



Memorandum for the Record

By Rebecca Cataldi

Subject: Visit to Pakistani Women's Madrasas, April 23-29, 2007

I am deeply grateful to Mr. Qazi Abdul Qadeer Khamosh, our Wahhabi partner in Pakistan, for sponsoring this last-minute trip, during which I visited five women's madrasas, in addition to meeting separately with other male madrasa leaders and briefly sitting in on Hafiz Khalil and Shabbir Ahmed's own 10-day workshop.

Jamia Taleem ul-Our'an wal Hadees lil Banat (Gujranwala)

This was the first madrasa I visited after arriving in Lahore. Khamosh called it the most influential Wahhabi women's madrasa in Pakistan, with influence over about 100 other madrasas, as well as the biggest and the oldest of the large Wahhabi women's madrasas and a model school. There are about 950 students, about 636 of whom receive room and board there (and clothing if they need it), with the youngest about 10 years old. The students come from all four provinces as well as Azad Kashmir/Jammu and the Northern Areas. There are 40 teachers (all but one female) and 20 administrators (male and female). I was apparently the first American to visit. I met with Bareera, principal of the school, and her brother Muhammad Umair Khokhar, an administrator, who took me on a tour of the madrasa (this was one of the few times in which males, including Khamosh, were able to accompany me into a women's school.)

The size of the school was impressive. I visited various classrooms, a larger room for memorization of the Qur'an (here students of all grades are combined, about 250 at a time), the library (which has about 15,000 books which they said students may take home), and the food preparation areas. I was told that about 10-15 students sleep in one room.

The 8-year course centers on the Qu'ran, hadith, fiqh, and Arabic grammar. However, this school is somewhat unique in that it also offers some government syllabus courses, including math, science, history, and English (I actually saw some English textbooks, although most students didn't seem to understand when I spoke simple English to them.) They apparently also teach a short 3-month computer course and have a vocational center where the students can learn to make clothes. Every Monday there is a public meeting on an Islamic topic. I was told that the method of teaching focuses on teachers' lectures based on the books but that group discussion is also included, and that every Wednesday there is a special training program to teach public speaking.

Most of the teachers graduated from this madrasa (or in some cases from other religious schools) rather than regular universities. Most of the students who work after graduation go on to teach at religious schools (or sometimes government schools).

There was an air of structure and discipline at the school. I visited various classrooms, most of which consisted of 10-15 students sitting on the floor in front of the low desks. The classrooms were generally sparse, with few chalkboards or other teaching aids. The students were generally quiet and often hid their faces when the men approached the classroom. All the classes I visited were teaching Qur'an, hadith, or Arabic grammar.

It was interesting to see how the women opened up when no men were present. Bareera was warmer and more relaxed when we were with only women, and after the men had gone, students crowded around me in the hallway, slowly overcoming their shyness, shaking my hand, and telling me their names. Muhammad also opened up more when the older men left, breaking the taboo on taking pictures and seeming eager to speak English with me and to exchange email.

I was given copies of government audits of their madrasa, a brochure on the school, a CD said to contain pictures, and print-outs in English with messages such as: "Islam is the religion of peace and love", "Islam condemns human rights violations and terrorism", "We condemn all kinds of terroristic attacks and suicide bombing [sic]", "We have no political connections with any political and jihadi organization", "He who kills a man kills the whole human race (al-hadith)", "Madina charter is an excellent example of Islam message of peace [sic]", "Acquire knowledge from cradle to grave", and "Islam is the most moderate and enlightened religion of the worlds". I was also given a beautiful Pakistani scarf and a Qur'an with English translation, and was told that they hoped I would accept Islam.

Khamosh said this madrasa is ready to collaborate with ICRD and wants the same type of workshop as we've provided for the boys' madrasas, and that anything grounded in the Qur'an and Sunna is acceptable.

