



CURRENT ISSUE

[table of contents](#)

FEATURES

[new democracy forum](#)[new fiction forum](#)[poetry](#)[fiction](#)[film](#)[archives](#)

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[masthead](#)[mission](#)[rave reviews](#)[contests](#)[writers' guidelines](#)[internships](#)[advertising](#)

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Inside the Madrasa

A personal history

Ebrahim Moosa

▶▶As I walked one morning last spring through the town of Deoband, home to India's famous Sunni Muslim seminary, a clean-shaven man, his face glowing with sarcasm, called out to me. "Looking for terrorists?" he asked in Urdu. "I have every right to visit my alma mater," I protested. With a sheepish grin he turned and walked away.

I shouldn't have been so annoyed. The century-old seminary in Deoband had come under intense scrutiny after the Taliban leadership claimed an ideological affiliation with it via seminaries in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Journalists, politicians, and diplomats have since September 11 descended periodically on this town near Delhi in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, long considered the intellectual and spiritual heartland of Indian Islam.

Once the Taliban was linked to Bin Laden, every aspect of India's Muslim seminaries, or madrasas, became stigmatized. Top-level U.S. officials, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and a chorus of journalists, pundits, and scholars have declared all madrasas to be breeding grounds for terrorists, but they have done so without any evidence and without an understanding of the complexity of these networks of schools, which are associated with multiple Muslim sects and ideologies. They have drowned out reasonable voices—for example, Peter Bergen and William Dalrymple—who argue that not all madrasas can be indicted in the war on terror. But even their sympathetic gestures fall short of providing a realistic picture of what happens inside madrasas or humanizing their inhabitants.

Had I not been defensive, I would have told the man from Deoband that I had lived and studied in several Indian madrasas between 1975 and 1981. A quarter century later, I had returned—

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not in search of terrorists, but to try to create a bridge between the world inside the walls and the outside.

* * *

“Wednesday 23 April 1975: The start of our four months in India. We slept after reading two *raka’as* (formal Muslim prayers). After *fajr* (pre-dawn prayers) and *ishraq* (optional after-sunrise prayers) we slept again. This was at Khar mosque in Bandra, Bombay.” So reads the first entry I made in my diary on my six-year journey in India’s madrasas.

Mumbai, known as Bombay in 1975, was a bewildering city for an 18-year-old kid from Cape Town, South Africa. Nothing prepared me for the intimidating throng of beggars and street urchins outside the airport, the countless people sleeping on sidewalks, and the heavy-laden monsoon air and strong odors. At the time I wasn’t aware of the full impact of the “state of emergency” that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had imposed to silence her critics, but I knew that fear surrounded me: people whispered about danger and secret arrests. I suddenly understood my father’s reluctance to let me go.

Deciding to study in India was its own journey that began with a crisis of faith. I was barely 16 when a classmate, a Jehovah’s Witness, brought some stinging anti-Islamic literature to our class. I still hear Gabriel reading: “Muhammad was an impostor who spread his message by the sword and was unworthy of being a prophet.” And he added, “Actually, Muhammad cribbed his teachings from Jews and Christians whom he met during his travels.” I had learned at the daily religious school sessions—also called madrasa in South Africa—that as a youth the Prophet Muhammad traveled to Syria with his uncle and was even anointed by a Christian monk. But never did I suspect the Prophet of treachery. This first exposure to the hostility some Christians harbor toward Muslims crushed my unchallenged sense of faith. But the encounter also started me thinking critically about Islam: it would change my life.

A trip to the library did little to reassure me. The refined prose of authors like Sir William Muir and Montgomery Watt leveled the same charges against Muhammad and claims to Islam’s authenticity. On reflection, it seems rather odd that as devout Christians and rational Scotsmen, Muir and (perhaps less so) Watt found it plausible that God could be incarnate in a man from

Nazareth but incredible that a seventh-century Arab could prophesy as the Jewish prophets did.

I later found comfort with a group called the Tabligh Jamat. The Arabic word *tabligh* means “to convey or transmit.” The Tabligh Jamat consisted of lay Muslims reminding their co-religionists of their religious duties. I attended their pious circle at my neighborhood mosque in District Six, Cape Town’s multiethnic and defiant cultural center, where I lived during the school week. Several years later, apartheid’s architects would obliterate District Six to remove any evidence that the coexistence of different races was possible and assign us to racially segregated ghettos.

