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Ebrahim Moosa, *What Is a Madrasa?*, The University of North Carolina Press, 2015, 304 pp., \$28.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9781469620138.

In two hundred and fifty-three pages of eloquent writing, in addition to a glossary, notes, index, and bibliography which comprise an additional forty-one pages, Ebrahim Moosa responds to the title of his most recent book, *What Is a Madrasa?* In embarking on, at times, an ethnographic, and other times, journalistic account, Moosa takes his readers on a captivating journey from his childhood days in District 6, Cape Town (South Africa)—incidentally the same place where I was reared—to the Darul Uloom Nadwatul ‘Ulama in Lucknow (India), to his time at Duke University in the United States of America, and, finally, to his current location at Notre Dame University where he is Professor of Islamic Studies. Through the inclusion of visual depictions of his life experiences in relation to the spaces and people that he encounters, Moosa does not disappoint in offering a vivid account of what the madrasa has meant to him—both individually and in relation to his membership of an *ummah* (community).

In response to the question ‘What is a madrasa?’ Moosa offers three interrelated lines of argument: firstly, he cogently expounds a rationale of a madrasa in relation to his experiences and knowledge of some of the Muslim seminaries in India; secondly, he offers an account of knowledge as it manifests in a madrasa, more specifically Deobandi seminaries in South Asia (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh); and thirdly, he explicates how a student of madrasa is an ethical being and, in particular, how this ethical orientation can be cultivated. These lines of argument, of course, warrant deep analysis, as they all point to what I would consider as a maximalist account of Muslims in relation to their learning spaces, and ultimately, their adherence to their Islamic faith.

Firstly, Moosa’s main argument is to show that madrasas are spaces of learning where “nurturing” or “nourishing” (*tarbiyya*) occurs (192). This practice of “nurturing” involves advancing “the public understanding of morality, ethics, and conduct in an Islamic alphabet, which ranges from intimate matters affecting the family to banking practices, national politics, governance, and the most complex questions of international relations, war and peace.... [Nurturing] also support[s] and maintain[s] the practice of rituals, prayers, meditation, piety, and remembrance of God” (10). In fact, this, he contends, is the *raison d’être* of madrasas, and it is fostered through the study of the Quran, Hadith (life experiences of the Prophet Muhammad), and the teachings of faith, Shari’ah (Islamic law), and theology (218). Being rooted in these orthodox sources and practices, he avers, prevents

madrasas from becoming “the dens of malevolence that media, cultural, and political portrayals assert” (218). Consequently, while he acknowledges that a handful of madrasas in Pakistan can be linked to militancy, “to equate madrasas [as a whole] with terror is absurd” (10).

Although Moosa gives an account of madrasas as spaces of socialization that discourage critical questioning and provocation, he declares that it had the opposite effect on him: “it [madrasa] taught me how to question...[a]nd in many ways, I have moved on from the madrasa tradition” (241). Thus it is evident that he himself has not been *conscientised* (to use a word coined by the Brazilian philosopher, educator, and activist, Paulo Freire) by his madrasa education in the mode of blind imitation. He describes how his madrasa education at Darul Uloom Matliwala in Baruch, Gujarat, then Darul Uloom Deoband near Saharanpur, and graduating from Darul Uloom Nadwatul ‘Ulama in Lucknow (India), socialized him towards a love of knowledge and learning, and curiosity for religion, philosophy, ethics, politics, literature, and “how to live in the world” (242). Madrasa education taught him how to read classical Islamic texts “differently” (242).

Inasmuch, however, as madrasa education seems to have liberated Moosa from a kind of conservative religious orthodoxy, he is not convinced that such an education is transformative enough. He acknowledges that the knowledge tradition in the madrasas is not progressive, cosmopolitan, and open-minded enough “to effectively transform and rejuvenate Islamic thought” (232). Moosa brilliantly elucidates the madrasa curriculum through an ontological and epistemological explication of the arguments that underscore the classical texts composed by the doyens of various schools of thought. His engagement as an “insider” with classical works (in Arabic and Urdu) of major thinkers such as Siddiq Hasan Khan Qannawji (d. 1890), Ahmad Raza Khan (d. 1921), Ashraf ‘Ali Thanvi (d. 1943), and several other scholars in the Muslim tradition is quite admirable. Hence, it is somewhat surprising that he does not offer too much assistance in clarifying what such a progressive, cosmopolitan, and epistemologically diverse rationale for madrasa education would mean or look like—especially since many facets of the latter form of education seem to be implicit in his articulations, and which I wish to next foreground more lucidly. If, as he asserts, a madrasa education has to move towards a progressive cosmopolitanism, then traditionalist and orthodox approaches to madrasa education should be viewed in a commensurable epistemological space with cosmopolitanism.

