

Book Review

Beyond Caricature: The Reality of Madrasah Life

By Muhammad Mojlum Khan

Madrasah Life: A Student's Day at Nadwat al-Ulama by Mohammad Akram Nadwi, London: Turath Publishing, pp103, 2007, HB, £5.95.

The author of this book is an Islamic scholar and prolific writer who had studied traditional Islamic sciences at an Indian madrasah (traditional Islamic seminary) before joining Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies as a Research Fellow. As such, the author is familiar with traditional methods of learning as well as modern research methodology and techniques as they are pursued at a leading British university. For this reason, he is in a good position to explain and explore the nature of traditional Islamic education as it is imparted in a well-known Islamic seminary for the benefit of both Muslims and non-Muslims.

As Professor James Piscatori of Oxford University has pointed out in his thoughtful Foreword to this book, madrasah education “has attracted considerable attention, even notoriety, since the startling events of September 11th. It is widely believed, particularly among Western policymakers, that these schools and colleges are the training ground for radical activities and directly sustain terrorist networks such as al-Qa’ida. No-one a decade ago would have anticipated that a traditional educational institution would occupy a central place in discussions between the presidents of the United States and Pakistan. But several months after the attacks on New York and Washington, in February 2002, George W. Bush and Pervez Musharraf agreed, in Bush’s words, that ‘the modern world requires an education system that trains children in basic sciences and reading and math and the history of Pakistan’... Similar arguments have been made of madrasahs in the Middle East, Africa and Southeast Asia, and governments, under pressure from Western donors and facing organised internal opposition, have pledged to reform them.” (p.xi)

Historically speaking, the masjid (mosque) always played an important and influential role in Muslim societies; it was not only a place of worship but also served as a school, college, community centre and a lodge for the poor and displaced. The Prophet's Mosque in Madinah was one such institution, which became a hub for spiritual, educational and community activities during the early days of Islam. Subsequently, after the rapid expansion of Islam in the East and the West, separate institutions were established by Muslim scholars, rulers and philanthropists for the purpose of promoting Islamic knowledge and wisdom. This, in turn, laid the foundation of what is today known as 'university' (madrasah tul-kulliyah) where Muslim scholars, scientists, mathematicians, astronomers, philosophers, theologians and jurists pursued research and training in different branches of knowledge. In addition to developing and disseminating classical languages and traditional Islamic sciences, Muslim scholars also reclaimed and refined the wisdom of ancient Greece, India, Babylonia, Persia and China for the benefit of posterity. The birth-place of this remarkable and unprecedented intellectual and cultural transformation was none other than the traditional madrasah!

Being unaware of the history and development of madrasah system of education, it is not surprising that both Muslims and Muslims have developed wrong impressions about this traditional educational institution. As James Piscatori stated, "There is no doubt that the madrasah suffers today from a serious public relations problem. Little understood, it has become emblematic of extremism; caricatured in this way, it has further complicated our understandings of Muslim beliefs and practices. Part of the difficulty lies in the variable usage of the term. Most commentators use the word 'madrasah' to refer to primary and secondary education, whereas in some societies such as India...it applies to tertiary and post-graduate education as well...Having evolved over the centuries and shaped by general principles and local needs, however, this institution – or, more precisely, related institutions – are both less and more than their image suggests; the madrasah is less rigid and less directly political than many fear, and it is more capable of combining religious studies with an inquiring approach than is often assumed." (p.xii)

For this reason, the author started by asking a number of pertinent questions, namely “What is a Madrasah? What role does it play in the life and development of individuals and society? How are days and nights spent at a madrasah? These and similar questions are often raised both by those familiar with the institution and those ignorant of it. Most writers on the subject betray a superficial, second-hand knowledge of madrasahs, their curricula and their methods of teaching; their reckless, sweeping statements with little regard for basic norms of honesty and fairness, and without the labour of independent inquiry into what is a system of education that has endured, and evolved, over many centuries.” (p1)

What is a madrasah? According to late Mawlana Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, the rector of Nadwat ul-Ulama in India and founder of Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, it is a “...institution for man’s upbringing and for channelling his talents. It is a place where those who call to Islam and defend the faith are prepared. A madrasah may be likened, in a manner of speaking, to the powerhouse of the Islamic world, which provides energy not only to Muslims but also to all mankind. It is a centre where the heart and soul are purified, and the mind and intellect nourished. A madrasah is a place wherein a world-view is cultivated, and humanity is thereby sustained. It leads, and is not led. A madrasah is not specific to any particular nation, civilisation, culture, era, language or literature. It thus transcends decadence and decline. For it is nourished and sustained directly by the Prophet Muhammad’s message, which is universal and timeless. It is inextricably linked with the life force of humanity and with life in its vibrancy and variety. It is independent of the debate about ‘classical’ and ‘modern’. For it is characterised by the eternal and life-giving message of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.” (Quoted by Akram Nadwi, p3)

In the book under review, the author recalls his time as a student at a leading Indian madrasah, namely the Nadwat al-Ulama in Lucknow. Originally written in Urdu as ‘Nadwe ka ek din’ and published in India in 2004 and subsequently in Pakistan in 2006, Akram Nadwi’s account of ‘a day in the life of a madrasah student’ is both vivid and lively, thus providing a perceptive and insightful picture of madrasah life as it prevailed at Nadwat al-Ulama in the early 1980s when he was a student there. According to the author, “The present work is a modest attempt to bring into relief the ethos of one particular madrasah and the range of its activities. It does not seek to

enumerate the disciplines taught there. Nor does it try to describe all the academic, literary, educational, self-developmental, writing and da'wah activities pursued there, though its students and faculty are continuously engaged in these. In recounting a day at my alma mater in the Indian subcontinent my aim has been to recreate the ethos of a madrasah that enriched life for numerous students like myself, and imbued us with commitment to faith, love for the Divine Book and admiration for the Prophet's words. It enabled us to develop a love of knowledge, and a depth and breadth of thought and literary taste. In sum, it taught us how to live well, by providing us with the means and tools to acquire beneficial knowledge, to exercise conscience and reason, to articulate and practise precepts." (p4)

If the madrasah's are increasingly viewed as breeding grounds for radicals and terrorists, then this book is a much-needed corrective, for, above all, it reminds us not to paint all the madrasahs with the same brush. Rather our journalists, writers, commentators and politicians need to be wiser and more discerning when it comes to politics, policy and current affairs in the Muslim world. Akram Nadwi's intelligent and thought-provoking account of life at a leading madrasah shows that students not only receive a thorough and intellectually stimulating religious education at that institution but they also learn to discuss and debate different views and arguments with respect and tolerance. As such, I found this book to be an important and timely contribution. Highly recommended reading for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

M M Khan is an internationally acclaimed author, literary critic and research scholar. He is a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland and a Member of English Pen. His books include THE MUSLIM 100 (reprinted 2010) and THE MUSLIM HERITAGE OF BENGAL (forthcoming). Kindle edition of THE MUSLIM 100 has been recently released (available from Amazon). He is a Founding Director of Bengal Muslim Research Institute UK.