

BOOK REVIEW

WHAT IS A MADRASA?

Moosa, E. (2015). *What Is a Madrasa?*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press. ISBN: 9781469620138.

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“What went wrong” is often the question asked by Western intellectuals when they seek to unravel or demystify the Muslim world. When asking this question, many Western intellectuals—not all—seek to contrast their understanding of Islam, Muslim practices, and its cultural milieu with the enlightenment of the West, as well as the growth of democracy and its deficit in Muslim-majority countries.

This is also Moosa’s starting point for his analysis, however his examination of madrasas goes beyond this simplistic question. Madrasas—monastery-like Muslim seminaries that dot the educational landscape in South Asia, Afghanistan, Malaysia, Thailand, and Iran—are the locus of this detailed and personal study. They are not all-male institutions, as he suggests that “Young adult males study in the South Asian institutions but there is a growth in segregated madrassas dedicated to the education of females” (p. 2). Although gender segregation is the norm in madrasas in South Asia, this is not necessarily the case in Southeast Asia, where young men and women may study in the same classrooms.

Ebrahim Moosa starts the book by describing his own experience of entering his alma mater, Darul Uloom, in Deoband in North India, where a clean-shaven man inquired if he was looking for terrorists. The fact that a right-wing government led by Hindu nationalists is in power in Uttar Pradesh—the state in which Darul Uloom is located—makes this question even more accusatory, given that

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DOI: 10.2979/musphilcivisoc.3.1.06

these nationalists paint Muslims as the eternal “other,” even if they have lived in India for centuries. The memories of partition in India and the religious divide that exists in the minds of these people make such questions very dangerous.

The book is divided into four parts: part I, titled “Lived Experience,” deals with the daily practices and routines of students at a madrasa. His detailed exposition of the daily life of students includes a closer examination of such practices as wudu, or the ritual washing of one’s hands and feet, which is necessary before saying salat or prayers. Here, he points to the intention or niyyah of every act as being key. “Lurking behind the apparent simplicity of the ritual of washing before prayers is the profundity of Islam’s ethical and moral philosophy, which is centered on the concept of intention” (p. 36). Moosa goes on to explain that intentions are the crux that determine if an action is rewarded for its piety or not. Some of this portion of part I seems to have been written for a non-Muslim audience, as it details how the salat is performed, etc. The routine of a madrasa is similar to that of any school or college, Moosa informs us. The rhythms of the day as well as the year follow the Islamic calendar for prayers, the celebration of festivals, etc.

Part II deals with the history and context of the modern madrasa and how it has evolved. This portion of the book deals with the struggles that madrasas such as Darul Uloom have gone through to incorporate “secular” social sciences with the study of religious subjects. Such efforts have been, for the most part, “stillborn,” Moosa points out. Subjecting Muslim religious thought to newer modes of query, such as critical thinking through, the lens of theology, sociology, and philology has not occurred in these institutions. However, this is absolutely necessary to help graduates find meaningful and fulfilling careers outside of the confines of a mosque, he seems to be suggesting.

Part III deals with the “Politics of Knowledge” and the dynamics of learning and teaching, intertwined with the idea of faith and belief. This section deals with the tensions that manifest themselves in the study of hadith, or the prophetic tradition. While there are scholars in India and other parts of the world that seek to reinterpret these traditions to suit the modern world, there are others who are uniquely traditionalist in a conservative sense, seeking to avoid modernist interpretations. He describes the processes of how interpretations of hadith and fiqh or Islamic law are arrived at and how they can often be different among different schools of Islamic jurisprudence.

Part IV, titled “Madrasas in Global Context,” places madrasas in a global context and examines how they have come to be seen by policy makers and those in positions to create discourses about these

institutions. Moosa points to the “vocabularies of difference,” when Americans and Europeans use the word “Madrasa” along with other terms such as “Islamic fundamentalism,” etc. (p. 209). The anti-Muslim bias in terms of removing minarets or other aspects of Muslim culture from mainstream Europe has become mainstream. “All madrasas have suffered from this whiplash at the hands of media campaigns fomented by a diverse range of actors,” Moosa suggests. There is a call for greater nuance and a more impartial examination of these institutions, which have been vilified for decades now.

Not many people know that the oldest institutions of learning were madrasas. During my own visit to the mosque and learning complex of Qarawiyyin in Fes, Morocco, in 2014, I witnessed the century old mosque complex and university in action. As the faithful prayed, dozens of young men recited the Qur’an melodiously and in unison. The place reverberated with the ancient sounds of Qur’anic recitation, while staying in touch with the modern.

Scholars of education have pointed out that it is one of the oldest models of what is considered a “university.” The role of madrasas in educating millions of young people and providing them with a direction in life is often ignored.

This book is a scholarly and sensitive response, as Moosa says, to the “barrage of Islam hating media assaults systematically[, which] violated and dehumanized me, and millions of other fellow believers, in a reckless, prolonged campaign of guilt by association that has, amazingly, not run its course” (p. 7). This is a must read for anyone who is curious about the madrasa as an institution. It offers a close and deep look at this important institution, which has survived centuries, that provides education. “Learning, teaching and moral training are and always have been at the core of Islamic Life,” Moosa suggests, and this book lays bare the ways in which this takes place (p. 9).

This review was originally published in the Journal of Education in Muslim Societies (JEMS).

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