

## CHAPTER 2

## Madrasas Medieval and Modern: Politics, Education, and the Problem of Muslim Identity

Jonathan P. Berkey

IN THE WAKE of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Western public has become aware of many things of which, before that date, it was blissfully ignorant. One recent development in the Islamic world which has caught the eye of Western reporters is the increasing prominence of institutions of religious education, usually known as madrasas, particularly in Pakistan and Afghanistan, but also in India, Egypt, and indeed throughout the Islamic world. Journalistic attention to this topic has been remarkable. A Lexis-Nexis search of newspaper reports for the year following September 11, 2001, reveals hundreds of separate articles devoted to the new madrasas. These institutions, we are told, have spread like wildfire in the Muslim world, particularly in South Asia. Their rise is linked, inevitably, to the political movement known loosely as "Islamism," and to the popularity of groups such as the Taliban and the emergence of new Muslim leaders such as Usama bin Ladin.

It is not clear that these madrasas represent a uniform type. The word *madrasa* in Arabic simply means "school," and can be applied to a wide variety of institutions. The madrasas at issue here are schools, many of them independent of government control, that in some way have an explicitly Islamic character. Not infrequently, these institutions are caricatured as "medieval." And indeed, the madrasa was one of the central institutions of religious life in much of the medieval Islamic world. Strictly speaking, there is no question of any direct institutional continuity between any of the contemporary madrasas and those which figured so prominently in medieval life. The great al-Azhar mosque in Cairo is sometimes spoken of as the oldest university in the world; unfortunately, for all its sentimental appeal, the assertion has little historical meaning. But in more general terms, to what extent can a historian of Islamic education recognize in these new schools institutions related to or descended from the medieval Islamic madrasa? What might medieval Muslim scholars, the 'ulama trained in madrasas and committed to the transmission of Islamic religious and juristic knowledge, have thought of the contemporary institutions that bear the same name?

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The new madrasas, of course, do not emerge out of nowhere. Since at least the end of the eighteenth century, the field of education has been the focus of considerable attention in the Muslim world, and in particular of various reforming movements and governments. Both Muslim reformers and the contemporary historians, anthropologists, and others who have studied their efforts—and, in a slightly more hysterical fashion, some journalistic accounts of the new madrasas—have shared the conviction that education can be a critical force for change: change for the better, or change for the worse, although how the "better" and "worse" are defined, of course, shift with the individual viewpoint. Battles over politics, over Muslim identities, and over what a Muslim modernity should look like are to be fought on the field of education. Whatever one wants Muslim society to *become*, it seems, the principal instrument of coercion, influence, and change is to be the schools; education has become the leading edge in various efforts to transform Islam and the Muslim world.

The idea that education and educational institutions can be, or should be, an instrument of conscious change in the world at large—especially change of a social or political character—is an idea that strikes the historian of medieval Islamic education as a fundamentally modern one. It is an idea that, in the West, lies at the heart of the radical principles and methods associated with the American philosopher John Dewey and his colleagues at the Columbia Teachers' College, whose vision of education as a tool of social engineering represents one important element of twentieth-century modernism. It is also an idea that lies behind the sweeping attention which those concerned with the political life and future of the Middle East have lavished on education for the last two centuries. Ottoman reformers of the Nizam-i Cedid or Tanzimat periods; colonial administrators such as Macaulay in India, Lyautey in Morocco, or Cromer in Egypt; Islamic modernists such as Muhammad 'Abduh or Rashid Rida; nationalist intellectuals such as Sati' al-Husri or Michel 'Aflaq; the Islamists of our own day who may be responsible for all those madrasas in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and elsewhere: all of these figures have seen education as the cutting edge of whatever ideological sword they wielded. One of the most striking themes to emerge from a recent study of education in the late Ottoman Empire is the optimism and confidence that the Ottoman reformers placed in education as a tool with which to resist the encroachment of European colonial power, and to shape more effectively a promising future for the citizens of the empire. They unhesitatingly believed that educational reform could transform Ottoman society as a whole, and strengthen it against external enemies. Consequently they were willing to undertake a remarkably ambitious program to construct a new and at least theoretically universal network of schools, a program that involved tremendous expenditures of cash—a measure

of the Ottomans' confidence in the transformative power of education (Fortna 2002).

