



IN THE NAME OF ALLAH, THE MOST GRACIOUS, THE MOST MERCIFUL

COMMUNICATION 113: MAINSTREAM MAKTAB SYSTEM IN THE TOWNSHIPS: BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE!

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

The following piece by Moulana Ebrahim Mokgabudi, a soft and diplomatic acquaintance, is very revealing of the outcomes we as established Muslims have produced with our activities in the townships. It tells a story, in a nutshell, of how not to do things and pleads with us in a nudging way to stop activities that are toxic to Islam. Our good intentions are bedevilled by damage that will take a generation if not more, to undo. If these comments do not ring alarm bells, little else will.

Moulana Mokgabudi, for those unaware, was the leader of the group that was chased out of the Mayfair mosque parking lot with eight other township imams for attempting to meet at a convenient place in Fordsburg to discuss matters relating to the imam project, yet he saw fit to forgive his detractors. His message on a sore subject is so profound and relevant to the “Indianization” of Islam in South Africa that it is only arrogance that still make us continue to push the same agenda with the same pushy attitudes in the townships. He is a graduate of an ‘Indian’ uloom as well as a university graduate, who tells us from the heart how we have spent, and continue to spend, millions to create not Muslims but murtads. No one disputes the good intentions we have, but the proof of the pudding is ultimately in the outcomes that we have produced. It would only be arrogance to go on applying a failed remedy which begins with the whole paradigm of handout and dependence creating charity. It tells us that if there is ignorance and incompetence, it is not on the side of the township communities but by those professing to know it all.

I went to the sprawling township of Inanda some years ago full of expectations to ‘meet’ the thousands of Muslims I was told we support and train with our millions in charity, running hundreds of maktabs under the direction of leaders who have never set foot to see how their township maktabs fare or what happens to the thousands of children who pass through them annually

I fear we as a society will have to bear a heavy responsibility for the tragedy of producing murtads in the townships. Allah has asked to deliver a message, not produce murtads in

topis and kurtas. Where did we get the idea sitting in our air-conditioned offices, institutions and businesses, that Islam is first and foremost a dress code and everything else is secondary? What a magnificent illustration of how we have reduced Islam to this status when an elderly township lady tell a kurta clad youngster when did he lose his senses to want to embrace 'the church of poverty and misery'?

Islam is not a charade of dress codes upon which we focus an inordinate amount of energy. Let us wake up to the enormous harm we have done the cause of the Messenger of Allah in our arrogant ignorance and change our ways before ALLAH calls us to account for the thousands of murtads that we produce at a cost of millions in charity. Granted, they are spent with good intentions. But now that we know what is really happening, ignorance before Allah will no longer be a defence. And rightly so. We have been warned again and again but insist on persisting.

Christians came here as colonizers, as oppressors. They started about the time we did. They have turned virtually the whole country Christian, despite their role as cruel exploiters and oppressors. We came as victims of colonization with a message from the one Allah had sent as a Mercy unto Mankind. Yet today we are often mistaken for the colonizers. Does it not bother us? Don't we care to understand why?

There is no point in strutting the country giving lofty speeches about race relations and Islam when we have not sat down talking to our township elders, when we have not made a single town or village a Muslim run and controlled one in our country. The time for speeches is long past. It is time to bring about real change. It is time to question why when the Jewish leadership builds just two clinics in Zululand and the king talks of thawing relations with Israel, yet I am told by one close to the king that the king asks when will the 'Indians' deliver on the promises that they made to him at Nkandla?

As Moulana points out, those Muslims dependent on our systems will tell us what we want to hear. It's a question of survival in what he calls peanut butter diplomacy. We can go on patting ourselves on our backs and pleasing our own 'Indian' constituencies for the 'great work' we are doing in the townships. I try hard to build bridges but in the battle for progress against public relations, the latter wins hands down.

Reading what disturbs Moulana Mokgabudi, I repeat one more time what Tahir Sitoto once cautioned about: If your charity gives you the impression that you have the right to dictate control of Islam in the townships, then keep out of the townships with your charity. We will manage far better on our own. There is only one a real alternative to the handout mess and instant hijabis we have created: Help the township Muslims develop their own communities as they see fit, not how we as know-alls dictate. Don't in our arrogance underestimate the capacity of the people who gave Islam more space and freedom in this non-Islamic country than anywhere else on earth. The freedom that we as established Muslims brag about in international arenas but do not see fit to allow the township Muslims the same opportunity because we think we can do a better job.

It is time to break out of this vicious cycle. It cannot be done by listening to the praises of the peanut butter dependants and patting ourselves for a job well done whilst township

elders are sneering at the symbols of our great faith. We lost the plot the day we took away that child's Islamic pride and dignity in the township. We lost the plot because we concerned ourselves with the public relations of our Islamic communities in the townships but failed miserably to actually develop such communities. It is time we stopped deciding what is best in townships we have no clue about. It is time we **sat around shura tables** with non-dependant elders to work on joint projects founded on sound principles. It is time to move on from the failed notion that we can turn every applicant into a successful business entrepreneur and looked at investing into long term projects, as do our Turkish and Egyptian brothers. It is time we supported and rewarded individual initiative rather than those who have mastered the art of playing on people's generosity. It is time we began to play a supportive rather than a prescriptive role in enabling communities to develop themselves. Handouts actually destroy initiative and the incentives for self-development. It is time to move out from handout mode to exploring ways and means to empower people to support themselves. It is time to pause and not ask how can I help you but rather, how can I help you in helping yourself. It is time to move out of the peanut butter mentality and help those that can and want to help themselves. It is time we asked with regard to our plans of action, especially those conceived by 'us' and executed by 'us' for 'them', Uyakuphi tina?