Because of its position of influence, status as a "model" school, established history, size, and its providing for the needs of such a large number of students who would otherwise be unable to afford an education, the Jamia Taleem ul-Qur'an wal Hadees lil Banat seems an ideal madrasa for us to engage, through which we could have a significant impact on many other schools and on Wahhabi women's education more generally. Though this school is not generally open to foreigners and did not know much about ICRD, they trust Khamosh and would almost certainly accept an invitation from him to participate in our workshops.

Jamia Umm-ul-Qura (Faisalabad)

This is a large and very modern Wahhabi madrasa (built in 2005), which is affiliated with the Umm-ul-Qura Women's Welfare Society. I met with Misbah Zia, the Director, a very warm and enthusiastic woman who is very eager to work with ICRD. In contrast with the more solemn and disciplined atmosphere of the first madrasa, this school seemed more relaxed and informal, and I was allowed and even encouraged to take pictures of the facilities and some of the students. The students seemed much more at ease around outsiders and were eager to be with me (one girl did not let go of my hand for almost the

entire time we walked around the school). Neither Khamosh nor any other men were allowed to accompany me inside, however.

I visited only one classroom and saw only a few students (Khamosh thinks there are maybe 60-65 total currently). While he said the school is currently teaching only the Qur'an, Misbah seems very eager to teach subjects such as English, computers, and interfaith dialogue. She also showed me some sewing machines to be used for vocational training. (It should be mentioned, however, that despite her running this madrasa she sends her daughter to a private city school.)

Misbah very badly wants ICRD to do workshops with her school (for both students and teachers), and even showed me the school's large auditorium which she has offered for the workshops. We need peace education and interfaith dialogue, she said, and made a point of mentioning that ICRD has done workshops for men but not yet any for women. She spoke enthusiastically about interfaith dialogue many times.

The Jamia Umm-ul-Qura is still young, and its course offerings and student population are still small. Yet its size, its modern facilities, and its being run by someone so enthusiastic to work with ICRD, to teach modern subjects, and to promote interfaith dialogue give it great potential. If we can engage this school in its early stage of development to build capacity for teaching tolerance and peace and a more modern education, it could have an enormous impact on an ever-growing number of students for generations to come.

Dar-ul-Islah (Village in Gujrat)

We spent two days in a small village in Gujrat, where I visited the Dar-ul-Islah, a Wahhabi-administered women's madrasa. It is a very small and simple madrasa, with only a few rooms (which they let me take a lot of pictures of despite that I couldn't take pictures of the class and students). This school teaches only the Qur'an, hadith, and the syllabus of the Wafaq-ul-Madaris-Salfia, which I perhaps got a taste of as one of the students helped me learn the Muslim profession of faith and some of the Qur'an by repeating the words over and over until I was able to repeat them back to her. Even some students who attend private academies or other non-madrasa schools study the Qur'an at the madrasa in the early morning before their other classes. Some of the graduates of the Dar-ul-Islah have gone on to start other madrasas in other places.

Despite that they spoke almost no English and I spoke almost no Urdu, the people of the village were very warm and hospitable, and some of them adopted me as family. However, it was also here that I first personally experienced what could be deemed a form of intolerance. I was sitting one night with about 10-15 people (all women and children), including 2 or 3 teachers from the women's madrasa and a couple madrasa students, and one of them asked me to repeat the Muslim profession of faith I had been taught at the madrasa. I had recited it and parts of the Qur'an for some of them before and didn't mind doing so again. However, this time some of the people followed by telling me, "Now say, 'Aana Muslim' ('I'm a Muslim'). Momentarily taken aback, I gently corrected, "Aana Christian." But they shook their heads, pointing to me and

