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

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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 organizations 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?

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, over what a Muslim modernity should look like: all of these 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—this is an idea that strikes the historian of medieval Islamic education as a fundamentally modern one. It is an idea which, in the West, lay 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 which lay 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 which 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 pre-modern 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 pre-modern 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—Koranic 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” [Amir Zia, “Pakistan Targets Religious Schools,” AP
press report, December 1, 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 pre-modern 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 approaching 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, 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 which 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 pre-modern 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 ulama 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 Shi`i 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 administration 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 ulama 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 `ilm, or “knowledge”—specifically, knowledge of the Koran, 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 which the ulama 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. And so 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 which 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 pre-modern 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, 108f). 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, pre-modern 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)—this sort of “closed shop” was virtually impossible to construct and defend. The ulama in the pre-modern 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 pre-modern 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, 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 re-cast, to suit the competing needs of moments and of individuals (Chamberlain 1994, 143). To put the matter another way,
intellectual discourse was a 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—its language or ideology 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. The fourteenth-century Syrian jurist Ibn Taymiyya was one familiar exponent of the ideology. Ibn Taymiyya was a member of the Hanbali madhab, 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 Deoband 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 (Geertz 1969): focusing, that is, on the Koran 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, and downplaying the significance of the polyvocal tradition which 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 were to be rejected in favor of an idealized historical construction, one associated with Muhammad and the pristine Muslim community. That project established a direct link between the Deobandi movement and Muslim reformers of the medieval period, especially those who embraced most fervently the ideology of opposition to innovations.

As it turns out, the flexibility and polyvocality of the Islamic tradition die hard. Even the Deobandi movement has been subject to its gravitational pull, and has given rise to numerous and widely divergent positions on matters both religious and political. Not all Deobandis, in other words, are Taliban (Metcalf 2002). But Deobandis, and others like them, have embraced a “scripturalist” agenda in a very different world than that
inhabited by, say, Ibn Taymiyya. Ibn Taymiyya fulminated against the visitation of tombs and the veneration of saints, popular customs in his day which he considered unlawful innovations—but his was not a majority view, and in any case his own tomb became an object of visitation and veneration after his death. That twist is more than just ironic; it reminds us again of the flexibility and creativity of the medieval Islamic tradition, despite its rhetorical or ideological commitment to a fixed, conservative worldview. But modern scripturalists operate in a very different world, one that may be more amenable to their project—the project, that is, of replacing the polyvocality which characterized the pre-modern transmission of knowledge with a “univocal” understanding of Islam.

For one thing, of course, they operate in an era of printing, a technological innovation which can of course assist the spread of literacy, but which can also contribute to the fixing of a tradition in one particular form. Brinkley Messick, in his magisterial study of education and the law in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Yemen, has traced the way in which print culture, along with a more rationalized and institutionalized system of education, has in some ways undermined the organic flexibility of traditional Islam in Yemen, what Messick called the “internal discursive construction” which was of the essence of the pre-print transmission of Islamic knowledge (Messick 1993, 34). The new institutional forms developed by Deobandi reformers and others have also served to strengthen the hands of the scripturalists and those committed to one particular, idealized historical model for what constitutes “Islam,” at least under certain conditions. These new institutional forms may be inescapable: the conditions of modern life may simply give the upper hand to those who embrace an educational model built on a regularized
curriculum and institutional structure. The strength of the Deobandi movement may stem from their recognition of that reality. It may also stem from the reality of cultural tension and conflict in the colonial and post-colonial worlds: Deobandis in South Asia, Wahhabis in Arabia, and other Muslim reformers embracing and campaigning for a pristine or “purified” Islam can rest not only on their religious bona fides, but on a reputation for resisting the advance of Islam’s external enemies. But the bottom line is that the conditions in which medieval Muslims pursued the transmission of knowledge are simply no longer there.