But questions about my faith persisted. My doubts—and my existential anxiety as a person of color in this white-supremacist world—became unbearable. My plans to become an engineer slowly gave way to another obsession. I wanted to go to India to study the faith of my ancestors, to reconcile that faith with reason. My mother was sympathetic to my cause, but my father didn’t want to see his eldest son as a poor cleric dependent on the benevolence of the community. Born and raised in South Africa, he hardly performed the daily rituals or attended Friday prayers, giving priority to his business. He relented, though, when my aunts reminded him of the promise of paradise for learned scholars of Islam and the Qur’an as well as their benefactors.

* * *

In my heart I was following my mother’s prayers. She had come to South Africa as a 19-year-old bride from Gujarat. Far from close relatives and burdened with domestic chores in an extended family with seven children, one of whom died in infancy, she took refuge in religion. In particularly tough times she would share with me, her eldest, the religious lore she learnt in her childhood in the village of Dehgaam, of how the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter, Fatima, endured life’s trials.

My grandiose plan was also an escape from the drudgery of life: South Africa’s third-rate segregated schools, where discipline was violent and dictatorial, and the weekends and vacations working in the family grocery store in a seaside town 30 miles away. I was aware of the country’s segregationist politics; but I knew little of the lives of black South Africans, and I did not see the black unrest that would erupt on June 16, 1976, after I had been in India just more than a year.

When I arrived in Bombay, Tabligh volunteers received me and the rest of our group; I had agreed to spend four months in the Tabligh program before entering a madrasa. The brainchild of an Indian cleric, Muhammad Ilyas, who felt the teachings of Islam were not reaching the grass-roots faithful in British India, the Tabligh has no real bureaucratic administration, but its presence is felt in almost every corner of the globe. Resigning from his teaching position at a prestigious madrasa in the 1920s, Ilyas devoted himself, against tremendous odds, to revival work (*da'wa*) in the Mewat, a region straddling two states, Rajasthan and Haryana. He used a small mosque, the Banglawali Masjid, as his base in Delhi, where he cultivated his core of loyal associates. On the same site today a Spartan mosque serves as the international center (*markaz*) of the Tabligh.

Ilyas had a simple but highly effective evangelical message that he had boiled down to five points to mirror Islam's five cardinal pillars of practice: grasp the true meaning and implications of the creedal statement that there is no deity except Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger; pray conscientiously five times a day; acquire learning and engage in the frequent remembrance of God; honor fellow believers; and participate in missionary work (*da'wa*) by spreading awareness of Islam. The Tabligh now hosts some of the largest Muslim gatherings, involving millions of participants on the subcontinent and around the world.

Working with the Tabligh was a grueling ordeal; and overcoming culture shock in India was daunting. We stayed at mosques, ate very basic meals, navigated treacherous roads, and traveled in overcrowded trains. By the lights of my naive faith, eternal damnation awaited these millions of Hindus apparently devoted to idols. In just weeks, India taught me to ask the first and enduring question about the workings of divine justice: how was it possible that a just God could promise me paradise and damn all these people who look like me? Years later, I would discover that many thinkers in the monotheistic tradition were confronted by similar questions, including the 12th-century thinker Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, about whom I would later write a book.

I cut short my four months with the Tabligh to three and headed for the Madrasa Sabilur Rashad in Bangalore along with two other South Africans I met in the Tabligh. At the austere walled campus I found dozens of students apart from the majority South Indians and the few from my home country—young men from Trinidad and Tobago, Malaysia, Indonesia, the United States, and a lone

Cuban. I occupied the fourth thin mattress in a sparse and cramped dorm room with a West Indian, an African-American, and the Cuban. The latter two would in pursuit of piety rise at 3 a.m. for optional prayers and liturgy, tormenting the rest of us for not doing the same. I saw this “calculator mentality” often in the Tabligh—the preoccupation with rewards for performing certain acts of piety and an attitude that these roommates celebrated.