saying “Aana Muslim.” Pretty soon the entire crowd joined in, both adults and children, pressing me to say it. Having innocently (I thought) repeated the Muslim profession of faith before, I wondered if now I was going to be viewed as an apostate. They continued to call on me to declare myself a Muslim, and each time I gently repeated, “Aana Christian.” Finally they asked me to show them Christian prayer, so I obediently stood, made the Sign of the Cross, and recited the Our Father aloud, and they listened in a respectful silence. When I finished, they asked me to perform Muslim prayer. I said I was willing if they showed me what to do, and so one of the madrasa teachers led me through the Muslim prayer. Getting up close to my face, in a stern but not hostile way, she repeated each word over and over until I had pronounced it correctly. I wondered if perhaps I was getting a taste of the way the students are taught to recite the Qur’an at the madrasa. Upon finishing, I hoped they would be satisfied, but they continued to push me to say I was a Muslim. As I continued to insist that I was a Christian, one woman shook her head and pointed to the sky, saying “Muslim—one God.” “Yes,” I appealed, pointing at both of us. “Muslim—Christian—one God—same.” She shook her head in disagreement. Then one girl who had previously called me her sister said, in as much as I could understand of her Urdu, “I can’t be your sister if you don’t say you’re a Muslim.” A woman who had previously called herself my mother said, “I can’t be your mother if you don’t say you’re a Muslim.” Though I knew they couldn’t understand my English, I replied, “I love the Muslim people, and I love you all, but I’m a Christian.” They continued to pressure me for a while, and I continued to respond in the same way. Then eventually, they gave up and began to treat me as they had before, with hospitality and kindness, some later again calling me family. I was amazed but grateful for the transformation.

What was particularly noteworthy was that this crowd that surrounded me, calling on me to declare myself a Muslim, was comprised almost entirely of women, the only males being children. On the few occasions after that when a few of the women tried again to get me to say “Aana Muslim”, they were always careful to do it when the men weren’t around. Likewise, they tried repeatedly to get me to cut my fingernails, saying that long nails were against the will of God, but would hide the nail clippers whenever one of the men entered the room. In contrast, when I went to Khamosh privately and offered to cut my fingernails while I was in the village, he told me not to worry about it. Similarly, it was the village women who pressured me to wear a hijab, even in the house, while I never felt the same pressure from the men. Thus, the women, and the way they are educated particularly in the rural cultures, may be even more conservative and less tolerant of differences than the men, making the need to engage the women’s madrasas all the more critical. (I do want to stress, though, that in general the people of the village, including at the madrasa, were generally incredibly kind and welcoming and usually did make me feel very accepted, even to the point of treating me as family. At no point did I feel any actual hostility or fear for my safety.)

Mahad-ul-Quran-o-Ume-Salma-lil-Binat (Islamabad)

This Deobandi madrasa is somewhat unique in that it has both a girls’ and a boys’ branch in the same building, and during my brief tour of the school, I got to see parts of both (at this school was also one of the few times I remember seeing a blackboard in a madrasa).

It is a large and influential school which is attached to a mosque which brings in about 1000 people. The school teaches the Wafaq-ul-Madaris-al-Arabia syllabus but also some government syllabus courses—I got to see some textbooks in subjects such as math and science. From what I was told, students can enter the madrasa at 15 or 16, after having passed the government schools exams, and concentrate solely on studying religion, or they can enter at a younger age (5 or 6) and study religion along with “worldly” subjects (math, science, English, history, geography) until their study has reached the equivalent of 10 years of study at a government school. They then have the choice of either sitting for a government university exam or continuing to study religion (the Dars e Nizam program).

The administrator I met with, Mr. Abdul-Hameed Sabry, said he also arranges vocational facilities and summer camps for both boys and girls (conducted separately). Mr. Sabry attended one of ICRD’s workshops and is ready to work with ICRD again to facilitate training workshops for women.