But the idea that education and especially educational institutions can be an instrument of change seems to mark one important disjunction between the social and intellectual construction of education in the premodern and modern periods, for at least three reasons. In the first place, the idea assumes that educational institutions have a discrete social identity and function. It may be that schools in the modern Muslim world possess that identity and function, but it is difficult to find evidence of an independent institutional role for the madrasa in premodern Islamic societies. Before the emergence of the madrasa as a distinctive educational forum in the eleventh century, the transmission of Muslim knowledge was not tied to any institutional structure. Most education probably took place in mosques, as students gathered with respected scholars in informal teaching circles to recite texts and discuss the issues which they addressed. Out of those discussions emerged the principal disciplines of the Islamic religious sciences: Qur'anic exegesis, the study of the hadith or "traditions" of the Prophet, and ultimately and especially fiqh, or jurisprudence. For the first several centuries or so—indeed, for virtually the whole of their formative phase—those sciences were transmitted outside of any institutional context. Mosques were probably the favored venue for this activity, in part because of their public nature, and in part because they were structures already associated with worship, and the transmission of knowledge as an activity was conceived of in terms parallel to those used to describe the central act of worship, prayer. But from an educational standpoint the mosque was simply a venue of convenience, and not an institution. There was no reason learning or teaching could not transpire anywhere: else—in a home, or in the street. (The director of one of the leading contemporary madrasas in Pakistan responded to the government's efforts to bring his institution under state control with a remark that directly invoked the absence of educational institutions in the early Islamic period. "No matter," he said dismissively, suggesting that the government was bound to fail because it misunderstood the nature of the enterprise, "We can impart Islamic education under a tree" [Zia 2001].)

Beginning in the eleventh century, Muslims began to establish institutions specifically created and endowed to support the transmission of religious knowledge, and over the ensuing centuries the madrasa and its cognate institutions became one of the most common features of premodern Islamic cities. Thanks to a prodigious vein of scholarship which has emerged in the last three decades, we have now a clear sense of how this took place—how, for example, the madrasa emerged as a distinct institution, one focused on supporting the transmission of Islamic knowledge, especially fiqh, and one established not by governments or anything ap-

proaching an ecclesiastical organization but by an individual as an act of private charity (Makdisi 1981). A madrasa established in Baghdad in the late eleventh century by Nizam al-Mulk, the Persian vizier to the Saljuq sultans, is often today mentioned as the archetypal madrasa, although in fact the institution probably developed earlier in Khurasan in eastern Iran. Eventually, the madrasa became the chief institution of higher education throughout most of the medieval Islamic world, but it was not the only one, and in some places, such as Egypt and Syria, the madrasa gradually elided, both architecturally and functionally, with other religious institutions, especially the Sufi convent (*khanqah*)—a part of the process whereby Sufism entered the mainstream of Muslim religious experience (Berkey 1992, 56–60).

Over the course of the Islamic Middle Period (1000–1500), these madrasas became typical features of the urban landscapes of Near Eastern and central and southwest Asian cities, and their proliferation was one of the seminal features of medieval Islamic religious life. Even so, the institutions themselves seem to have had little or no impact on the character or the processes of the transmission of knowledge. For all that the transmission of knowledge might take place *within* an institution labeled a madrasa, and be supported by the endowments attached to that institution, the principles that guided the activities of teachers and students, and the standards by which they were judged, remained personal and informal, as they had been in earlier centuries before the appearance of the madrasa. No medieval madrasa had anything approaching a set curriculum, and no system of degrees was ever established. Indeed, medieval Muslims themselves seem to have been remarkably uninterested in *where* an individual studied. The only thing that mattered was with *whom* one had studied, a qualification certified not by an institutional degree but by a personal license (*ijaza*) issued by a teacher to his pupil. Whether lessons took place in a new madrasa, or in an older mosque, or for that matter in someone's living room, was a matter of supreme indifference. No institutional structure, no curriculum, no regular examinations, nothing approaching a formal hierarchy of degrees: the system of transmitting knowledge, such as it was, remained throughout the medieval period fundamentally personal and informal, and consequently, in many ways, flexible and inclusive (Berkey 1992). It is tempting to suggest that the emergence of these new educational institutions was an early harbinger of later, essentially "modern" developments: the regularization and systematization of religious life and institutions which occurred under the last and greatest of the medieval military states, the Ottoman Empire, when the 'ulama (or at least some of them), including those who taught in madrasas, became in effect employees of the state. Such an explanation has the advantage of complicating the story of the emergence of the modern

by seeking its roots at least in part in indigenous developments in the premodern Near East. For all its appeal, however, this explanation may be too teleological in character.