Daily madrasa routine would begin at least an hour before sunrise with preparation for the early-morning prayers. Afterward students remained at the mosque to read a portion of the Qur’an. Others used the early morning hours to memorize the Qur’an, known as *hifz*. Breakfast would follow in the dining hall, called “the mess,” a reminder that the British had ruled India. Breakfast consisted of South Indian *idli* (lentil-rice patties), a crispy *roti* (baked bread), and *chai* (tea boiled in milk). Most foreign students made breakfast in their rooms with a spread of eggs, toast, and *chai*.

I had arrived at the madrasa only one month before it closed for the long Ramadan break, the end of the academic year. But in that short time I chafed at the highly regimented and pietistic environment and, worst of all, the cafeteria food. I took a class on memorizing portions of the Qur’an for liturgical purposes and perfecting my recitation of the holy book. The six-hour day of memorization was tedious, and students would take frequent bathroom breaks, sip lots of tea, and play surreptitiously to pass the time. The day’s memorized passage, as well as back lessons, were recited to an instructor at least twice daily. It took up to three full years to memorize the entire Qur’an. Not having budgeted such a length of time, I selected chapters, which would be useful in the classroom or in delivering sermons, as well as for liturgy. Since all instruction was in Urdu, I also threw myself into learning both Urdu and Arabic in private lessons.

But after almost four months in India, I had yet to enroll in an *alimiyya* program, required for gaining the knowledge and skills of an *alim*, the Arabic word for “a learned person.” (The plural, *ulama*, is today used to refer to Muslim clerics.) I spent the Ramadan break with my maternal grandfather, visiting my parents’ ancestral villages in Gujarat, near Bharuch, a bustling city on the banks of the Narmada River. On the outskirts of Bharuch I discovered a small madrasa, Darul Uloom Matliwala, supported by an affluent South African family and enrolling some 200 students at the time.

The centerpiece of the seminary was a three-level Parsee bungalow. Parsees are followers of Zoroastrianism, an ancient religion of Persia. They straddle Indian and Anglo cultures and often speak both English and Gujarati. The bungalow was large enough to accommodate several classrooms and administrative space. To the side of the sprawling compound on Eidgah Road was a beautiful mosque of pastel greens surrounded by palms and a well-maintained garden. A student dormitory abutted the tilled fields that ran down to the banks of the Narmada.

The pace was relaxed and congenial. I decided to enroll. By coincidence, three other fellow South Africans came to study as a private cohort with a brilliant teacher, Mawlana Ibrahim Patni, who allowed me to join his group. Mawlana Patni's talents were such that he could have succeeded as a lawyer or businessman. For the first few months we four would spend most of the day at the back of a class with dozens of 12-to-14-year-olds who were taking elementary classes in the pre-alimiyya program. We were on average 18 years old, writing with white chalk on child-sized black slate boards. At first we hardly understood the day classes we were auditing, but as the weeks and months progressed, things became clearer. By year-end I had a good handle on Urdu, and my Arabic was coming along.

As I adjusted to my new life, I also learned that my naive views about madrasas were not immune to contradiction. Puritanism reigned, and sex was taboo. I recall one evening in Bangalore when the Cuban student raised the alarm in the dorms, claiming that he had caught two Indian students in a homosexual embrace in the bathroom. I was scandalized, and the revelation haunted me for weeks. At home and in the madrasa I was taught that heterosexual conduct outside marriage was forbidden (and had life-threatening consequences); homosexuality was an unthinkable abomination.

Within a few months at the Bharuch madrasa I received my second jolt: I learned that it was an open secret that one of the teachers had sexual relations with younger men or perhaps even boys. Disturbed, but less shaken this time, I was getting a reality check. The personal lives of teachers and fellow students would not be my biggest concern. I realized that Bharuch was a provincial city and the madrasa lacked the more robust intellectual environment I sought, which was available in reputable North Indian madrasas.

After a year in Gujarat, I headed for Darul Uloom Deoband—the most prominent and prestigious madrasa for those affiliated with the Deobandi interpretation of the Sunni sect. Deoband, legend has it, was named after the goddess Durga, who in ancient times lived in the dense forest (*van*) near a lake (*kund*). It then became known as the ‘forest of the goddess’ (*devi van*) or ‘lake of the goddess’ (*devi kund*), which became corrupted to Deoband.

