

Book Review –**What is a Madrassa** by EbrahimMoosa, Edinburgh University Press, 2015, 290.

EbrahimMoosa, a leading theoretician behind [critical/progressive](#) Muslim thought and a graduate of the ‘alimiyya program at Dar ulUlum ,NadwatulUlama, Lucknow, in the early 1980, has gifted us with a much needed, personal account and a compassionate yet critical analysis of the network of some major South Asian madrassas, their intellectual history, curriculum, their role in contemporary (S. Asian) Islam and the kind of worldviews inhabited by those who are involved in their every-day operations.

The [book](#) discusses a number of crucial topics ranging from an analysis of what constitutes ‘knowledge’ and its purpose in these traditional institutions of learning with a long history and the ongoing debates regarding their relevance and reform to their alleged links with terrorism in the wake of the ‘war on terror’.

The book is divided into four parts consisting of a total of twelve chapters. The first part titled “Lived Experience” (chapters one to three) recounts his days at the various madrassas he attended offering us a humane and at times funny description (e.g. discussion of young adult madrassa students’ reaction to definition of marriage “as sexual enjoyment” in strictly segregated Muslim communities) of madrassa life(including prayers, types of food eaten, extra-curricular activities and what constitutes knowledge) from that of a novice to that of an aspiring scholar.

In the second section of the book, “History and Contexts”(chapter four to six), Moosa offers us an illuminating description of the birth of the contemporary madrassas in S.Asia and their historical cum intellectual genealogy. Moreover, the reader learns about the major scholars, texts and subjects used in the madrassa curriculum and the various phases of its development. Importantly, Moosa also discusses the hotly debated topic of curriculum reform both in the context of madrassa administrators themselves and their external critics offering his own perspective on the issue.

In the third part bearing the title “Politics of Knowledge”(chapters seven and eight) the author documents how people who are part of the madrassa educational system view themselves as purveyors and embodiments of the life and the teachings of the Prophet (“Sunna”/maslak) through an intensive study and internalization of the practices and values (including strict and all-encompassing gender segregation) considered to fall under the aegis of Sunna. Here Moosaalso provides us with glimpses of what goes on in female madrassas including the kind of curriculum they study. Because of the strict gender segregation rules, the insights on the life of female madrassas are recounts of what his former female graduate student from Pakistan gathered. In terms of curriculum content, Moosa notes a recent significant shift in the emphasis on the study of the hadith as a core of the curriculum and notes its

implications that perhaps best echo the major approach the author takes in relation to the role and function of madrassas in S.Asia in contemporary Muslim societies:

The absence of an updated and robust rationalist dialectic blended with a Sunna- centered approach to religious knowledge has only fomented an exclusionary faith- centered or hidebound received tradition centered mindset. This mindset generates extraordinary hurdles and roadblocks for religious discourse to engage with the challenges of the time. Institutional reforms, without substantive intellectual reformation, tend to yield fewer discursive dividends but a surfeit of apologetics.(p.175)

Moosa also revisits the issue of knowledge and contestations over its meaning and nature from the perspective of the traditional, as advocated by most of those who administer the madrassas, and modern approaches. Here Moosa highlights the utmost importance madrassa administrators place on the process of embodiment of knowledge through practice as avenue of reaching true piety as the noblest goal of the madrassa curriculum.

In the fourth, final part titled “Madrassas in Global Context” (chapters nine to twelve) discusses the negative and often ill-informed media coverage madrassas in S.Asia get by being unintelligently and unfairly conflated with Al-Qaeda, Taliban and their ilk. Moosa considers these views to be “gross distortions” (p.218) of reality. The author also ponders over the future of the madrassas and the career options of their graduates.

In this fourth section one of the most important and unique features of the book, in the mind of this reviewer, is to be found, namely the letters Moosa writes to both policy makers in the west as well as his former madrassa teachers about the future of the madrassas and their potential role as important institutions for intercultural understanding between the two worlds Moosa’s interlocutors represent.

This important book, therefore, grapples with a large number of complex questions that pertain to the very core of the nature and role of Islam and its over millennia old tradition in today’s world. These include, among the most prominent others, the very question of the contested nature of the concept of Islamic tradition and knowledge itself and what it means to be a Muslim, the nature of religious authority at the time of its unprecedented fragmentation, issues pertaining to the nature of Islamic ethics, gender relations, Islam and politics and Islam and (post)-modernity in general.

The book also contains helpful summaries of major historical concepts, religious doctrines and teachings of Islam and as such can be used in introductory courses on Islam, especially those which focus on Islamic education.

Consistent with his [other](#) writings, Moosa effortlessly combines a deep knowledge of the Islamic tradition with that of equally deep 'secular western' tradition to skillfully navigate and guide us through major concepts and topics under discussion.

While Moosa astutely diagnoses the problems and challenges of the educational systems of the madrassas as needing to incorporate contemporary knowledges from a variety of disciplines perhaps one aspect that did not get as much attention as this reviewer considers warranted is the need for madrassas to develop alternative [interpretational approaches](#) within the confines of the classical Islamic sciences in order to break away from dogmatic positions that were established many centuries ago and which are making them a source of continued Muslim intellectual stagnation. For example, the emphasis on contextualization of the Qur'an and Sunna beyond the classical disciplines *asbabulnazu* and/or *naskhwamansukh* or indeed a reexamination of the very concept of [Sunna](#) in traditional Islam. This reevaluation of the intrinsic and internal hermeneutical mechanisms is, in this reviewer's mind, the most promising avenue for a meaningful madrassa reform which builds further on the existing strengths of the madrassas' curriculum but conceptualizing it through a different set [of interpretational approaches](#) which are to a large extent, albeit in underdeveloped form, readily available in the traditional sciences.

I highly recommend this book especially to all those who are interested in Islamic education and its reform as well as the question of reform of Muslim thought in general.