

### Book review: Usha Sanyal: Scholars of Faith - South Asian Muslim Women and the Embodiment of Religious Knowledge

Muhammad-din, Faiza

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riod. Related to this is the translation “Zhang Zhao the second Lord” for 張趙二郎 (pp. 114–115), which surely means “the two Lords Zhang and Zhao”. According to David Mozina (see above, pp. 179–180), the ritual specialist first takes on the body of the first Celestial Master (i.e., Zhang Daoling 張道陵) and then the even more powerful Dark Emperor (Xuandi 玄帝, called Yuandi 元帝 during the Qing), who was named Zhao Gongming (趙公明). “Dark Sovereign” and “Dark Emperor” are essentially synonyms. It made good sense to name one’s ritual tradition after this figure.

In addition to the elaborate consecration documents, the statues contain a variety of objects to represent a life force (e.g., medical substances, but unlike elsewhere no dead insects) as well as life in a more literal sense (organs out of silk). Interesting (and new to this reviewer) is the medical discussion of the various healing substances, which might also explain why these statues can be used in praying for health (pp. 130–139).

All in all, I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book, which will provide an excellent starting point to the religious culture of the western part of the Hunan region. Even despite the above mentioned weaknesses, it is a marvelous book. It is well translated, richly illustrated and deals in extensive detail with the domestic statuary of Western Hunan. It is part of a series of books that have already come out or will come out very soon on the religious culture of the region, putting it on the map in the same way that earlier scholarship elucidated the religious culture of Taiwan and parts of Fujian.

*Barend ter Haar*

USHA SANYAL, *Scholars of Faith: South Asian Muslim Women and the Embodiment of Religious Knowledge*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2020. 409 pages, 10 illustrations, \$65.00. ISBN 978-0-1901-2080-1

The existing scholarship on madrasas in South Asia, which investigates the socio-political aspects of these religious schools, is mostly based on madrasas for male students. Madrasas in South Asia are a parallel system of education for learning about Islam. The subjects one may study include the Qur’an, Islamic theology, Islamic jurisprudence and worship rituals, among others. During the last three decades women’s madrasas have become so popular that they now outnumber those for men<sup>1</sup> – a trend that is linked to increasing literacy among women.

The book *Scholars of Faith* by Usha Sanyal takes up this new development and provides a highly welcome addition to the research on madrasas by providing a

1 According to the official website of the largest madrasa examination board in Pakistan, <http://www.wifaqulmadaris.org> (accessed 15 October 2021).

detailed picture of two madrasas for women: the Jami'a Nur al-Shari'at madrasa in Shahjahanpur, a small town in Uttar Pradesh, North India, and the online madrasa of Al-Huda International. The book's core argument is that the implications of Muslim women's religious education for social change must be understood through the nexus of women's education, the domestic realm and the community. The agency acquired via the attainment of religious knowledge is exercised by women in a context where gender norms constrain their opportunities for action.

The study's strength lies in its combined analysis of the traditional madrasa in North India and the online education course by Al-Huda International. The second half of the book focuses on the latter, a highly structured organisation that emerged in Pakistan in 1994. Since then, Al-Huda International has spread rapidly to other parts of Pakistan and the Pakistani diaspora in Great Britain, Canada, the United States and parts of the Middle East. Initially Al-Huda International attracted educated, upper- and upper-middle-class Pakistani women, though currently, its students represent a broad spectrum of income categories. Since its relocation to Canada (and the US), it has especially attracted middle-class, second-generation, English-educated South Asian Muslim women. The online madrasa brings together the diaspora communities and provides a unique space for debate. The students are based in different parts of the world and bring their own perspectives and experiences to the classroom.

After completing their studies, the graduates of both the traditional madrasa and Al-Huda International have to balance their enthusiasm for preaching Islamic values with the societal norms and expectations of their respective environment, with regard to age, gender and their duties towards parents, in-laws and husbands. Madrasas are considered avenues of upward mobility for the students as their knowledge of the shari'a increases. However, if, on the one hand, this education gives them agency, this agency is circumscribed by social norms. The experiences and goals of the students of Al-Huda International and the Jami'a Nur al-Shari'at madrasa are therefore a major research topic of the book.