Today, the small town of Deoband, 98 miles from the Indian capital, Delhi, is typical, with open air markets, bookstores, food stalls, grocers, barbers, Internet cafes, and telephone exchanges. On its congested roads, man, animals, and vehicles vie for space. Locals joke that Deoband is famous for five things starting with the letter *m*: *moulvis* (Muslim clerics), *masjid* (mosque), *mandir* (temple), *matchchar* (mosquitoes) and *makkhi* (flies). But the spacious courtyard of Darul Uloom Deoband, in its serenity and historical grandeur, is reminiscent of Castalia in Hesse’s *The Glass Bead Game*: a place without family, amusements, poverty, and hunger, but dedicated to learning and hierarchy. Inside the red-brick walls, a large green cupola rises, dominating the landscape. The madrasa is built like a medieval fort, with four main gates and a courtyard marking the administrative and teaching spaces. Enclosing a larger courtyard replete with manicured lawns and simple flower gardens are extremely modest student residences. A majestic white marbled mosque now looms outside Madani Gate of the main campus.

* * *

Deoband was founded in 1867 in the aftermath of the failed Indian rebellion against British rule. With the defeat of the Moghuls, Muslim India divided into two intellectual paths. One saw the future secured in the embrace of modernity; this school established secular universities such as Aligarh Muslim University, founded by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan. The other embraced tradition through religious schools, madrasas.

Deoband’s intellectual architect, Muhammad Qasim Nanautvi, a man of ascetic taste, a committed traditionalist, and a tireless anti-imperialist, belonged to the latter group. He and Khan were contemporaries and, as evident in their extensive and at times hostile correspondence, clashed over the meaning and place of Islam in the modern world. According to Khan, modern rationalism and science were compatible with a new interpretation of Islam—his. Older and more established

doctrines, he believed, might have to be modified, if not jettisoned. (Khan did have his limits—he never entirely reconciled himself with the role of women in modern society.) Nanautvi was also a rationalist, but for him rationalism did not mean modern Western rationality like Descartes and Spinoza. It was, instead, a very early form of Greco-Arabic rationality consisting of Euclidean geometry and Aristotelian logic in the service of the old theological formulations of faith. Even today, this rationalist framework at Deoband and similar schools effectively exclude modern science.

Despite his anti-imperialism, Nanautvi did find European bureaucratic modernity attractive. He was trained at Delhi College, established by the British East India Company. He institutionalized exams, salaries for faculty, stipends for students, and an administrative system at Deoband modeled in part on Delhi College.

Nanautvi and his descendants controlled the main campus of Deoband until 1981 when rivals ousted Nanautvi's aging grandson during an extended student strike that led to the closure of the institution. The reasons for the schism remain unclear. Students and their supporters at the time leveled charges of nepotism at the leadership and demanded better living conditions and some modernization of the syllabus. Ironically, the ousted administration had been planning to radically transform the Deoband madrasa with the support of a new hastily formed council that was later deemed to be unconstitutional. Two decades later very little had changed at the main Deoband campus. In fact, a breakaway madrasa, a cloned version of the main Deoband madrasa, has sprung up not far from the original campus. The new facility housed some 1,500 students, whereas the main campus housed over 3,000 students.

Deoband and other madrasas on the Indian subcontinent differed from their counterparts elsewhere in the Muslim world: they were privately funded. In fact, their *raison d'être* was resisting the state, in particular the influences of British rule and the spread of modernity through westernized Muslim elites. In contrast, Cairo's al-Azhar and other schools in the Middle East had lost their independence to secular governments, who turned religion and clerics into extensions of the state and coerced modernization in certain areas.

For idealistic young men like me, who landed on the subcontinent

in the mid-1970s in search of salvation and identity, the madrasas of India and Pakistan were presented as genuine bastions of tradition. We viewed institutions and scholars throughout the Middle East with disdain: they were feckless, robbed of intellectual vigor by governments that were slavish to foreign powers and uninterested in indigenous talents and history. Despite meager resources (extremely meager compared to the bourgeois comforts to which I had become accustomed), the madrasas had great legitimacy in our hearts and minds.

