

The Worth of a Traditional Tutelage¹

Nadeem Mahomed
University of Johannesburg

Much has been written about traditional Muslim education in the last decade, often termed the *madrasa* in common parlance. Primarily, these writings have addressed the perception that *madrasas* are the hotbed of Islamic fundamentalism and pose challenges to global peace and their function in Muslim societies, specifically on the Indian subcontinent and in Afghanistan. However, the term *madrasa* is a widely used term and means various forms of traditional tutelage for Muslims. In South Africa, it is common for Muslim children to attend afternoon classes after school where they are taught the basic beliefs and practices of the faith in addition to learning Qur'ānic recitation. Those who prefer to make the pursuit of religious knowledge and its exposition a lifelong career usually enter theological seminaries (*darul-'ulūms*) where they are trained in the scholastic sciences of Islam, such as Qur'ānic exegesis, Arabic, Prophetic tradition, law and other disciplines. In some parts of the country, particularly in the Western Cape, formalised religious education does not stop at the end of high school but continues well into adulthood.

The memorisation of the Qur'ān (*hifẓ*) is an important feature and accomplishment within the Islamic tradition and some people, men and women, young and old, attend institutions where they memorise the Qur'ān under a qualified teacher. The one who memorises the Qur'ān is known as a *hāfiẓ* and Islamic lore delineates a number of spiritual benefits that accrue to such a person and his or her family. I attended such an institution for eleven years, from the age of seven until seventeen. I

1 I am tremendously grateful to Prof Farid Esack, the editors of this journal (Associate Prof Sa'diyya Shaikh, Assistant Prof Gabeba Baderoon and Dr Nina Hoel) and Mawlana Masood Gathoo for their valuable advice and encouragement.

completed the memorisation of the Qur'ān at the age of eleven and while, at the time, it was certainly challenging, the experience was immensely valuable for me.

For the purpose of memorising the Qur'ān, I attended an institution that is well-known in the South African Muslim community for its extreme conservatism and deep commitment to implementing detailed aspects of the Islamic tradition as enunciated in the Deobandi tradition, a tradition that has its origins in North India. The head of the institution, and my teacher, was a disciple of the Indian scholar and Sufi, Mawlana Maseehullah Khan (d. 1992), who in turn was a student of the famous and notable scholar Mawlana Ashraf Ali Thanawi (d. 1943), who was a graduate of Darul Uloom Deoband and the rector of a Sufi lodge in Thanabawan in pre-partition India. Mawlana Thanawi was also a disciple of Hajji Imdadullah (d. 1899), a prominent Sufi from the Indian subcontinent. Anyone familiar with the history of Muslim scholarship on the Indian subcontinent will recognise the significance of this illustrious pedigree. The *madrasa* I attended was located on a quiet residential street in the Indian township of Lenasia, south-west of Johannesburg and was later relocated to the outskirts of Vereeniging. The ethos of the institution was so indebted to its intellectual legacy that it was called, among other names, *Masihullah Manzil* (Masihullah's Station). To this day, the complex which forms the *madrasa* and its adjacent buildings is affectionately termed "Little Jalalabad" after the town where Mawlana Khan lived, preached and taught.

Some time before my exit from the traditional Muslim education scene, I had begun to harbour doubts about the value and validity of what I was being taught and the worldview espoused by the institution and its teachers. I was immersed in a lifestyle that seemed foreign to most people and even at times distant from the daily lives of many Muslims. I wore only white tunics — called *kurtas* — the length of which reached above my ankles. According to a tradition of the Prophet, any garment that covered the ankles was prohibited due to its potential to induce pride in the wearer. My head was covered at all times with a skull cap and I rarely ever socialised (definitely never during tuition hours) with people

of the opposite sex, since this was strictly prohibited. The vast majority of my time was spent reciting and memorising the Qur'ān, with some time also devoted to the recitation of other religious litanies. All of this was in addition to my other obligatory religious duties, such as the five daily prayers. The preoccupation with religious rituals and observances, together with a prejudicial attitude towards women and others (basically anyone who held a different view) and a nonchalant attitude to the very real challenges facing the vast majority of South Africans during the end of Apartheid, led to a personal rebellion on my part. During the historic 1994 elections when black South Africans voted for the first time, despite it being a public holiday, our *madrassa* classes continued. We were told that the seeking of religious knowledge and devotion to God is far more important than taking part in irreligious political events.

Increasingly, I was plagued by a number of questions. I asked myself what the execution of pedantic rituals has to do with the love of God. Why are women excluded almost completely from public and religious life? Why are non-Muslims envisioned as a group of infidels on a path leading them to sure hellfire? How do the norms of such an archaic faith lend itself to life in the modern world? What about the importance of liberty, freedom of action and the democratic freedom to criticise? Why are art and music regarded as taboo and sinful? These were the beginnings of uncomfortable stirrings in my conscience and the start of a definite rupture with my then-existing religious worldview.

