

Foreword



James Piscatori

THE MADRASAH 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'. Musharraf conceded that, although madrasahs provide an important social welfare function, lodging and training the poor in particular, their 'weakness' lies in exclusive 'religious' training. He assured the president that fundamental reforms to the curriculum, emphasizing science, mathematics, and English, would allow the 600,000 to 800,000 madrasah students in Pakistan 'to be brought into the mainstream of life'.¹ 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.

¹ Transcript, 'Bush Hosts Pakistani President Musharraf at White House', 13 February 2002, Department of State Washington File, <http://www.usinfo.org/wf-archive/2002/020213/epf301.htm> (accessed 30 November 2006).

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, which this book covers, it applies to tertiary and post-graduate education as well. This work details a typical day in the life of a *faḍīlah*, or Master’s level, student who embarks on a two-year programme after the four-year undergraduate, or ‘*ālīmiyyah*, programme.

Despite the important difference between schooling and university-level education, ‘madrasah’, as a synonym for religious education, is commonly juxtaposed with ‘modern’ education; religious subjects are contrasted with the ‘mainstream’. 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. It is the singular achievement of Mohammad Akram Nadwi that he provides the first full exposition of the daily life of a madrasah. In so doing, he provides the raw material that allows us to see the institution as rounded and responsive – a complex, intellectually challenging and spiritually charged learning environment that binds teachers and students together in an enterprise that sustains and renews Muslim society.

Prior to *Madrasah Life*, we have relied on the descriptions of Muslim historians, the glimpses of travellers, the account of orientalist such as Snouck Hurgronje and a small number of anthropological studies to examine the madrasah’s place in Muslim

² For example, Dale F. Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco: The Education of a Twentieth-Century Notable* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); and Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1960).

³ Richard T. Mortel, ‘Madrasahs in Mecca During the Medieval Period: A Descriptive Study Based on Literary Sources’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 60, no. 2 (1997), pp. 236-252.

life². Fifteenth century historians like Taqī al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Fāṣī and Najm al-Dīn ‘Umar ibn Fahd tell us that there were 23 madrasahs in Makkah prior to Ottoman times³, for example, and Quṭb al-Dīn’s history of Makkah documents the flourishing of madrasah education in the holy city under the patronage of Mamlūk and early Ottoman rulers.⁴ Hurgronje gives us a greater sense of what occurred within the Makkah educational complex, but distinguishes the higher studies at the Grand Mosque (al-Masjid al-Ḥarām) from earlier training. He made a sad note of the fact that the ‘madrasah’ had, by the late nineteenth century, declined to the point where once-grand buildings were treated as abandoned, and the word itself had come to denote simply a house near the mosque. Yet there is the hint in Hurgronje’s writing that perhaps all is not lost: ‘Only a few of the poorer rooms are still occupied by poor teachers and students, and here and there the rich occupier of the best rooms will arrange for a lecture, out of respect for the founder, to be given weekly in the hall (*dihltz*) or a room of the building.’⁵ One suspects that more was going on than even this perceptive observer discerned.

Indeed, the self-consciousness of ‘tradition’ and commitment that unfolds in this volume hints at something more enduring and fundamental than buildings or curricula. Dr Nadwi’s account is, in this sense, the best of participant observation: it reports on the structure of higher madrasah education, but also imparts the ‘ambience’ – the intellectual excitement, the spiritual enthusiasm. Teachers unforgettably appear in fond pen portraits, sartorially challenged at times or impatient, but indisputably learned and generous with their knowledge. It is also reassuring to find that, however motivated they are, students remain students – reluctant to get up in the morning, argumentative, bored with grammar, teasing one another over sporting rivalries, concerned that standards are slipping yet skimming assigned readings. The milieu is more cultured, though, than the typical Western school or college, with

⁴ Quṭb al-Dīn al-Nahrawālī al-Makkī al-Ḥanafī, *al-Fīlām bi-a’lām baytillāh al-ḥarām* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1857).

⁵ C. Snouck Hurgronje, *Mekka in the Latter Part of the Nineteenth Century*, translated by J.H. Monahan (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970), p. 172.

poetry and literary criticism a common diversion. More importantly, the calls to prayer punctuate the daily life of the madrasah students, as has been done for centuries and across diverse societies. They begin a long day with the dawn prayer, attend classes from 8.00 a.m., perform the mid-day prayer, rest in the afternoon after lunch, pray the *‘aṣr* prayer in the late afternoon and then engage in a combination of entertainment and study, attend a seminar after sunset and the *maghrib* prayer, say the evening prayer, and retire perhaps by 1.00 a.m., only to rise again several hours later for the dawn prayer. In describing this ritually marked routine, Dr Nadwi reminds us that the transmission and acquisition of knowledge form a continuum with worship and the search for piety.⁶