Later that day, I met again with Mr. Sabry and Mr. Saedullah al-Azhari, a preacher and senior teacher at the Jamia Fulqania, a Deobandi madrasa in Rawalpindi. Mr. Azhari attended ICRD’s January 2007 training workshop along with Mr. Sabry and had extremely positive things to say about it: “I learned tolerance culture and about creating interreligious harmony. Now I believe strongly in mutual respect of other religions. After the workshop, my mind was changed. Now I give many speeches on the need for interfaith dialogue. After the workshop, (I came to believe that) a safe human future is only possible through true interfaith dialogue. In my speeches now at the mosque and at public rallies, I talk about resolving conflict through dialogue. Every day in my classes now I also talk for a few minutes about interfaith dialogue (and about what I learned in the workshop).”

For the next 2-3 hours, the three of us, with Rashad Bukhari translating, proceeded to have our own impromptu interfaith/intercultural dialogue, discussing religion, politics, education, media, 9/11, and other topics. Some of the highlights of our discussion are as follows.

Mr. Azhari asked me about the image of madrasas in the United States, and I said I believed in truth that most Americans probably do not know what a madrasa is, but that those Americans who have heard of madrasas have most likely heard them associated with violence. However, ICRD has helped to show a different face of madrasas.

In talking about perceptions of each other, Mr. Sabry said to me, “We don’t hate anyone, including Americans. I am impressed by your personality, your manners, and your character. There is no difference between you and our girls here in Pakistan. We do not dislike you.” Mr. Azhari continued, “The only thing we don’t like about the United States is its oppressive policy and its exploiting weaker nations. Muslims are being targeted in Iraq, Palestine, and Afghanistan without justification. This increases bad feelings, grievances, negative perceptions, especially among Muslim youth.” He continued to say that the American/Western media is biased against Muslims and that

Americans and Europeans are influenced by this media. Christians and Muslims have been collaborating throughout history, he said, and so he thinks maybe the Jews, who he believes control the media, are using it to project negative perceptions of Muslims.

In response, I said that I honestly don't think the American media has anything against Muslims, but that it tends to focus on the most violent, shocking stories wherever they are, believing this is what sells—thus a violent minority gets much more press than the peaceful majority. (It was noted that this was also true of the Pakistani media.) Most Americans, I said, do not dislike Muslims or any other group of people—our culture teaches us to view and respect people as individuals, not to judge them as part of a group. America was founded on the principle that each person is an individual created by God and deserving of rights not because they are given by the government, but because they are given by God.

I also told them that I wanted to offer my own personal apology for the US policy in Iraq. I said I believed that Pres. Bush had misled some Americans into believing that going to war in Iraq was necessary for our security in the post-9/11 climate of fear, and that many Americans also truly believed that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq would actually help the Afghan and Iraqi people, but that now people have seen such violence and suffering in these countries and most Americans now oppose the Iraq war. “As an American,” I said, “I just want to say I'm so sorry for what the US has done in Iraq, and that I pray every day for the Iraqi people and for peace.” They seemed touched by this, and Mr. Azhari said in English, “Thank you.”

On the topic of religion, I said that the two greatest values in Christianity are to love God and to love other people, and that through my experiences in visiting Muslim countries and making Muslim friends I have come to see that Islam shares these values. So we have much in common and there is no reason for conflict between us; rather, we should cooperate and work together for peace.

The subject of 9/11 came up, and Mr. Azhari said he believed the attacks were a Jewish conspiracy designed to start a war between Christians and Muslims. I then said to them, “I would like to ask you a question, which is a little difficult to talk about, but I do not want to offend you, because I respect you.” They urged me to ask it. Long before 9/11, I said, Osama bin Laden declared war on America and has repeatedly and proudly advocated the killing of Americans, calling on Muslims to “kill the Americans—civilian and military—in any country in which it is possible to do it”, calling on those who “believe in Allah and wish to be rewarded by Allah to kill the Americans and plunder their money”, and saying that “to kill the Americans and the Jews is the highest obligation and the greatest form of worship.” I described the pain this caused but that I understood that this was certainly not what Islam really teaches. But given that bin Laden proudly broadcasts these messages from his own lips, and admitted his responsibility for 9/11 and his delight over 9/11, how could people believe that anyone else was responsible?

