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Islamic Education

WHAT IS A MADRASA? By Ebrahim Moosa. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015. Pp. 290. ISBN: 9781474401746.

For the last decade or so, “madrasa” has become a buzzword for various tropes, especially in the Western media. Since the 9/11 tragic attacks, the West’s attitude towards Muslims and their institutions, such as the madrasas, has taken a radical turn. The madrasas have come under severe criticism and are now under surveillance for being wrongly perceived to be breeding grounds of violence and terrorism.

Ibrahim Moosa, a scholar who benefited from a madrasa education as well as from modern education, attempts in the present book to clarify the reality of this important institution, to the outside world. At the same time, he also advocates reforms in the madrasa curriculum which, he believes, is important to revive the intellectual legacy of Islamic history.

Thematically arranged, and apart from a prologue and an epilogue, the book is divided into three parts, each consisting of two to four chapters. In the prologue, ‘Inside Madrasas’, the author mentions the two things that compelled him to embark on the task of writing about this institution: first, the distorted interpretation of Islam by certain extremist/terrorist groups which portrays a bad image of the madrasa; and, second, the hatred and Islamophobic narratives of the media about Islam and its institutions. While deconstructing the anti-madrasa perception prevalent in the West, the book also tackles Moosa’s life experience with madrasas, where he started his intellectual and spiritual journey, the role played by the madrasas, past and present, in the cultural, religious and intellectual experiences of Muslims, the inside story of the madrasas, especially the Deobandi ones.

Part one, “Lived Experience” (pp. 15–74), describes the author’s six-year experience as a madrasa student and the post-madrasa life of madrasa graduates. Moosa was a student in a number of madrasas. He started first his pursuit of knowledge in South Asia with the *Tablighi Jamā‘at* and later enrolled in madrasas in Bangalore, Gujarat, and finally at the *Nadwat al-‘Ulamā’*, India. The author takes the reader through the day-to-day madrasa life which includes worship, learning, teaching, piety, and other curricular activities spreading throughout the calendar year. He also mentions the tremendous services that these madrasa proffer on the community as a whole.

Moosa expresses concern at the reluctance of the Ulema to open up to pluralism and the secularisation of knowledge in madrasas, for 'the absence of modern knowledge from madrasa curricula,' he argues, 'results in intellectual deficit' (p. 73). The madrasa graduates, he states, remain mostly circumscribed in some religious activities such as *da'wah*, *imāmah* and teaching at madrasas. Supporting his argument for the integration of knowledge, he cites some great Muslim scholars such as Ibn Sīnā, al-Fārābī, Ibn Khaldūn, to name but a few, who never differentiated between secular and religious knowledge, whose combination produced an intellectual heritage the like of which is yet to be produced in our age (p. 51).

Part two, "History and Contexts", discusses, among other things, the origins of the contemporary madrasa, the most prominent classical texts in the madrasa curriculum, and the different phases of madrasa education in the sub-continent. Lastly, he criticises the prevalent madrasa curriculum that was once robust and vibrant but which has now lost its relevance.

Moosa states that the development of the contemporary madrasas in the subcontinent has in fact originated from two centres: the eighteenth century Farangi Mahal family of scholars in Lucknow; and the nineteenth-century Shāh Waliullāh family in Delhi. The *Dars-i Nizāmī*, the curriculum followed in South Asian madrasas to this day, still bears the name of Mullā Nizām al-Dīn of Farangi Mahal (d. 1748) who had helped standardise it. The different madrasas emerged due to different family franchises. The Deoband School is the culmination of the madrasa system which dominates the sub-continent but it includes others such as the madrasas of the Barelvi (after Ahmad Raza Khan) and those of the *Ahl-i Ḥadīth*.

Moosa further highlights the beauty and intricacies of some medieval Arabic texts read in madrasas such as *Nūr al-Īdāh wa Najāt al-Arwāḥ* (Light of Clarification and the Salvation of Souls); *Hidāyat al-Ḥikmah* (Guide to Wisdom), *al-Mirqāt* (the Ladder); *Kitāb al-Mawāqif* (Book of Stations), to name but a few. He laments that the *Nizāmī* curriculum has made significant adjustments which has made it more vibrant, tolerant and interdisciplinary.