While the madrasah that emerges here is thus connected to the centuries-old Islamic educational experience, it has a cultural and intellectual specificity as well. *Dār al-‘Ulūm Nadwat al-‘Ulamā’*, based in Lucknow, is the product of a particular revivalist strand that dates back to the late nineteenth century and, in its self-presentation, was broadly inspired by the eighteenth century Indian thinker, Shāh Waliullāh (1703-1762 CE). Its proponents, including the modernist Muḥammad ‘Alī Mungerī (1846-1944) and the pan-Islamist Shiblī Nu‘mānī (1857-1914), espoused keeping pace with modern conditions while adhering to the basic canonical sources of Islam and promoting the tolerance associated with the principles of the spiritual path. While prescribing its own curriculum, it moved beyond the *Dars-i Nizāmī* syllabus common in India from the early eighteenth century and introduced diverse legal views and modern sciences and languages. As this suggests, it represents a *mélange* of perspectives and defies easy categorisation. Some would thus refer to the madrasah as traditional, others as modernist, still others as Sufi-inspired. In Nadwah’s worldview, its vitality derives from the blending of these perspectives into a seamless whole. In the words of its twentieth century patron, cited in the preface to this volume, Mawlānā Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī Nadwī (1914-1999), the madrasah, rightly conceived, takes its place as ‘the powerhouse of the Islamic world’.

⁶ See also Jonathan Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 50.

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the most concrete impression that emerges from this diary is the level of intellectual curiosity and disputation that characterises the daily life of a madrasah student. This cuts to the core of one of the principal criticisms of the institution. While many object to the nature of the curriculum, objection is also made, at times vociferously, to the pedagogy. It is often assumed that rote and tightly-defined education leads to an inflexibility of mind that reinforces authoritarianism or enhances the ability of radical groups to recruit adherents. In the Southeast Asian experience, focus is often placed on *kitāb kuning*, the ‘yellow books’ that purportedly contain, and limit, knowledge.⁷ To many observers, they imply a closed and classical educational system, which is to be learned but not questioned. While this volume deals with a more advanced madrasah education than is normally covered by this criticism, it nevertheless shows, by way of contrast, that students who are being trained in the religious sciences – Qur’ān, Prophetic sayings (*hadīth*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), the spiritual path (*taṣawwuf*), and Arabic – display well-honed skills of critical judgement. The parameters are different from those of a paradigmatic ‘liberal education’ but, leaving aside what this means in practice, it is clear that working within a structured framework allows for focused rules of intellectual engagement. As Dr Nadwi shows, students – at least post-graduate ones – are perfectly capable of questioning the competence of scholars in one field while admiring their contributions in another, or suggesting that their train of thought leads to a variant conclusion without disputing the validity of the basic inquiry.

With its curriculum conventionally focused yet liberally taught, the madrasah is naturally open to diverse influences. Some teachers are versed in Western educational methods and are expert in journalism or modern Arabic literature, for instance, and a number of the students comfortably invoke Freud or Sartre in support of an interpretative point. Some students are influenced by the *Tablighī*

⁷ Martin van Bruinessen, ‘Pesantren and Kitab Kuning: Maintenance and Continuation of a Tradition of Religious Learning’, in Wolfgang Marschall (ed.), *Texts from the Islands: Oral and Written Traditions of Indonesia and the Malay World* (Berne: University of Berne Press, 1994), p. 121.

Jamā'at, and others received training at Imām Muḥammad ibn Sa'ūd University in Riyadh. But none *necessarily* derives greater authority from such associations. One student is pointedly told that citing Tablighī practice is not sufficient proof of an argument, nor is Ibn Taymiyyah, a Saudi favourite, automatically correct in his views. Each advanced student must embark upon a detailed research project and write a dissertation, thereby developing the skills of argumentation and lucid writing. But, in the end, success depends, as it has for centuries throughout the Muslim world, on a detailed knowledge of the classical sources of Islam.

Mohammad Akram Nadwi offers an acutely observed and charming portrait of the student intent on acquiring this knowledge. From an insider's vantage point, he takes us into a world most of us do not normally enter and helps us to appreciate the rich intellectual traditions and the lively debates within Islamic educational institutions. The contribution of *Madrasah Life* is both unassuming and conclusive; it disturbs the complacent thought that madrasahs are inevitably anti-modern and marginal.



All praise and thanks are due to God, the Lord of all creatures and domains. May peace and blessings be on the best of His creation, the Prophet Muḥammad, and upon his family and his Companions.

Introduction



WHAT IS A MADRASAH? What part 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; they make 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.

آنانکه وصف حسن تو تقریر می کنند
خواب نادیده را همه تعبیر می کنند

Those offering to report your beauty
Are only interpreting a dream they never had

When a community has lost its grip on power, and its former prestige and glory slip away from it, the memory of its contribution to culture and civilisation weakens until that contribution is questioned, then doubted, then denied; even those of its virtues that still survive are presented in a negative light, made the object of suspicion or ridicule. Distrust of madrasahs first came to the fore when the British Empire, having entrenched itself in the subcontinent, introduced its own educational system. But even at that time, there were some objective, fair-minded individuals who had enjoyed firsthand access to the madrasah system, and who therefore recognised its strengths and efficacy. Major-General Sir W. H. Sleeman, after visiting