This question was never really answered to my satisfaction, but did lead to a discussion on US support for bin Laden in the Afghan/Soviet war. I made the point that at that time both were fighting a common enemy who had invaded the sovereign nation of Afghanistan and who represented a Communist ideology that was anti-religion and anti-freedom, and that when the Soviets were defeated the Americans did not take their places as occupiers but returned home and allowed Afghanistan to be free.

Mr. Sabry said the world would be better off if it were purged of both bin Laden and Bush. “Osama bin Laden does not represent Muslims or Islam,” he said, “and we are not fools to follow him. We should have a [different] forum to express our opinions and grievances, like what you (ICRD) are doing. As Christians and Muslims grow in understanding of each other, we can defeat extremist ideologies like the ones propagated by bin Laden. We can start an exchange program—if people visit each other’s countries, we can build [such an] environment and clarify misperceptions. If we make it a priority to establish peace and to clear away misperceptions—for example you (ICRD) have the right kind of platform for initiatives for engaging other people—we will (accomplish something good). And conspiracies against our religions can be treated with this strategy.” I was pleased to tell him that ICRD hopes to initiate just such an exchange program if funds can be raised.

At the end I asked if they would be interested to see the American-Islamic Friendship Project I started in which I compiled messages of peace and friendship from Americans to the Muslim world in a book, of which I had brought several copies. When I showed it to them, they remembered it from its inclusion in the ICRD workshop, which made me quite happy. I showed them the pictures I’d included of last year’s Unity Walk in DC, explaining that this was a gathering of Americans from many different religions to mark the anniversary of 9/11 by coming together in respect of all faiths, praying together for peace, and demonstrating our unity as one human family against violence and hatred.

It was a remarkable experience for me, as an American Christian woman, to be able to discuss these issues with two Pakistani Deobandi madrasa leaders. Despite disagreeing on certain things as major as who was responsible for 9/11, we were able to engage in a frank and respectful dialogue and to see how many values and goals we shared in common. What made me happiest was that they told me, before we had finished talking, that “In these 2 or 3 hours you have changed our impression of America and Americans”, and that their impression had become more positive.

We finished by sharing the fruit that had been brought to the table, which I had been carefully avoiding until now for fear it had been washed in the local water but which I now ate at their urging to show my respect for them. “Eat,” one of the madrasa leaders said to me. “How will you fight Osama if you don’t keep up your strength?”

Jamia Hafsa at the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) (Islamabad)

This was definitely the most interesting experience for me as it was the first clearly extremist madrasa that I visited. The Red Mosque is affiliated with both a men’s madrasa (the Jamia Fareedia) and a women’s madrasa (the Jamia Hafsa)—both Deobandi and

administered by Razi Abdul-Rashid (Abdul Rashid Ghazi) and his brother Maulana Abdul Aziz—which have threatened suicide bombings if the Pakistani government does not immediately implement Islamic Shariah law. Women from the Jamia Hafsa have taken over a public library, kidnapped three women they accused of operating a brothel (they were later released), and stopped cars carrying uncovered women and threatened to beat them. The deadline originally given by the madrasas for the government to implement Shariah law was Friday, April 27. I was taken to the Red Mosque on Saturday, April 28. (And I paid extra attention to the way I covered my hair that day.)

The first thing I noticed when we entered the complex was the men walking around with AK-47/Kalishnikov rifles, which was a bit unsettling. (I was also surprised to find the journalist Nicholas Schmidle there.) Having prior been told repeatedly not to say too much or ask too many questions, I was rather surprised when we were taken into a separate room to see Razi Abdul-Rashid himself, who sat down directly in front of me and asked me what questions I had for him. (He allowed me to take notes and even said I could record our conversation if I wished. After our conversation (the highlights of which are below), Khamosh told me he had not seen Mr. Rashid speak so frankly in front of a foreigner before, and that it was because he had told him that I was his daughter. (Khamosh “adopted” me as his honorary American daughter during his visit to America for the National Prayer Breakfast earlier this year.)) Khamosh spoke a little about ICRD and had me give him our contact information, and then the two of us spoke directly for about 15 minutes (Mr. Rashid’s English is extremely good, and was interrupted only by periodic contacts in Urdu via his walkie-talkie).