Nowadays, cosmopolitan educational debates have moved beyond producing citizens of the world to becoming citizens who are also strangers to the world.<sup>1</sup> Cosmopolitan education refers to such an estrangement that presupposes a critical relation with the home—a relation authorized by a profound reflection on justice. And this is where Muslim orthodox, conservative madrasa education can enter contemporary education with its apparent “strangeness.” It would therefore not seem inappropriate for orthodox madrasa education to come into contact with other notions of education with the intent to elicit some inter-cultural understanding of education, and not necessarily that madrasa education should relinquish what it has. It might seem unfeasible to expect madrasa education to merely abandon what they have always known and done. Perhaps, it would be more feasible and realizable to bring the type of education to which Moosa has been exposed into that which is both known and unknown. To this end, a conception of cosmopolitan education does not imply a complete moving away from what already exists, but rather, an introduction to that

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<sup>1</sup> Marianna Papastephanou, *Thinking Differently about Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Eccentricity, and the Globalized World* (Boulder & London: Paradigm Publishers, 2015), 78.

which is unknown, and yet to be known. In fact, if the hallmark of a madrasa is its etiquette of self formation and piety (137), coupled with the study of classical texts (140), such an understanding of education could in fact lend itself to deepening conceptualizations of cosmopolitan education rather than working against, or undermining it. And, it might just be that Moosa's desire that the once intellectually robust classical texts of the madrasa would become more relevant to "those outside them" (141). What can be so pernicious about a cosmopolitan education that is informed by "knowledge [t]hat opens the door for humans to adore and serve God with sincerity in order to reach a heightened sense of self-awareness...[a]nd to earn God's pleasure and approval" (194)?

This type of madrasa education as a form of strangeness can interrupt a cosmopolitan education, that is, enhancing its potentiality to be something else. Perhaps, bringing madrasa education as a form of strangeness into cosmopolitan education could act as a further repellent for violent action and terror. And perhaps Moosa's argument that madrasa should not be equated with terror might just be afforded more credence. To merely lay the blame on media for associating madrasa education with the propagation of extremism and terrorism is not necessarily a tenable argument. The potential for terror to emanate from the madrasa cannot be discounted through an emphasis on accusations of "antimadrasa propaganda" uttered by the West (218). It seems more plausible to build a case regarding the exoneration of madrasas from terrorism along the lines of enacting respect towards humanity and honoring human life. After all, terrorism neither requires educated nor uneducated people to enact such violence. Rather, terror is the direct consequence of disrespect towards the other and its otherness as several of the acts of terror in the world today would confirm. What might be more important to Moosa's argument is a recognition that the appeal for a cosmopolitan education might not only serve in cultivating spaces of deliberation and difference within the madrasa itself, but might also serve as a counter-argument to the repeated (often, unjustifiable) accusations that madrasas are associated with acts of terror.

In response to Moosa's second line of thought, he highlights some madrasas' emphasis on "transmitted" knowledge as separate from "instrumental" knowledge. The "transmitted" knowledge would be knowledge of the revealed sciences, such as the Quran, Hadith, and Shari'ah, whereas "instrumental" knowledge is identified as knowledge of the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, as eloquently enunciated by him (50). Quite aptly, he explains the separation of knowledges as an epistemological crisis in Muslim religious knowledge, as such knowledge would not equip students "to meet the needs of ever-modernizing societies" (203). This is a similar argument propounded by scholars such as Fazlur Rahman,<sup>2</sup> Naquib al-Attas,<sup>3</sup> and Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud.<sup>4</sup> Although Moosa does not explicitly link his argument to the "Islamization" of knowledge debate propounded by Isma'il al-Faruqi,<sup>5</sup> Rahman, and al-Attas, his implicit bias towards the integration of knowledges—"transmitted" and "instrumental" knowledge—is evident in statements, such as

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<sup>2</sup> Fazlur Rahman, "Islamization of Knowledge: A Response," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Science*, 5(1): 3-12.