I completed secondary school and went on to university. During my final years in high school and the time I spent at university, I was exceptionally critical of Islam and its practice. The more restrictive and conservative expressions of the faith, the more damning and angry was my response. I remained a committed Muslim, a religious believer, with intermittent spiritual crises where I questioned everything cardinal to Islam, but began formulating and articulating an expression of Islam that was deeply personal and open to the world. I also maintained, and continue to sustain, friendships with people from the religious institution I attended, who are far better Muslims than myself and count some of them as my dearest friends.

The position of women in Islam, the treatment of homosexuals, the attitude towards non-Muslims, the fixation with rituals such as the daily prayers at the expense of broader social concerns, among others, continued to bother me tremendously and were the focal polemical points of any conversation I had at the time with more conservative Muslims or religious Muslim scholars. At the Muslim high school I attended, I defended women's rights and LGBTIQ rights, spoke out critically against the Taliban and at one point refused to sign a petition calling for the banning of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. I was what some would consider the source of *fitna*, mischief. While I still maintain a strong commitment to justice and equality, including a deep personal moral concern for the marginalised in our communities, namely, women, LGBTIQ people, black people and the poor, my perspectives on liberalism, traditional Islam, religion and faith as well as the political and social context of Muslim societies has since come a long way in ways that I describe below.

There is a very little chance of me ever returning to the religious life I once had as a young teenager. However, as a Muslim, I have discovered a profound appreciation for my faith and traditional Islam, including the very institutions and scholars who triggered my initial uncertainty and rebellion. I have come to respect and honour my religious teachers, particularly the one mentioned in the early part of this essay. My experience of living in a world dominated by wealth accumulation, the search for security (financial and otherwise), for reputation, for prestige, for success, and the desire to fit in, to be socially suave and to enter social circles that are good for one's image, professional career and material advancement, has left me disenchanted, disappointed and nostalgic — every so often I long for a more innocent and simpler way of life, which traditional religion, at times, can offer. Even the very human act of showing vulnerability when being intimate with another person is corrupted. Now it is simply about finding someone who can fit into your schedule with the least amount of trouble to your other material pursuits. Everything is so depressingly utilitarian, with very limited passion and sincerity, and in the process, the more important things fall by the way side.

At this point I must embarrassingly confess that I have not shunned

this “utilitarian” world completely although I have made some major decisions to be less absorbed in it. I consciously struggle against my own inclinations towards some worldly attractions, for example, I have an unhealthy obsession with luxury hotels and fine dining, which I am desperately seeking to remedy, so far, with limited success. I suppose I am describing the bind that many people of my age, living in these times, are experiencing — the question of balance and harmony in life, even while trying to establish one’s life as an adult, with all its concomitant duty to be responsible for one’s livelihood and to respond to social concerns and realities. The question of creating balance and harmony in one’s daily life, more often than not left to the lonely individual to resolve on his or her own, has prompted me to reconsider the worth of my traditional Islamic education, the invaluable lessons it taught me and the morals it imbued. These lessons or principles, these “lofty” morals, are not of the type one would usually learn in a corporate or university environment. In fact, instead of increasing your chances of material success, these lessons, if followed strictly, may have the potential of reducing the likelihood of achieving financial success and material status. I will mention briefly four such lessons that I have now come to cherish and which inform, and I believe will always inform, my life.

Love of God and the Prophet (*Allah aur Rasūl Ki Muḥabbat*)

The love of God and the Prophet Muhammad was instilled in me during my earliest years. Nothing was more meaningful or important to me at the *madrasa*. No earthly power or material achievement demanded more attention than my dedication to God and the Prophet. No matter how much I tried to reduce this overbearing profusion of affection for a transcendent being and a historic personality from 7th century Arabia, the intensity of the love I have for God and the Prophet has only increased over time. I am prone to melancholic states and it is only the remembrance of God and the praise of the Prophet that have comforted me, the balm for my uncertainties and failures. I cannot envision a future or a life without a strong belief in God and the spiritual authority of the Prophet. The impact of this attachment and love is so overwhelming

that, in the course of doing anything, I find myself wondering what God would want me to do and what He would think of me. This has led to me making better choices than I otherwise would, often the result of a guilty conscience when meditating on God and the Prophet as described, I realise that I have acted in an undesirable manner. My belief in God has allowed me to take myself to task for my actions, sometimes very harshly and has made me more conscious and cautious of how I relate to people, strangers and friends, trying to conduct myself with fairness and gentleness, although I often fail to adequately uphold these virtues of the spiritual life. In a world where individualism is prized and alienation is common, the intertwining of God and my life — God who is “closer to you than your jugular vein” and is “indeed close: I listen to prayer of every suppliant when he calls on Me”— has allowed me to take refuge in the Most Powerful and the Most Compassionate, with the knowledge that my anxieties and insecurities are genuinely attended to. Even when I have momentarily erred, I can move on to try yet again to acquit myself in a better way to those around me as well as to myself.