A second peculiarly modern aspect of the conviction that education can be an instrument of change is found in its underlying assumption about the nexus of politics and education. The development of the madrasa in the medieval period certainly had a political dimension. Each institution was founded by an individual—usually, although not exclusively, a member of the military elites that ruled over most Near Eastern societies from the eleventh and twelfth centuries down into the modern period. Those elites, such as the Mamluks who ruled Egypt and Syria from the thirteenth through the early sixteenth centuries, were often foreign-born, culturally alien, speaking a different language from the local population, sometimes only superficially Islamicized. Building and endowing a madrasa, which typically took the founder's name and in which he was often buried, paid political dividends by raising the profile and establishing the Muslim bona fides of the individual Mamluks. The pattern of establishing madrasas and cognate institutions served a broader political interest as well, since the military elites had frequently come to power in somewhat irregular fashion. The collective exertions and expenditures of the Mamluks and others formed one cornerstone of a *quid pro quo* which characterized political arrangements in much of the medieval Islamic world, in which the ruling military elites provided the institutions and the endowments to support them, and in exchange appropriated at least a part of the esteem in which the public held the activities of the scholars who lived and worked in them (Berkey 1992).

But the ruling elites left the institutions themselves largely untouched, and left the *ʿulama* a generally free hand to supervise and regulate the transmission of knowledge itself. Occasionally control over appointments of professors or others to a madrasa might emerge as a field of contest in which the ruling elites took an interest, but their concern did not extend to any systematic effort to guide educational life or shape its purposes. Several decades ago, historians thought they perceived a closer relation of educational program and political purpose. They characterized the appearance of madrasas as a fundamental feature of what was called the “Sunni Renaissance.” The madrasas, it was thought, provided new and newly militant Sunni governments of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries with a cadre of functionaries, bureaucrats, and apologists to assist their struggle against the various Shiʿi regimes which in the tenth century suddenly burst on the scene (for example, Hodgson 1974, 2-47). This explanation is probably no longer tenable, at least in such a stark form. Several historians have cast doubt on any sort of systematic, functional link between the madrasas and the political and bureaucratic ad-

ministration of the medieval Sunni governments. In eleventh- and twelfth-century Iraq, for example, aside from a few *qadis* (judges) who served the Saljuq sultans as viziers, relatively few religious scholars entered the state bureaucracy (Ephrat 2000). In Mamluk Cairo, too, despite some *ʿulama* who served the Mamluks in an administrative capacity, the career paths of scholars and bureaucrats remained fairly distinct (Petry 1981). The establishment of madrasas served the political interests of those who founded them, both individually and collectively, but the institutions themselves, and the academic activities they supported, were not subjected to systematic governmental regulation and control, and did not undergird any particular political program.

A final difference about discussions, both scholarly and political, of education in the modern, as opposed to the medieval, Islamic world concerns the element of change itself. Medieval Islamic civilization attributed considerable power to education. Medieval Muslims placed enormous confidence in *ʿilm*, or knowledge—specifically, knowledge of the Qurʾan, the records of the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad, and the religious sciences derived from them. Any number of aphorisms which survive in the literary record attest to this confidence: for example, that “one scholar is more powerful against the devil than a thousand worshippers” (al-Zarnuji 1947, 22; Rosenthal 1970, 247-8)—a rather astonishing statement, if one considers the central position of prayer, or worship, in defining the life of a Muslim. This power had social and even political consequences: Mamluks and others may have established madrasas out of genuine piety, but there is no doubt that their doing so helped to confer legitimacy on military regimes which operated in varying degrees of cultural tension with the indigenous Muslim populations over whom they ruled. The power that the *ʿulama* wielded by virtue of their control of the transmission of knowledge was rooted, of course, in a spiritual perception, but that does not mean that, for medieval Muslims, it was any less real. Hence those sultans and others who established institutions of learning frequently made certain that they would be buried in a tomb attached to the building, so as to benefit after death from the spiritual power of the religious activities which took place therein.

But for all the *power* that medieval Muslims attributed to education, *change* was not something that the transmission of knowledge was ordinarily expected to foster. The guiding principles of medieval Islamic education were fundamentally conservative, in the literal sense of that term. “A good teacher hands on what he has been taught,” went a popular aphorism, “neither more nor less” (Tritton 1957, 50). Much about the prevailing patterns of premodern Islamic education reinforced a conception of education which cast it, like the Hindu god Vishnu, in the role of *preserver*. Probably all education is in some way inherently hierarchical.

But hierarchical relationships were central to medieval Islamic education—from the regimented patterns in which teachers and students sat, with authority literally moving outward from the teacher through his older and senior students to younger and less experienced ones on the periphery, to the frankly paternalistic terms in which treatises on education discussed the teacher-student relationship (Chamberlain 1994, 108–9). Hierarchies may change, sometimes in spite of themselves, but they are almost by definition conservative in outlook.