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE, by ML. MOKGABUDI.

I recently read an article titled: 'Township Madrassas need a Paradigm Shift'. It outlined some recommendations on how to successfully operate maktabas in the Townships. I believe the recommendations are quite relevant and apt.

I remember a day wherein I was just going about with my business in one of our township when I heard an elderly lady screaming at a youngster in the street who was dressed in 'topi' and 'kurta' headed to madrassa:

"uyakuphi wena? Nawe se ungena lesonto? ekini anihluphegi mos, why ungena lesonto?"

(Where are you going? Have you also joined this church? Your family is not poor mos..., why are you attending this church?)

For a good few weeks, I spent lengthy moments of silence trying to unpack the statement of that lady, as short as it may have been, and as much as many may argue that it doesn't need 'tafsir'. Of course it was not a revelation that lady had just painted before me, yet it was very revealing in that in a few seconds, the most vivid picture of what a Muslim in the Township, or to be more specific for the purpose of our topic, a Madrasah child is seen to be. A poor, broken wayward lad who has no sense of direction.

Many a time, I come across people who would want to know the nature of my work in the Townships and the kinds of challenges I face in trying to add value within these communities. One common question that always comes up is: "Is Islam growing in the Township? Are people taking well to it?" I often respond by saying, yes it's growing, but also **declining** at the same rapid speed at which it's growing, if not faster. The reason? Nobody wants to appear for the rest of their lives as being 'poor, broken and having no sense of direction'. So if the child does stick around for a few years in the madrasah, it's either because he's hanging around with his friends who happen to attend the madrasah, or he/she is just in survival mode. The minute the need for survival is over, and the basic needs for him or her to start scavenging for himself have been fulfilled, he has no reason to be seen in that 'church', or it's uniform, ever again.

Now, someone may argue, justifiably or not, that you see, all that these people come for is food, they use us and leave us just like that. Well..., the reality is that we have created **no other reason** for them to come to madrasah other than giving them peanut butter bread and juice. No effort was made to make the religion more relevant to them other than changing their names.

What we need to understand is that people have unique cultures of their own, they have their own social dynamics and challenges, they have their own approach in the manner in which they see life as well as the concept of religion itself. If I'm just going to dive into the Township and start teaching the child 'alif', 'ba', 'ta' without understanding the religious background of the child, their cultural convictions, their unique societal challenges and what type of baggage removal I have to engage in before pouring anything into the child's mind, I should definitely not be surprised when the child is full of my peanut butter and bread and then disappears for good.

Are we not surprised as to how the Missionary colonisers got it right? They studied every social aspect of the indigenous people, gained mastery in it, and used it to permeate their theology into the communities. I remember back then when I was a Roman Catholic, it was a great matter of prestige for anyone to say they are attending Sunday school. When I compare that to the kids in the townships attending madrasah today, many have to conceal their topis and abayas until they reach the door of the madrasah.

Most of the times when people want to gauge the success of a Township madrasah, the first question they'll ask you is how many students do you have? To such an extent that the 'Sheikh' is severely lambasted if some people have to pop in the masjid and find only few students in the madrasah. Due to the pressure on him to 'manufacture' students, the

'Sheikh' has mastered the art of the game and does what we call 'crowd hire' by gathering most of the young kids of the community just before the December jalsah or when he hears his superiors are coming to visit just to create a great spectacle in front of their eyes. I don't blame the 'Sheikh', he has come to learn that the tool for survival is always in ensuring that the numbers are 'right', irrespective of what happens to the numbers in a year or two's time, he can always cook up new numbers, that's it!

A good question to ask the 'Sheikh' should be - out of the fifty students you had five years ago how many are still Muslims? After ten years ask, out of those who remained Muslims how many are now independent and adding value to the masjid and broader community? You see...the thing is, you can have 100 students at one go in your maktabas if they are all going to turn 'murtad' in 3 to 5 years' time. Then we should be crying tears of blood and asking ourselves where we are going wrong, not asking how many students the 'Sheikh' currently has.

I once asked an imam working in the township: "Why do you work so hard to get a large number of students when you know for sure that they are just going to end up as statistics"? He turns around and tells me, "SHEIKH..., that's my job, what can I do"?

This is what I call the "between a rock and a hard place".

The problem is that although the conventional madrasah system works so brilliantly within established Muslim communities, a copy and paste of the exact same system in the townships spells disaster.

What needs to be done in the Townships is quite different from what is done in the established Muslim communities. The madrasah system is not in the DNA of children in the Townships, they need to be motivated in various ways in order for it to end up being a part and parcel of their lives.

We need to demonstrate to the parents of the kids that we care for the children holistically and not just trying to push our religion down their throats. We need to demonstrate to them that we are with them for the long haul.

Along with the Islamic studies, the madrasah needs to incorporate a tuition program into the syllabus, homework assistance program, sporting activities and good quality excursion programs.

If you gauge that people in the township don't have an affinity to the word madrasah, don't call it madrasah, call it afternoon school. In this way you will be elevating the program from being in the margins into mainstream because it won't sound foreign anymore.

Don't give the young girls old and worn out abayas to wear to madrasah, sew them beautiful, shariah compliant dresses that cover them modestly without being black and faded.

In order to gain prestige and honour in the Townships, people need to know that children who attend madrasah are also the best performers at school. If we can achieve this, we won't need peanut butter and bread to draw the children, the parents will themselves enrol the kids into our madrasahs.

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