The changes associated with printing and new institutional arrangements are part of larger developments. Most broadly, in many parts of the world, Islam is undergoing what the anthropologist Gregory Starrett, following Dale Eickelman and others, has termed a process of “objectification”: that is, the identification of a precise (and, at least from an anthropological perspective, arbitrary) set of beliefs, values, and practices which are assumed to constitute a normative and timeless “Islam.” In this, of course, Islam is hardly alone. But as anthropologists have argued, this represents a sharp break from the pre-modern Islamic past, with its emphasis upon a living tradition mediated by an oral and personal system of transmitting knowledge, and defined by a principle of consensus, ijma`, which was in fact quite broad (Starrett 1998; Eickelman, 1985; Eickelman and Piscatori, 1996, 37-45).

One aspect of this process of “objectification” may be the stress laid by reformers in many parts of the Muslim world— in Afghanistan, in Pakistan, in Egypt, Sudan and North Africa—on “Islamic law.” The imposition of Islamic law is perhaps the most universal political objective of “Islamists,” wherever they operate. Most of us assume
that this is quite natural—that it stems from what Western students of Islam have almost habitually referred to as Islam’s emphasis upon law, upon practice and behavior as opposed to doctrine or belief—Islam, as the textbooks put it, not as a “religion” in the Western sense of the term, but as an “all-embracing way of life.” But those who argue that Islam is being changed by this process of objectification might say that the very idea that one can identify a precise body of legal principles and doctrine as a conceptually distinct something called “Islamic law” is an idea foreign to the pre-modern Islamic tradition. The pre-modern shari’a, in Brinkley Messick’s phrase, is decidedly not “law” but rather what he called a “general societal discourse,” with an emphasis upon the word discourse and all the flexibility that term implies. One can see this process of objectification at work already in nineteenth-century attempts to “reform” and to codify Islamic law. It is perhaps most striking in the emergence in British India of that bewildering construct, “Anglo-Muhammadan law.” Driven by both the British legal system’s consuming quest for binding legal precedent, and by the regularizing and rationalizing utilitarianism and modernism of the colonial administration, those who constructed “Anglo-Muhammadan law” sought to rescue order and regularity from the jaws of indeterminacy—as Lord Cromer put it in a different context, to bid “disorder and administrative chaos cease” (Cromer 1916, 556). Of greater interest than Anglo-Muhammadan law itself—which, after all, could be administered by officials who were not necessarily themselves Muslim—is the reaction to it on the part of Indian ulama. Aware of the British criticism that Islamic law as traditionally formulated was indeterminate and unpredictable, many Indian ulama responded by stressing even more the force of taqlid and by developing what Muhammad Qasim Zaman has called a
“rhetoric of invariable law” (Zaman 2002, 24). Similarly, the Ottoman reformers who set out to codify the shari`a in the mid-nineteenth century referred to the shari`a as “an ocean without shore.” This was a striking choice of words on their part. Medieval mystics had used the phrase to suggest the limitless range of meaning and interpretation which could be found in the expressed word of God. By contrast, the Ottoman reformers employed it to suggest that the shari`a as traditionally formulated, with its lack of fixed reference points, was virtually un-navigable, and therefore unsuitable to the needs of a modern state and its citizens. There has been much chatter in the Western media over the unusually “harsh” brand of Islamic law imposed by the Taliban in Afghanistan. No doubt it was harsh, but was it perhaps also simply one manifestation of this broader phenomenon of objectification, one particularly successful example of the effort to replace the polyvocal tradition of pre-modern Islam with a univocal construct?

Another factor which marks a sharp break between the pre-modern and modern scenes, and which contributes to objectification—to strengthening the homogenizing and scripturalist agenda of those associated with many of the new madrasas—is the presence of Western culture and colonial and post-colonial power. In the nineteenth century, this power was often felt through the medium of missionary schools, Christian but also Jewish, founded by Europeans, and (as in India) through competition with and pressure from educational institutions founded by colonial governments. Several recent monographs on late nineteenth and early twentieth century educational reform efforts in the Ottoman Empire, in Iran, and elsewhere, have stressed the degree to which educational reform was both driven by and shaped by competition from those missionary
enterprises, in a complicated *pas de deux* intertwining both admiration for and hostility to Western culture and modes of education (Ringer 2001).