Part three, "Politics of Knowledge", assesses the intent, content and forms of knowledge in the South Asian madrasas. According to Moosa, preserving the Prophet's legacy is the main goal of madrasa education. He is dissatisfied with the madrasa-based scholars for their overemphasis of and deep reliance on the study of *Ḥadīth* and Sunnah. He observes that the Ulema 'often ignore the substantive moral teachings of the Prophet by obsessing with the cultural expressions of Arabian Islam' (p. 147).

Moosa then touches on an important topic, the epistemology of knowledge, a point of crisis among Muslim scholars. Moosa maintains that faith-based

knowledge has been the only purpose of madrasa education. The 'Madrasa community adopts a narrow account of the meaning and end of knowledge while ignoring an inclusive account of what knowledge is' (p. 177). For this reason, efforts were made in the madrasa community to bridge the gap created between religious and worldly knowledge. An example he cites is the famous *Nadwat al-'Ulamā'* at Lucknow, (India), which in my view has not succeeded yet in bridging this gap. Moosa maintains that unless a robust reform is undertaken in madrasa education, in which religious knowledge is combined with modern secular methodology, the future of the madrasa system will remain bleak.

The last part, "Madrasa in Global Context", tackles the West's anti-madrasa campaign. The madrasas have become scapegoats for the West's 'war on terror'. Moosa mentions that, in a post 9/11 world, all the madrasas and Ulema 'have suffered a whiplash at the hands of media campaigns fomented by a diverse range of actors' (p. 209). It is important therefore for the West to change its perception and understating of the most orthodox representatives of Islam: the madrasa community. He warns that presenting a false portrayal of the madrasa system does nothing but raise more suspicion among the madrasa leadership about the motives of western powers.

Most interesting are Moosa's letters addressed to the President of the United States of America, on the one hand, and to his teachers at madrasas whose imprints he still acknowledges, on the other. His first letter to the policy makers and political leaders of the West, is that '[i]t is time for the United States to hit the reset button when it comes to dealing with Muslim communities around the world' and 'treating the madrasa with hostility would be a monumental failure of U.S. public diplomacy' (p. 234). Moosa clarifies that madrasas are not places of terror. They are rather places of religious learning and training; places which play a big role in Muslim societies and the Ulema are religious scholars who serve Muslims.

His letters to his teachers at Deoband and the *Nadwah* further highlights two important points. To his teacher at Deoband, after expressing his gratitude toward them, he politely requests them to take the initiatives regarding curriculum reform as they implicitly have already adopted many elements of modern technology. To his *Nadwah* teacher, Moosa expresses his dismay at the Ulema's resort to hate language vis-à-vis the West, especially after 9/11. This, he observes, will foment more anti-Muslim and madrasaphobia. Moosa suggests that the madrasa community fully engage with modern disciplines and admix the old and new knowledge as advocated by Shibli Nu'mānī (1857-1914).

His epilogue expresses a mixture of optimism and pessimism regarding the madrasa system. Moosa sees in the madrasa tradition a tremendous

potential for a vigorous renewal of religious scholarship which needs a creative interpretation of religious texts. However, he is disappointed because an intellectually robust Muslim orthodoxy is absent in the contemporary madrasas. He thinks that the unhealthy scepticism about modern knowledge among the Ulema has put Muslim communities at a great risk. Therefore, an immediate effort to establish a constructive engagement between the Muslim revelatory tradition and the humanistic tradition of knowledge is mandatory.

Moosa's analysis appears to be paradoxical and apologetic at times. For instance, it lauds the aesthetics and beauty of the traditional religious curriculum but is mostly critical of madrasa education. Overall, the author offers an engaging analysis and assessment of one of the most important Islamic institutions: the madrasa in the sub-continent. His book is an excellent, timely and important tool, especially for the West, for understanding what a madrasa is. It will definitely help to remove misconceptions and stereotypes about Muslims.

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