The conservative character of the transmission of religious knowledge is further illustrated by the importance of *memorization*. Here we must be careful, for the cultural significance of memorization can easily be misunderstood. Memorization served a conservative cause, although not in the way that is usually supposed. Western news reporters who in the wake of the September 2001 terrorist attacks visited and reported on the new madrasas in Pakistan and Afghanistan professed themselves shocked to discover how education in these schools relied on memorization, to which they invariably attached the pejorative adjective “rote.” But this unfairly casts memorization in an almost demonic role, and reflects nothing so much as the failure of human memory in the modern era. In medieval Islamic education, memorization was a tool, not an end in itself; education did not end with committing a text to memory. But the *process* of memorization, which typically involved the close and direct supervision of a student’s shaykh, did reinforce the hierarchical character of instructional relationships, and so contributed to defending and preserving the transmission of knowledge as an authoritative system. If the question had been posed to them, medieval Muslims would have been far more likely to have conceived of education as a pillar of *stability*, rather than as a force for *change*.

Let me be clear about what this does, and especially what it does not mean. There is no attempt here to suggest that classical or medieval Islamic culture was in any way stagnant—that is, to resuscitate old and discredited “Orientalist” stereotypes about a timeless and unchanging Islam. On the contrary, premodern Islamic culture was preternaturally vibrant and creative—far more so, in fact, than most of those who participated most actively in shaping its contours would admit (Berkey 1995). Its creative and flexible character stemmed in part from some of its basic organizing principles, and also from the methods and standards through which it realized the transmission of knowledge. The ‘ulama were very much an open elite. The criteria for determining who constituted an *‘alim*, a learned person, were so loose and flexible that a “closed shop”—such as the medieval European clergy, set apart through ordination and consecration and holding a virtual monopoly on education, or the modern academy, with its narrow openings for admission and recognition (in our

own case, an advanced degree from a prestigious university)—was virtually impossible to construct and defend. The ‘ulama in the premodern period, in other words, represented an extraordinarily heterogeneous group, one that included famous scholars well versed in jurisprudence and other religious sciences, but also lesser scholars, preachers, and other minor religious figures, Sufis of varying stripes, as well as others with few if any professional aspirations of an academic nature who nonetheless managed to participate, in some limited but meaningful way, in the transmission of religious knowledge (Berkey 2001). The informal and personal character of medieval Islamic education, in other words, allowed many to participate in the transmission of knowledge who would not ordinarily be reckoned among the educated elite.

Another factor was that the very concept of what constituted ‘ilm—that is, knowledge of social and religious significance—was itself porous and polymorphous. Partly this arose through the absence of any formally constituted authoritative body: the absence, if you will, of a church. What served in its place was the consensus of the scholarly community, and most studies have suggested that, in practice, that consensus was quite broad—that it left the parameters of what constituted legitimate knowledge fairly loose. But it also arose from some of the basic pedagogical methods of premodern Islamic education. So, for example, a class in jurisprudence might be guided by some particular treatise that was memorized by students and formed the object of discussion, but that discussion was never enslaved to the text. As a matter of instruction, texts were routinely read aloud, both in person and by some person, then broken down and commented upon. As Michael Chamberlain has elegantly expressed it, texts were not frozen in any form, even that which their authors had given them. They “were rather enacted fortuitously in time,” and so could be invoked, and recast, to suit the competing needs of moments and of individuals (Chamberlain 1994, 143). To put the matter another way, intellectual discourse was as much about disagreement and “polyvocality” as anything else (Messick 1993, 34).

For all of the inherent creative power in medieval Islamic culture, however, the idea that education and the transmission of knowledge could be an instrument of *change* is nonetheless discordant. What makes it so is the dominant grain of medieval Islamic discourse. The language of that discourse—in effect, its “ideology,” although, of course, medieval Muslims would not have used that term—was explicitly conservative, again, in the literal sense of that term. In the words of a well-known dictum, “every new thing is an innovation, and every innovation is an error, and every error leads to hell”—a dictum which, like many other ideological expressions, was cast in the form of a saying of Muhammad (Ibn al-Hajj 1929, 1:79; Berkey 1995, 42). The opposition to innovations was, of

course, an old one in the Islamic tradition, and also a highly nuanced one. In juristic discourse, for example, a distinction was often made between innovations that were acceptable, and even praiseworthy, and those which were not. But as an *ideological* language, the hostility to innovation became a dominant theme in the medieval Islamic Near East, as much a part of religious life as the madrasas with whose development it was contemporaneous. It was paralleled by a growing emphasis in legal discourse and practice on *taqlid* (imitation)—that is, following established authorities (Fadel 1996). The fourteenth-century Syrian jurist Ibn Taymiyya was one familiar exponent of the ideology of opposition to innovation. Ibn Taymiyya was a member of the Hanbali *madhhab*, or school of law, as are his intellectual descendants in the modern world, the Wahhabis. As a result, this ideological posture is often associated especially with Hanbali scholars. In fact, however, in the Middle Ages it was embraced by scholars belonging to all four of the so-called orthodox schools of law.