I asked him to tell me about his school, and he gave me a short history. The men’s madrasa was founded by his father, Mullah Mohammed Abdullah, in 1966. The women’s madrasa was established in 1989, and with 6500 students today (4000 at the main campus at the Red Mosque), it is now the largest female educational institution in the Islamic world. There are two teaching departments, he said—one for memorization of the Qur’an and another for “higher classes”—translation and explanation of the Qur’an, Islamic jurisprudence, as well as subjects like math and general science. Male graduates often go on to become preachers or imams, or may teach Arabic or Islamic studies in universities or go into business. Female graduates generally become teachers, or focus on their families.

When I asked what was the most important thing they try to teach their students, he said, “The religion of Islam, and about the world. We introduced computers to female students, as well as email and the internet... We are not as the world portrays us, that we want to take the world back to the Stone Age. This is Western propaganda against us. Another propaganda is that Muslims are against educating women. We have the biggest female educational institution in the Islamic world, perhaps in all the world.”

“What can the West do to better understand Islam, and your work here?” I asked him. Nodding his head, he said, “It is a good question. Your media is in the hands of a few, who purposely portray Muslims as barbarians and terrorists. The need is for dialogue; we need to sit together and understand each other . . . Pakistanis, perhaps a majority, have

started hating America—hatred is rising in their minds and hearts. I understand this is wrong. I say we should criticize policy but not hate Americans themselves. The (American) people are not doing what Bush is doing; it is only a few. But there is also (another) view that the American people are involved because they are not stopping their government and they vote for their government. This confirms that Americans are also involved in anti-Muslim policies . . . This (should be dealt with) through dialogue, workshops, seminars . . . The United States has spent so much money fighting the war on terror. If the trillions of dollars spent on war had been spent on welfare for us, I think maybe we would have loved you. You can't win the hearts of people through pressure. You win hearts through love and sincerity. Suicide bombings and such actions are extremism, I understand, but who used extremism first? The United States. We don't like seeing Americans killed in Iraq, but at the same time when we see thousands of our own people killed, then I think it's justified to kill US soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan because they are aggressors against innocent children."

I brought up the fact that most Americans oppose the Iraq war. "Yes, this is good," he said, "but who is responsible for the bloodshed in the first place? It takes time for wounds to heal." I said that nowadays many Americans are making an effort to learn about Islam and desire greater understanding and better relations.

"Would your US soldiers carry out suicide attacks?" he asked me. "No," I said, "because they don't want to kill people." He became animated. "No—they do want to kill people." (I was going to argue again, but, remembering where I was, decided it would be wiser to keep my mouth shut.) "But they do not want to kill themselves. But Muslims are ready to sacrifice their lives for national honor, for their country; they are allowed to do it. With only technology you will not win; you need courage in your heart. There is no comparison."

"You mentioned before the importance of dialogue," I said. "What interfaith dialogue projects have you or your school been involved in?" He paused for a moment. "We don't have the capacity. We depend on our older brother America for this, but America did not behave like an older brother. After the Soviets were defeated in Afghanistan, we looked to America as our older brother, but it did not behave this way. We think America should come forward for dialogue."

"You come in peace and I talk to you," he said. "But if you brought a gun, like a cowboy, and killed my family I would regard you differently. Islam has a clear message. It is not like Christianity where you should let someone slap your cheek. Muslims will defend themselves—we are behaving according to our teachings." He also said that in blaming Afghanistan and bin Laden America had become judge, jury, and executioner, and suggested that an international court could have been used to try bin Laden instead of war.

