim jurist, can claim a right to political leadership and divine *velayat* (authority). Thus, since the guardianship of the jurist attributes the divine right of ruling to fallible people, from an Islamic theological perspective in his opinion, the theory of *Velayat-e faqih* is deeply flawed.

Aside from a critique of *Velayat-e faqih*, in *Hekmat va Hokumat*, Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi sought to provide a detailed explanation of his philosophical approach to governance that provides a definitive basis for a secular government and the separation of religion and state. He proposed a 'principle of representation' (*vekalat*) as the principle of organisation in a democratic society that should replace the institution of the 'Guardianship of the Jurist'. His proposal incorporated a full parliamentary system and the election of public officials who are unconditionally accountable⁵⁹. Thus, it is seemingly evident, unlike his brother, who was an advocate of *Velayat-e faqih*, Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi was influenced greatly by his father's apolitical nature and the separation of religion and state.

Conclusion

Ayatollah Abd al-Karim Haeri Yazdi passed away on 30 January 1937 (1355 AH) at the age of eighty-four. The funeral prayers were led by Mirza Fakhr al-Din Qomi, and was buried in the holy shrine of Fatima Massoumeh. Mourning for him was widespread beyond the city of Qom but public expressions of it were stifled by the government. It is widely acknowledged amongst the scholars that the *Hawza* in Qom today has managed to garner the prestige it has because of the immense efforts made by Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi in reviving the seminary.

With his passing away, the *Hawza* continued to survive under the tripartite leadership of Ayatollah Hojjat, Ayatollah Sayyid Sadr, and Ayatollah Sayyid Khonsari until Ayatollah Borujerdi eventually took over in 1946 and furthered the development of the *Hawza*.

Aside from his legacy of turning the *Hawza* of Qom into one of the most important scientific and cultural centre of Islam, Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi is mostly remember for his asceticism and simple life, both before and after he became a *Marji' al-Taqlid*. Despite writing on numerous jurisprudential topics and leaving behind several works including

⁵⁶ Hamid Mavani

⁵⁷ Ramin Jahanbegloo, p.65.

⁵⁸ Meysam Badamchi

⁵⁹ Farzin Vahdat, p.159.

Kitab ar-Ridha, and Kitab as-Salaat, his scholarly legacy is somewhat relatively less compared to other scholars. This was largely due to the result of his preoccupation with managing the revival of the *Hawza* and teaching. The magnitude of his influence is perhaps demonstrated by the fact that nearly all the significant scholar's active during the revolution had been his students. Aside from Ayatollah Khomeini, other eminent scholars who studied under him were Grand Ayatollah Shaykh Muhammad Ali Araki and Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Rida Gulpaygani.

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