The nature of human society being what it is, that principle did not in reality exclude the possibility of change. Even the parameters of *sunna*, the normative practice associated with Muhammad and his companions, were subject to quiet, sometimes unacknowledged growth and evolution, despite its theoretically timeless quality. But the ideological framework of medieval Islamic discourse by and large devalued the possibility of innovation, and so those who were most committed to that discourse, those who participated in the transmission of knowledge—who were, of course, “more powerful against the devil than a thousand worshippers”—*perceived* education as a force for stability, rather than change. The staying power of this ideology was considerable. The earliest waves of reforms in the Ottoman Empire were famously cast by their proponents in the language of “return”—a return, that is, to an uncorrupted, pristine Islamic order, regardless of how innovative they were in substance. When ‘Abbas Mirza, the Qajar prince, instituted a series of relatively minor educational reforms in Iran in the early nineteenth century, reforms inspired by both European models and European power, he was forced to rebut charges that they constituted unlawful innovations, and defended them by insisting that, in fact, they would *restore* the status quo ante, the supremacy which Muslims had known in the days of the Prophet (Ringer 2001, 41–2).

So medieval Muslims recognized the *power* of education, and as historians we can perceive beneath the surface of ideological discourse considerable flux and evolution, in the content and character of that knowledge, the transmission of which was education’s object. At the same time, that evolution was to some degree obscured by the ideological language in which medieval Muslims discussed the forms and purposes of education. In the modern world, by contrast, do we not in some ways face the opposite situation? Is it possible that, at the very moment that the power of

education to provoke change has been recognized, embraced, and celebrated, the scope for evolution and growth, at least evolution and growth of the sort cultivated by medieval patterns of Islamic education, has in some ways been narrowed?

Consider, for example, the thousands of Islamic schools in South Asia that have emerged from the institutional network which owes its origins to the school founded at Deoband in northern India in the nineteenth century (Metcalf 1982). Many of the new madrasas established in Pakistan and Afghanistan, including those in which Mullah Omar and other Taliban leaders were trained, are, directly or indirectly, products of the Deobandi mission. The founders of the Deobandi model explicitly and deliberately jettisoned much of the informal pattern of traditional Muslim education. The school at Deoband was to have a fixed institutional character. Its academic and administrative staff were to be permanent and salaried. The curriculum was to be regularized—drawing on earlier Indian efforts to revitalize Muslim education by identifying a standard canon of texts as the basis for instruction, efforts that go back to at least the eighteenth century, the Deobandi ‘ulama eschewed textual innovation in favor of “classical Islamic texts,” and in the process may be said to have *established* an Islamic curriculum for the first time (Zaman 2002, 68–9). A student’s progress was to be measured, not by a web of personal relationships established over a lifetime, but by a series of carefully calibrated examinations. All of this apparently reflected the transforming, perhaps distorting power of the colonial context and the influence of modern British educational models. It also, however, undermined the informal and highly personalized system of transmitting religious knowledge which had encouraged flexibility and creativity in medieval Islamic educational and intellectual life. Intellectually, the Deobandi model was what Clifford Geertz might call “scripturalist” in orientation (1969). That is, it focuses on the Qur’an and hadith, promoting the idea that through them rather than through the extensive medieval apparatus of commentary one could discern the precise parameters of the community of Muhammad and thus a normative model for what “Islam” should be. Simultaneously it downplays the significance of the polyvocal tradition that really constituted medieval Islamic religious discourse.

The Deobandi enterprise has, in some ways, reprised parts of the medieval Islamic ideological agenda. In their numerous *fatwas*, which they issued both to guide the Muslim faithful and also to establish their own authority within the Indian Muslim community, the Deobandi scholars took aim at what they considered accretions to proper ritual and practice. Various popular religious practices, such as celebrations of the Prophet’s birthday, they dismissed as unlawful innovations. The popular customs which gave a local flavor to Islam as practiced in particular communities