The Love of Money and Prestige (*ḥubbe māl* and *ḥubbe jah*)

The love of money and the desire for prestige, I was told, are the twin diseases of the heart. The ethos of the *madrasa* was notably devoid of competition and selfish interests. The focus on wealth was discouraged, rendered insignificant, and this has had an enduring effect on me. The consistent mania of accruing money and hoarding it, of spending the waking hours of one’s entire day to obtain financial success, material wealth and security for a future life that is uncertain has made me realise that in many instances the love for others no longer has much worth in the contemporary world. The love for material prosperity and the desire for social prestige have led many to choose paths that are less moral and more unjust, less respectful and more arrogant, less considerate of others around us and more selfish, less sensitive to giving and more inclined towards egotism. The nagging awareness of these twin diseases in my mind has led me to give more without expecting much, or even anything, in return and has provided me with the courage to make important

decisions, some of which go against the strain of material success. It has also made me more conscious of the needs and feelings of others so as not to injure them on my path to achieving my goals. Of course, as confessed earlier, I am not perfect at accomplishing this at all times and in all my actions, thoughts and words. I am hardly asserting myself here as a paragon of virtue in alluding to my effort. I only wish to convey a sense to the many lonely others that the effort is worth it and can be as good as the desired result and I hold to the certainty that with continued vigilance and practice, I shall with each passing day become better at living out my spiritual ideals.

Character and Respectful Etiquette (*Akhlāq* and *Adab*)

The Prophet is reported to have said that his mission was to perfect character. One of the most important components of the education I received was how to be a good person. While I continue to struggle to conduct myself in accordance with the highest ideals of what I was taught constitutes noble character and respectful etiquette, there is little doubt in my mind that these teachings contribute to my daily efforts to be a better person. I was taught to respect my elders and have mercy on those younger than me. I was schooled to display the highest form of respect and affection for my mother. I was told that by giving charity, the receiver is not beholden to me, but rather, I to him. I am beholden to the recipient for unburdening me of an asset in my possession that I would be answerable to God for, having to explain the manner in which I accumulated and spent it. I was coached that to be gentle and soft in speech is more beautiful than to be loud and harsh. I was taught that to love another person for the pleasure of God is rewarding and virtuous. I was instructed that hospitality and generosity are noble traits. I was advised that to keep silent is more often than not better than to speak. I was informed that to speak the truth and stand up for justice against falsehood and oppression is an obligation. I was taught that a smile, a helping hand to an elderly person, the protection of the orphan and the greeting of others are meritorious acts. I was counselled to be ever cautious of pride and arrogance for these attributes extinguish the good

and the beautiful in oneself and in others. I was advised to respect my teachers even if he or she taught me just a single letter of the alphabet. I was alerted to be firm against injustice and lenient towards the weak. I was taught that forgiveness is better than revenge. I was apprised that gratitude towards others is gratitude to God. I cannot say that I have accomplished or brought into fruition all of this sagacious advice, but it has nonetheless left its mark on me.

Life and Death (*Hayāt and Mawt*)

The Qur'an states that God says "Be and it is (*kun faya kūn*)". I was told that life is a precious gift from God and it is our duty to live it in an honourable manner mindful of God. I was told that life is only worthwhile if one has a good character and respectful etiquette. In this regard, life and death were created by God to measure who are best in action. I was told that death is equally important as life. Death is a certain reality that unites one with his or her Beloved (God). The Sufis call their death a wedding, for it is then that they meet God. When I look at my life and the abundance of superficiality against which I try to strive, death is no longer so bad or something to avoid, just as life is a responsibility that we must meet and try to fulfil gracefully. The process of loss (as opposed to accumulation, hoarding and clinging) is important in Muslim cultures (and other cultures as well) and this is what I find meaningful. I was taught that life and the pleasures of this world are transient, an illusion. The reality is the feeling of love, of belonging and yearning for closeness. It is stated in the Qur'an: "Know that the life of this world is only play and amusement, pomp and mutual boasting among you, and rivalry in respect of wealth and children. (It is) like a rain, thereof the growth is pleasing to the tiller; afterwards it dries up and you see it turning yellow; then it becomes straw ...And the life of this world is only a deceiving enjoyment".

These four lessons have continued to be my guide long after I left the *madrassa*. The worth of the education I received at this traditional Islamic institution is invaluable. Although I remain critical of certain aspects of such institutions, I am profoundly grateful for what the experience taught me. More importantly, it was also the inception of a passionate love affair

with the study of religion, particularly Islam, which continues to sustain me to this day. I am getting older and the choices I make tend to have greater implications for me and those around me, but as I persistently think about the type of person I would like to be, and with the guidance that was imparted to me in those formative years having for the most part held sway, I could not ask for anything more.