Islam in South Africa:

Muslims make up about 2% of the 42 million people in South Africa. They were classified under the Apartheid as 'Malays' and 'Indians' and settled in such major cities as Cape Town, Durban, Port Elizabeth and Bloemfontein. However, Muslims have preserved their cultural and religious identity. This is due, in no small measure, to their Islamic educational institutions.

In 1658 the first Muslims arrived in the Cape. They were the Marodijes from Ambon (in the Moluccas). They were followed by voluntary migration of slaves and political prisoners that lasted until 1834. The Marodijes were the Malay servants of Dutch officials. They were followed by the Prince Abdullah Effendi (d. 1669) from Maccasar, who was exiled to the Cape in 1694 for his struggle for Bantam independence. He came to the Cape from the Indonesian islands. In all, about 72% of the Muslims came from Asia, particularly India. The first group of Indian Muslims arrived in South Africa from Gujarat and Bombay as indentured labourers from 1860. The second group of Muslims are concentrated in Kwazulu-Natal, Gauteng and the adjacent areas. Although they respected Arabic as a sacred language, they regarded Urdu as a religious language to be used in sermons and to be taught in madrasas.

A fraction of Shaykh Yusuf's Zubdat al-Asrar

The first figure to be associated with Islamic education in South Africa was the Prince Abdullah Effendi (d. 1669), known as Tuam Guru. He became a prisoner on Robben Island until 1783, and after the new ordinance of religious freedom in 1804, he founded the first mosque and madrassa in Cape Town. He performed the first Friday congregational prayer and paved the way for the madrassa as the one institution which has enduring formative influence on the Muslims of South Africa. The madrasa, whether home-based or mosque-based classes in Qur’anic recitation, are still retaining their religious identity. It is an extension of the home. At home parents set the example of religious practices and children imitate their example; at the madrasa the children learn more about these religious values and practices. But most importantly, they learn to read the Qur’an. However, since the 1960s Muslims parents have become more earnest in having their children pursue a higher secular education, and with the increasing pressures of schoolwork, many of these children stop attending the madrasa after primary school.

The development of the madrasa must be understood in the context of the political status of Muslims as ‘non-white’ and isolated from mainstream education. As a shaykh of main-ly the Khalawiyyah Sufi order, he was an in-spiration to the small Muslim community. Muslims had to be socialized according to a different set of values; independently of mainstream education. They regarded Urdu as a sacred language, they regarded English and the Dutch as the colonizer’s language and literature. A significant difference from the madrassah is that all instruction is in English.

Less indigenous to South Africa and more in keeping with the Deobandi spirit is the Azadville seminary, near Johannesburg, which teaches all subjects in Urdu. Even Arabic was taught in Urdu! Today there are many Islamic seminaries in South Africa that aim at conferring Islamic knowledge and preserving Islamic faith. A compromise, however, is that because their curriculum is devoid of the rational sciences, they produce graduates that are unable to confront the challenges of secular modernity.

Community-based colleges

The sole institution that tried to overcome the dichotomy between the secular and the religious, and to combine the academic pro-approach of the university with the religious approach of the Darul-Ulum, is the Islamic College of Southern Africa, which was estab-lished in 1991 in Gateville, Cape Town. This community-based college offers a four-year bachelor’s degree in theology, Arabic, and Islamic law. The Islamic College has a wide curriculum, including subjects such as comparative religion and Islamic spirituality. The lecturers’ backgrounds vary; some are graduates of universities and others of Islamic seminaries. The Islamic College is a feeder for the honours degrees in Arabic and in Islamic studies at the universities of the Western Cape and the University of Cape Town, respectively.

To conclude, the above Islamic education-al institutions have evolved over three cen-turies and have contributed to the preserva-tion of the Islamic faith. In the current post-Apartheid period, Muslims are exposed to an open society with new challenges, mak-ing it essential for Islamic educational insti-tutions to prepare their graduates to com-front the challenges of secular modernity, or to come in terms with it, and by so doing, make a larger contribution to society while still retaining their religious identity.