*Scholars of Faith* starts with a chapter about the author's field experiences at the madrasa Jami'a Nur al-Shari'at. The male guardians of the madrasa function as the gatekeepers – an image that nicely mirrors the real-life experience of the female students and graduates and a helpful approach to the documentation of the fieldwork findings by the author. She describes the many efforts made by the male administration of the madrasa and its dedicated staff, which is overlooked in many studies. Their detailed biographies inform the reader about the machinery behind a structure that works smoothly despite limited resources. This is followed by a detailed overview of the daily rhythm of prayers and studies inside the madrasa. The detailed narrative about a day in a madrasa boarding school then takes the reader on a journey to the parts where entry is limited. Women's madrasas do not allow the entry of male visitors and the practice of

veiling and seclusion further protects the students from outsiders. The descriptions of the classroom environment take the reader through detailed imagery. These accounts of the students' everyday lives paint a vivid picture of a madrasa's activities and daily routines. The humble living conditions are portrayed without judgement – a rarity in most literature about madrasas.

After these detailed field descriptions Usha Sangyal turns to the question of how young South Asian women apply the teachings of the madrasa to their daily lives and how they balance them with their place in public and private spheres. The fifth chapter provides examples by following the life trajectories of some graduates of the two madrasas studied. The author shows that the students' internalisation of the madrasa's worldview gives rise to a sense of obligation to teach what they have learned. Their studies shape their lives after graduation, defining the meaning of life for the former students as well as their rights and duties in the world. However, the trajectories of the graduates profiled are quite different. Some went on to teach at madrasas, while others found this too challenging and left these demanding and low-paid teaching jobs. One of them started a small neighbourhood school for girls, intending to give them basic Islamic classes in the afternoons. She felt that “the girls needed guidance with daily life skills such as how to dress, how to carry themselves, and how to live in an Islamically correct manner” (p. 218). In her opinion the madrasa is a place for discipline and nurture, “which encourages students to develop a habitus through predictable routines and responsibilities throughout the day” (p. 222).

The online madrasa of Al-Huda International emerged as part of a broader worldwide phenomenon of women's movements in the Muslim world that the famous anthropologist Saba Mahmood, who wrote about the mosque movement in Egypt, characterised as “piety movements”. Following the same pattern as the description of the Jami'a Nur al-Shari'at madrasa earlier in the book, the book introduces the people behind the organisation in great detail, as well as highlighting the similarities between Al-Huda International and the popular South Asian preaching movement Tablighi Jama'at. The teachings attach great importance to the values of personal piety, patience, adherence to norms of Islamic behaviour, female segregation and the acceptance of male authority in the family. Sangyal contextualises Al-Huda International as a Muslim reform movement, which shares with all the nineteenth-century reformist movements their readiness to adopt the latest technology to disseminate their views as widely as possible. It thus uses a hybrid organisation model incorporating the properties of secular schools and concepts and methods taken from the world of business and marketing, emphasising the optimisation of time, resources and technology to achieve its goals.

The author's observations of the online madrasa are especially interesting since online madrasas are quite a recent format that has grown in popularity during the last 10 years with increased access to the internet. The online platforms

have become particularly important for smaller ex-pat Muslim communities that lack madrasas in their vicinity. The online community of the Al-Huda International “sisters” is based on the shared goal of studying the Qur’an and Islamic teachings, thus providing a powerful source of support and affirmation in a diasporic context.

Al-Huda International is unique, as the organisation is run by Farhat Hashmi, a female scholar whose audio lectures are very popular amongst men and women. In her lectures, also available online and as audio cassettes, the madrasa founder speaks authoritatively, directly and colloquially while paying attention to every detail of the Arabic texts, the literal, figurative, contextual meanings and the association of meanings. She integrates Qur’anic material with modern science, technology and the everyday realities of the students. Her embrace of science and technology in a life lived following the teachings of the Qur’an shows her students that they can become modern, tech-savvy orthoprax Muslim women. She believes that educated women can bring about change in society and “loosen the hold of the ulama on society by studying the Qur’an and finding out for themselves why certain things are forbidden, rather than taking the ulama’s word for it” (p. 318). Her exegesis focuses on inner personal transformation as the key to outward changes in behaviour, in order to become a servant of God.

The book highlights that while the acquisition of religious knowledge is empowering, the madrasa graduates in both cases are aware of the need to find a fine balance between their desire to preach what they have learnt and society’s expectation of obedience. They must be careful not to transgress gender and age hierarchies and social expectations. The process of change is a negotiation over a lengthy period between the community’s expectations of a woman’s role and the text-based knowledge of shari’a norms that the madrasa students practice. The study by Usha Sanyal helps understand the subtle differences between the male madrasas, which focus on sharpening sectarian profiles through debates and competitions, versus the female madrasas, which adopt a more subtle approach when expressing their sectarian identity through worship and rituals. The book furthers the discussion of shared concerns arising at the nexus of female religious scholars’ agency and social position. Finally, the detailed case studies enable readers interested in gender and Islam to zoom in on the intricacies involved.

*Faiza Muhammad-din*