Being a student at Deoband was for me at first a dizzying experience. I devoured my texts, and they opened up worlds to me. Madrasa education drives home the sacred nature of knowledge. One is taught to show the utmost respect for the bearers of knowledge, teachers, and the instruments of learning, books. Novices quickly learn that some scholars cannot even tolerate the sight of paper lying in the street; carelessly discarded paper is the desecration of knowledge. Texts are not only symbols of learning, but markers of progress, too. So, for instance, if you ask a student what year of the program he is in, he will cite the text he is studying; only an insider could translate the name of that text into a specific year of the curriculum.

We studied books that were written in the tenth century and earlier, as well as those from the 15th to 20th centuries. The beauty of the textual tradition lies precisely in its discordant variety: texts serve as palimpsests of the ancient and the modern world. The best professors not only translated and clarified the text; they made an effort to link the ancient world to contemporary realities.

Law, called *fiqh* in Arabic, is the mainstay of the madrasa curriculum. *Fiqh* is actually moral discourse that proposes ethical guidelines for society. Learning the classical *fiqh* texts was exciting and awesome; after all, learning the practices advanced by tradition confers a certain responsibility and authority. I initially held out the hope that the proper application of *fiqh* would create an ideal Muslim society, only to find out that it would take more than law. I was disturbed, too, that some of what passes as the execution of Sharia practices involved gruesome amputations and floggings. I believed that if there were other ways to deter murder and theft they would be preferable to the practices of early centuries. There were few teachers to whom one could air such doubts. Most would respond with dire warnings of the spiritual and theological hazards of such thinking.

Even as students we would lampoon some of what we were taught, questioning its utility. For instance, in the *fiqh* class there were endless discussions about seven types of water usable to secure ritual purity: rain, sea, river, and well water, followed by water melted from snow and ice, and, finally spring water. Most of us had only seen water from the taps and wells, and few students from rural India would have had seen snow or the sea, except for in pictures—and pictures were rare, since images of animate objects were taboo. But thoughtful professors would transform arcane lessons into broader discussions, for example about the validity of recycled water for ritual purposes, a possibility unimaginable to the medieval authors of our texts.

* * *

Critics often charge the madrasa system of anachronism, a charge that is partly true. Defenders of the traditional curriculum, which was devised by the 18th-century scholar Mulla Nizamuddin, insist on the supreme pedagogical value of the old texts. They believe that, apart from connecting students to the canonical tradition, the “Nizami curriculum” enhances one’s mastery of every discipline and enables scholars to solve any contemporary problem. But few have been able to rebut the charge that the texts used are redundant and at times impenetrable, save to a few scholars who have spent their lives mastering them. Indeed most texts are frustratingly terse, forcing teachers and students to scour commentaries and super-commentaries for help. The multiple levels of calligraphic marginalia on each textbook page were decorative, but they were taxing to the eyes and mind. For decades critics have petitioned for more lucid texts. But inertia has turned the texts and syllabus into inviolable monuments to the past. The result is that students are poorly prepared and lack the confidence to engage the tradition critically to meet the needs of a changing world. At its worst the system recycles intellectual mediocrity as piety.

After three years in India I started asking questions about the relevance of the texts and how to apply their insights in the modern world and, especially, in South Africa. By now I had become acutely aware of the political challenges of my home country: racism, and the intransigence of the Muslim clergy there to speak out against the evil of apartheid. Reading the uncensored Indian press and following political developments at home through the literature of Nelson Mandela’s banned African National Congress, all impressed upon me the challenges I would

face in South Africa. My restlessness drove me to read widely and independently—especially literature written by more contemporary authors. One such author was Mawlana Abul Ala Mawdudi, whom most teachers in Deoband reviled and for whom only the bravest expressed guarded admiration. Mawdudi was the gadfly among clerics who pushed for what is called “political Islam.”

Mawdudi rose to prominence during the dying years of British colonialism and after partition moved to the new state of Pakistan. While he had the credentials, he was not a member of the clerical elite, being for most of his life an autodidact, a gifted writer and founder of a continent-wide social movement known as the Jamat-e Islami. Mawdudi’s prolific writings guaranteed him audiences among modern educated Muslims. As the traditionalist ulama bickered with him on petty issues, Mawdudi emphasized the social dimensions of Islam as an ideology. If Muslims conceived of Islam as a social teaching then they could build new societies. Establishing an Islamic state, fully backed by Islamic laws and institutions, was one of Mawdudi’s ideals. Mawdudi was an ideologue with a vision, a political program, and international influence. Sayyid Qutb, the prominent Egyptian writer and ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood was persuaded by Mawdudi’s analysis that secular materialism was akin to the days of ignorance, *jahiliyya*, at the birth of Islam.