It was quite an experience to have the opportunity to hear firsthand Mr. Rashid's views on so many things. While he was much more interested in talking than listening, when opportunities arose I did try to make the point that many Americans oppose certain

government policies and that some actually thought they would be helping the Afghan and Iraqi people through the Afghan and Iraq wars. While he seems skilled at telling Westerners what they want to hear, his comments about waiting for America to open dialogue perhaps provide an opening for ICRD to engage him and his school.

Mr. Rashid then wrote something on a scrap of paper in Urdu and gave it to me, telling me that if I took it to entrance they would allow me into the women's madrasa. Though a little apprehensive about leaving my protection in the form of Khamosh behind, I went alone and followed one of the AK-47-wielding men to the entrance.

Unlike the welcoming atmosphere of the other madrasas I had visited, the women at the Jamia Hafsa did not seem to know ahead of time that I was coming and seemed more cold and suspicious at first. They asked if I were a journalist and what I wanted, and I explained a little about ICRD and gave them our contact information. Upon questioning me they did not seem particularly pleased to hear that I was an American and a Christian, but still they invited me to sit and brought me some food and drink. In answering the question about my religion, I also told them that I have many Muslim friends, and recited some of the Qur'an for them.

Two teachers who spoke some English sat with me and translated for the Principal, Ume-Hassan, the wife of Maulana Abdul Aziz. At first she did not seem to want to talk to or even look at me. When I asked if might be able to see some of their school, she refused, saying that visitors who come to the school often see things only from their own point of view and go back and write very negative things about them. People in the West, especially in America, just see madrasas as terrorists, she said.

I just sat and listened to them for a while, and when the opportunity came, told them a little about ICRD, that we work for peace through religion, and that we respect madrasas and have worked with men's madrasas. I told them that I wanted to learn more about the religious education of women and that I had come because I wanted to understand their point of view. I also said I wished to bring a message of peace from America, and that Americans like all people and do not desire any conflict.

"We also have no problem with Americans," one of the teachers said. "Our religion says to love all people. We are just against the US government policy." I said that many Americans also do not like US government policies. The Principal turned and for the first time, looked at me and smiled faintly. "We do not like our government either," she said. "Perhaps we are similar in some ways," I said, and she smiled again.

Then she asked me if I would like to see some of their classrooms. Having refused my initial request, they now sounded almost eager for me to see some of their school, and took me through the hallway where I saw a couple classrooms. The atmosphere was a little chaotic in comparison with the discipline and silence of the first madrasa I had visited, with many students milling throughout the hallways and balconies. The students also seemed a little more solemn toward outsiders, although a few did start to smile when

I smiled at them. The teachers accompanying me said that many of the students there are poor and receive free room and board from the madrasa.

My time nearly up by then, I presented the small gift I had brought for their school (after my missing luggage had been recovered I had been able to give gifts to several of the other madrasas as well). They took me back to the Principal and I gave the gift to her—a small desk decoration that said “Peace” and “Peace on Earth”. When she understood the meaning, a big smile came onto her face and she looked genuinely happy. I started to thank her for letting me visit her school, and she stopped me from speaking, motioned for the English-speaking teachers to come back over, and had me start again so they could translate what I was saying. “May God bless you and your school and your students,” I said, which also seemed to make her happy.

The whole experience seemed to be a testament to the power of engaging people in a respectful way and of listening before speaking, and to the way that this can start to build a little bit of personal trust. I could see a transformation in the way they interacted with me at the beginning and the way they did at the end, and the fact that the Principal went from barely looking at me to smiling at me, and from refusing to let me visit to inviting me to visit her school, is perhaps an illustration of the impact of personally approaching people in an open and respectful way.

Upon leaving the school and reconnecting with Khamosh, I convinced him to let me leave a copy of the American-Islamic Friendship Project message book for the women’s school. When I asked him if teachers from the Red Mosque madrasas would be willing to come to ICRD’s workshops, he said they would not refuse an invitation from him.