<sup>3</sup> S.M.N. Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> W.M.N. Wan Daud, "Islamization of Contemporary Knowledge," *Al-Shajarah: Journal of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation*, 2(1): 1-19.

<sup>5</sup> Isma'il Al-Faruqi, *Islamisation of Knowledge: General Principles and Workplan* (Reston, Virginia: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1982).

Knowledge does not only have to serve the purpose of salvation, and bypass the reality of the world in which believers live and flourish. Both the revelatory tradition and the humanistic tradition of knowledge can be fruitfully acknowledged, rather than one at the expense of the other.... Madrasas are the ideal social laboratories where these experiments with knowledge can successfully be undertaken. (252-253)

Quite correctly, he cautions us against the non-integration of knowledge, which according to him “opens the door of rank scripturalism and toxic versions of do-it-yourself Islam that jettison tradition in order to make self-serving instruments out of the tenets of faith, and the teachings of scripture” (253). Like most proponents of the “Islamization” of knowledge idea, Moosa is silent on what such a curriculum would look like, or how it should be taught. Perhaps, in mitigation, his silence on “Islamization” itself seems to be balanced by his advocacy for “a synthesis of modern and traditional knowledge” (48)—an idea of Mawlana Ghulam Vastanvi that he endorses. Or, as Rahman would argue, all forms of knowledge are “Islamic” rather than advocating for the idea of “Islamization.” Moosa seems to be attracted to the latter idea as is evident from the following statement:

Pluralizing knowledge and constructively exposing Muslim religious thought to newer methods of inquiry such as critical readings of history, sociology, theological anthropology, philology, and hermeneutics using a variety of intellectual resources and tools remains an unaccomplished task. (51)

Thirdly, throughout the book, Moosa cogently advocates the cultivation of a madrasa-being, who is both socialized in the tradition, faith, and dogma (rituals) of its education (nurturing), as well as one who questions—or in his words, one “who has a critical edge” (243). This reminds me of the distinction Richard Rorty makes between socialization and individuation.<sup>6</sup> Rorty’s distinction implies that a learner must be initiated into an existing tradition of knowledge, and then embarks on a process of individuation whereby, like Moosa’s own experience, (s)he begins to challenge and ask questions. Such an idea of an ethical being who experiences both socialization and individuation might not be sufficient to meet the challenges of the contemporary world. It is at this point at which the book seems to be silent on notions of activism—which Moosa reminds us of in his references to the apathy of Muslim religious orthodoxy in his native South Africa towards the apartheid regime. To associate madrasa education mostly with nurturing (*tarbiyya*) and criticality might be remiss of the notion that education should also counteract forms of social injustices. And it is here, that perhaps a reconsidered view of the notion of *ta’dib* (good action) might be helpful, as *ta’dib* does not only refer to having competence in *belles lettres*. Rather, it also responds to forms of oppression and marginalization in the world. Extending the idea of *ta’dib* made famous by Naquib al-Attas, my contention is that madrasa education should also be geared to provoke students to disrupt and to take risks.<sup>7</sup> And it is in this regard that Moosa’s advocacy for a vacillation between romantic humanism and pragmatic realism (250) might not be enough. If students in madrasas are not summoned to use their intellectual

<sup>6</sup> Richard Rorty, “Education as Socialisation and as Individuation,” in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 114-126.

<sup>7</sup> Yusef Waghid, *Conceptions of Islamic Education: Pedagogical Framings* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

equality (speech) and to disrupt the taken-for-granted, as Jacques Rancière reminds us,<sup>8</sup> the possibility that madrasa will move risk-fully beyond their pietistic and redemptive agenda, would be somewhat unlikely.

In the main, the book offers some engagement with madrasa education in South Asian institutions of higher learning. It does well in its defense of the integration of knowledge, its advocacy for socialization and criticality (mainstays of pedagogical encounters), and its cultivation of an ethical madrasa-being. It is somewhat less convincing in its argument that madrasas cannot contribute to the idea of progressive cosmopolitan education.

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics* (London: Verso, 2007).

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