I thus discovered an interpretation of Islam outside the walls of the madrasa where I could find inspiration and guidance for building society from an Islamic platform. The ancient texts I was studying suddenly seemed musty and stale.

An overbearing government clerk who told my father that my expired passport could not be renewed unless I returned home changed everything. During my subsequent—and, as it turned out, unnecessary—three-month trip to South Africa in 1978, I realized I had been living in a cloistered world. Just seeing the people of Cape Town made me begin to question everything: my lifestyle, attire, ideas about my future. Up to that point, I had hardly spent time in Indian cities; nor did I watch television, go to movies, or listen to music because of the strict moral code I had followed for three years. I had given away all my Western clothes, vowing to wear only what I then believed was “Islamic dress”: the typical loose-fitting knee-length tunic, called a *kurta*, and loose-fitting pants.

I now knew that if I were to follow the rules of Deoband, not only would my life in South Africa be restricted—I had come to the madrasa to escape such confinement—but so too would be my emotional and intellectual development.

On my return to India I stepped into the precincts of Deoband wearing a T-shirt and jeans, a cavalier affront to my immediate friends. Even though the act was largely symbolic—I would continue to wear the conventional attire—I spurred a debate among close friends about what I thought were the deficiencies in the madrasas. Fellow students and a few teachers predictably labeled me a “modernist,” an insult. Some of my younger teachers who often gently challenged my views, helped me realize how self-righteous I had been in the past about an Islamic dress code and the superiority of the interpretations of madrasa authorities on virtually every matter.

It was time to move on. I was still determined to complete the *alimiyya* program, but I needed to find a madrasa with less emphasis on texts. I explored opportunities to study in Libya, Iraq, and Egypt to little avail. I was less of an idealist by now, and the burden of becoming independent started to weigh on me as I approached 21. Taking over the family business was certainly not an option; I needed to find a vocation.

I decided to transfer to Darul Uloom Nadwatul Ulama, a madrasa in the capital of Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow. Nadwa was located on the banks of the Gomti River, which flows through this historic Mughal city, reputed for its refined culture, food, and aesthetic taste and a place where people still feel nostalgia for the days of nobility. In Mughal times this region was known as Oudh, and its rulers were mostly those who followed the Shia rite. In my student days there were occasional Sunni–Shia tensions around the beginning of the Islamic month of Muharram, signaling the Muslim New Year, when public exhibitions of Shia passion plays rekindled ancient grievances underlying the sectarian split within Islam more than a millennium ago. Yet Lucknow was a city that took pride in civility.

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Moving from Deoband to Nadwa is in effect like transferring from the Vatican to a liberal divinity school. Deobandis look askance at Nadwa: in addition to being too modern and too liberal for the Deoband temper, it is more internationalist in outlook. Its former

president, the late Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, was internationally reputed in the Muslim world. A one-time colleague of Mawdudi, with whom he ~~would~~ later had differences, he was clearly enchanted by Qutb and the Muslim Brotherhood. He wrote extensively on the plight of Muslims in the 20th century and mobilized for their welfare and advancement. Nadwa received a great deal of support from foundations and individuals in the Arabian Gulf, and the campus boasts significant upgrades over the last three decades. Ali Nadwi was a descendent of the Prophet's family and was therefore known as a *sayyid*. He wrote mainly in Arabic and strongly believed that a renaissance among the Arabs would have a salutary influence on the rest of the Muslim world. I think that toward the end of his life he was less sanguine about such an outcome.

Nadwatul Ulama was launched in 1898 by a broad spectrum of *ulama*, traditionalists to modernists, who all believed that the Deoband-type madrasa education did not equip students for the challenges of modern life. Placing a greater emphasis on the liberating message of the Qur'an, Nadwa favored certain departures from the traditional curriculum and emphasized the study of history. Nadwa's motto was "Synthesizing the profitable past with the useful modern." Nadwa's tolerance to intra-Sunni differences made it attractive. Students adhering to the Barelwi school of thought, a more Platonic interpretation of Islam that accepts elements of popular religion, and Salafis, those who follow a scripturalist interpretation, both rivals to Deoband, enroll at Nadwa to pursue different degrees. Students are allowed to attend class wearing Western dress, although the majority wear *kurtas*.

