

Program equips graduates of traditional Muslim schools for engagement with wider world

Madrasa Discourses at Notre Dame covers the scientific and philosophical questions Islamic seminaries often skip.

by [Aysha Khan](#) in the [January 30, 2019](#) issue

When Waqas Khan, 29, graduated from his madrasa in Karachi, Pakistan, he felt disillusioned.

Though he had earned top grades throughout his education, he felt confused about the role of religion and Islamic scholars in the 21st century.

“I could not connect the learned knowledge with the world I am living in,” Khan said. “I needed to know what I am missing but I could not.”

The dots began to connect when he met Ebrahim Moosa, a professor of Islamic studies at the University of Notre Dame. Moosa had felt similarly disenchanted after graduating from the one of the most esteemed madrasas in the Muslim world, the famous Darul Uloom Nadwatul Ulama seminary in Lucknow, India.

He pivoted toward academia, earning additional degrees that helped him fill critical gaps in his madrasa education and convinced him to help other Muslims. In 2015, Moosa founded the Madrasa Discourses, a program of study based at Notre Dame teaching madrasa graduates—students like Waqas Khan—the scientific and philosophical questions traditional madrasas often skip.

Madrasa is the Arabic word for a school of any kind but most often refers to Islamic seminaries, usually attached to mosques. They are invaluable as “repositories of Islamic tradition,” said Moosa, author of *What Is a Madrasa?* But some orthodox Muslims “make an idol out of tradition, without recognizing that tradition is an active thing.”

Moosa's initiative, funded by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation, is now in its third year and has taught more than 80 students at Notre Dame, Jamia Millia Islamia in New Delhi, India, and GIFT University in Gujranwala, Pakistan.

The ulema, or the world's body of Islamic scholars, were once intellectual and spiritual leaders within Muslim societies. Today, they are rapidly losing their moral authority as their madrasa educations have left them out of touch with the times, Moosa said.

Moosa, who considers himself primarily a theologian, leans on experts with scientific backgrounds to help participants understand scientific history and processes.

His colleague Mahan Mirza, a Notre Dame professor who leads the Contending Modernities program, helped design the curriculum and teaches online every week. Mirza has religious studies degrees from Hartford Seminary and Yale University, along with a background in mechanical engineering.

Some Madrasa Discourses participants have little to no scientific literacy, he said.

"Some of them might perhaps know what the periodic table or an atom or an electron is," Mirza said. "But we start with next to nothing."

Their knowledge of classical Islam's long engagement with philosophy, reasoning, and science, he said, gives them a strong grounding on which to build.

"Those kinds of things are already integrated into practical theology," Mirza explained. "But students don't really recognize them as science anymore, because they consider them part of the Islamic intellectual tradition."

The Madrasa Discourses team uses what it calls an "elicitive" approach.

"We work from within the tradition and help them recognize the scientific reasoning already embedded within the tradition," Mirza said.

That is the key breakthrough, Moosa said: "Once our participants understand that Islamic history is not static, that this is a history of growth and development and alteration, it makes them very comfortable."

In the second year of the three-year course, the students participate in roundtable discussions with local scientists and compare texts from Islamic and Western

science and philosophy. Part of the framework is the notion of “Big History,” a recent academic trend that looks at the development of the universe and humankind according to large patterns instead of culture-by-culture, politically focused events.

The aim of the program is not to give answers or to prove, for example, that evolution is true. The point is to explain what a scientific theory is, so that madrasa graduates can no longer dismiss it as “just a theory.”

Once participants begin to appreciate that complexity, “they start asking, ‘What does this mean for creation? How are we supposed to think about this theologically?’” Mirza said. “That’s where our work stops. Because they are the ulema, they are the scholars, and that’s why we invited them.”

Some Muslim scholars and madrasa leaders have criticized the Madrasa Discourses, questioning why Notre Dame, a Catholic institution, should be concerned with reforming madrasa education.

“There’s a concern that this is some kind of a neocolonial project,” Mirza said.

But he and Moosa have no desire to impose any Orientalist Western reform on the madrasas. They point out that the project’s local faculty in India and Pakistan are drawn from the prestigious Jamia Hamdard and Al-Sharia Academy, respectively, and that they have buy-in from community leaders.

“We’re learning and struggling together rather than making a top-down attempt to unsettle everything,” Mirza said.

The proof, perhaps, is in the pride Waqas Khan now takes in his Islamic education. Before working with Madrasa Discourses, Khan said, he had begun wishing he had studied at a typical university.

“Now I think that in a society like mine it is good to have both educations, traditional and conventional,” he said.

Fellow participant Zaid Hassan agreed. While in Karachi, he felt satisfied with all that he learned in madrasa, although his “heart was sometimes troubled with the seeming impracticality of these teachings in the real world.”

He is grateful to Madrasa Discourses for introducing him to a way of thinking that is entrenched in Islamic thought but open to multiple perspectives. But moving forward

with it is no easy task, he said.

Learning this way of thought, Hassan said, “has given birth to new burden, a feeling of a great weight on our shoulders.” —Religion News Service

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