Hafiz Khalil and Shabbir Ahmed’s Workshop (Islamabad)

On the last day I got to briefly visit Hafiz Khalil and Shabbir Ahmed’s workshop for madrasa leaders at the Best Western in Islamabad. This workshop, the first they had conducted on their own, brought together 25 Deobandi madrasa leaders (administrators, principals, and teachers) from Balochistan for a 10-day workshop beginning on April 23. The major themes were interfaith harmony, religious tolerance, and peace education, and speakers included women, Christians, and Americans.

I was taken into the main room and told to sit next to the speaker, a Muslim woman who was addressing the participants on the topic of human rights. A little self-conscious without a head covering, I sat and watched the madrasa leaders listen to this woman in an attentive and respectful silence.

After a few minutes Khamosh and I went back to talk with Hafiz Khalil and Shabbir privately. They told me how they had taken the workshop participants to a Christian study center, where they had received a gift of the Bible, and how they had had a madrasa leader who had visited America talk to the participants about the good things in American culture and the fact that Americans do not hate Muslims. They had also invited people from the American Embassy to address the workshop participants the following day. I was very impressed that they had taken the initiative to do all of this. When I expressed

regret that I hadn't been able to speak to the participants and asked Shabbir to send them my best wishes, he replied, "We are using your message book from Americans during the workshop; through this they will hear your feelings."

Final Thoughts

Other new experiences of my final day in Pakistan included eating goat brains for breakfast (which I would recommend avoiding at all costs) and being the only foreigner at a wedding in a remote village. The people there, like most of the people I met in Pakistan, were wonderfully kind and hospitable and very warm and welcoming.

I learned so much throughout this trip, but the main points that were really driven home to me through this firsthand experience were:

- Madrasas as an institution are truly diverse and defy simple generalizations and stereotypes.
- Most madrasas truly care about the welfare of their students, and about the image of madrasas and of Islam in the world.
- Madrasas are looked to as providers for real human needs—giving education, food, and shelter to children who would otherwise be without it. Even wealthy parents who send their children to a government or private school may still send them for extra classes at a madrasa to ensure they are receiving a religious education (much like the public school students who attend "Sunday School" in the United States.) Madrasas are not going away and so it is imperative that they be engaged if positive change is going to occur.
- Women, and women's madrasas, may be even more conservative, and stricter enforcers of religious and cultural customs, than the men and the men's madrasas. Many Pakistani women also seem to feel more uncomfortable around men than men feel uncomfortable around women. However, women tend to open up substantially when they are in the presence of only women.
- The importance of personal, respectful engagement, and particularly engagement on religious grounds, cannot be emphasized enough. Even extremist madrasas may start to respond positively, or at least listen, if they are engaged in this way.

This trip was an invaluable experience for me, not only for all I learned but because it really put a human face on the work we are doing. In particular, meeting madrasa students who are bright, energetic, warm, and intelligent (the village girl who taught me the Qur'an and who learned quite a bit of English from me in a short time comes to mind) made me want to work all the harder to ensure that their potential and their future are not limited by an unnecessarily narrow education.

It was an honor and a privilege to be the first female representative of ICRD to be sent to engage women's madrasas, and to be able to engage in dialogue with madrasa leaders as an American and a Christian. I hope there will be more opportunities for ICRD to use me in this way. My deepest gratitude must go to Khamosh, my "Pakistani father", for sponsoring my visit and for taking such good care of me while I was there. He really treated me as his daughter, and by doing so also got me access to places Americans don't

normally get to go. (I asked him once why he chose to “adopt” me when he must have met so many other people in his travels, and he said, “I didn’t choose. God did.”) He said he could bring me to Balochistan and the Northwest Frontier Province next time, and I want to go on record that if there is something useful I can do there I am most willing to go.