But while Nadwa offered me space to pursue my own interests, the curriculum was in the end not that different from Deoband. (On a recent visit to both places I was unable to tell the difference.) By now, too, the Nizami curriculum seemed largely redundant. Classes at Nadwa were not very demanding. And I was completely put off by the lifeless study of Islamic law, even though the philosophy and sociology animating law and ethics intrigues me to this day. On my own I frequented the British Library in the Hazratganj area of Lucknow and borrowed widely from Nadwa's excellent library collection to read new subjects—political science, economics, and English literature. I found Alex Haley's biography of Malcolm X inspirational and became totally enchanted by Muhammad Asad (Leopold Weiss), the author of *The Road to Mecca*, an account of an Austrian Jew's discovery of Islam and his life as an explorer, a confidante of kings and rulers, a scholar and

a diplomat. Asad and Malcolm X kindled in me the desire to write. I published an essay in Arabic in Nadwa's monthly newspaper and submitted op-ed pieces to the daily *Northern India Patrika* on politics and Islam.

In 1980 several international speakers attended a conference on Arabic literature held at Nadwa. A tall and imposing Egyptian lawyer and Princeton postgraduate, Mohammed Fathi Osman impressed me. We had several animated conversations about the Iranian revolution that had just occurred. Later, when I was about to graduate, I wrote Osman seeking advice. I received no reply, and decided to visit Egypt and explore a master's degree at al-Azhar in Cairo. By now I was thoroughly disabused of my earlier, negative views of Islamic education in the Middle East. But just weeks before I was to leave, Osman sent a message inviting me to join the staff of a promising new magazine, sponsored by liberal Saudis, that he was launching in London. The choice between studies in Egypt and journalism in the United Kingdom was a no-brainer. I grabbed the offer and set off for London. *Arabia: The Islamic World Review* turned out to be the beginning of my career as a journalist. Even though I moved on from *Arabia* after 18 months, its closure a decade later was a great loss to the world of progressive Islamic ideas.

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Spending six years inside India's madrasas left deep imprints that over time have become only more significant as I have grown further from my youthful indignation. If given a choice once again at age 18 between a madrasa and a university, I suspect I would opt for a madrasa.

I remain a critic of madrasa education—its inability to provide the big picture of Islamic ideas, its failure to effect the transformation of Muslim societies. Yet madrasas offer something of enormous value. Properly harnessed, they are repositories of classical learning and seed intellectual sophistication that might challenge the shallow discourses of fundamentalism and revivalism that often pass as Islam today. Madrasas are environments of Islamic cultivation of the self, culture, civility, wisdom, and life.

While madrasas are growing in number on the subcontinent, the cherished world of the madrasas of my youth is rapidly disappearing. Shrill rhetoric substitutes for critical and sober reflection as the battle lines are drawn between a triumphant

West and the madrasas who believe it is out to destroy them. This atmosphere breeds a debilitating defensiveness and a victim's mindset. Madrasas of the 21st century will continue to change. I fear that the West's insistence on casting madrasas as redoubts of terror and proposing invasive surveillance techniques and unilateral curriculum reforms will only force madrasas to retreat into more unpredictable modes of resistance. Madrasas may be forced to defend themselves by more militant means as the political rapids in countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh become more turbulent.

My experience in the madrasas is an atypical one: I crafted my own program and selected from what was on offer, whereas most conform to the prescribed syllabus and ideology. Yet as I continued in my work as a journalist, social activist, and then academic in South Africa and now in the United States, I have been able to recover the palimpsest of my madrasa education. I now appreciate these resources in ways madrasa authorities would not approve. Now, as I write about human rights, bioethics, Islamic law, and the ethical interpretation of the tradition, I can do so with confidence and argue that tradition is open to abuse and open to change. In my own thinking, writing, and activism I can push back against the many retrogressive forces and form productive associations with progressive ones. I doubt I would have had the courage to undertake some of this work otherwise. ■

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