More recent developments may suggest that that tortuous dance is not yet completed. In the wake of September 11, the United States has applied considerable pressure on the Musharraf government in Pakistan to clamp down on the new *madrasas* there. Since closing them would not be politically feasible, the struggle has largely come down to one over their curricula. In the first place, of course, that a *madrasa* could even have a curriculum is in itself a sign of the force behind the modern Western model—and at the same time a reminder of the continuity between these schools and that at Deoband. In the second place, this battle is hardly new. Already in British India, debate over *madrasa* education and its reform often centered around the question of the “useful”—although there was little agreement as to what exactly constituted the “useful.” (Should a *madrasa* education prepare a student for active participation in modern economic and social life? Would it be more “useful” to protect Islam through a reform of *madrasa* education that stressed purely “religious” subjects?) In the 1960s and 70s, there was much discussion among Pakistani ulama, and especially on government-appointed commissions, about the character of education in the *madrasas*. Those discussions betray a fundamental tension which reflects the radically different circumstances facing the modern, as opposed to the medieval, ulama. On the one hand, there was an effort to preserve and protect the “religious” character of *madrasa* education, which a 1962 Pakistani commission suggested could be accomplished by reducing or eliminating such “non-religious” subjects as logic and philosophy—never mind the fact that these disciplines formed an important component in the education of many medieval ulama.
On the other hand, successive Pakistani governments have sought to “modernize” the education in the *madrasas* by supplementing the religious curriculum with other subjects—languages and sciences, for example—following the same syllabus as those used in state schools (Zaman 1999; Zaman 2002).

To a medievalist, what is especially striking about these debates and developments is the way in which they restrict the “religious sphere” to a limited range of intellectual disciplines—even if there is some confusion as to where the limits actually lie. This reflects, of course, the power of the familiar post-Enlightenment Western construct of modernity. From the standpoint of the ulama, this development is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the identification of certain areas of intellectual discourse as “religious” can serve to circumscribe the sphere of the religious elite’s authority and thus marginalize them—certainly that has, more or less, been its result in our own society (at least until recently, with the rise of the so-called “religious right”). On the other hand, in tying the ulama specifically to those disciplines which even secularists acknowledge as authentically Islamic, the dynamics of modernization have tended to affirm their role as custodians of the Muslim tradition. As Malika Zeghal has shown for the network of institutions focused on al-Azhar and the Egyptian ulama, this is a development with potentially significant and, from the ulama’s point of view, very positive political ramifications (Zeghal 1999; cf. Zaman 2002).

Educational reform is likely to remain a principal battleground for the political future and the Muslim identity of Pakistan, or indeed other Islamic nations. One point of struggle, of course, will be the curricula of all the new *madrasas* in South Asia and elsewhere. It appears that there already is in fact a fair degree of diversity in their
curricula. The Pakistani government, or perhaps one should say the American
government, has sought to “temper” the product of the new madrasas by encouraging
them to broaden their curricula to include subjects such as math, computers, and English.
Less hysterical news accounts suggest that many such institutions already incorporate
those things into what they teach. What is actually being taught in these schools is a
matter of prime interest. But to a historian, what is most significant is that, in part at
American prompting, the battle is being cast in all-too-familiar terms, in the dichotomous
language of religion vs secularism, of tradition against modernity—of the Koran, hadith
and Arabic on one side, and math, computers and English on the other.

This may help to put one of the more troubling features of the new madrasas into
a broader historical perspective. Amongst all the Western news accounts concerning the
new madrasas in Pakistan, one word that appeared almost in tandem with madrasa was
jihad. A journalist writing in *The New York Times Magazine* described the Haqqaniyya,
one of the leading religious schools in Pakistan (and the alma mater of many Taliban
leaders), as a “jihad factory”—a phrase which has stuck, and has replicated itself
throughout the Western media (Goldberg 2000). Their purpose, such accounts suggest, is
to guarantee an endless supply of anti-Western mujahidin. On the face of it, that would
mean that these new madrasas are indeed radically different than the medieval
institutions which bore the same name.

At first glance, this might seem to be another product of the Western imagination,
of our seemingly endless and macabre fascination with the specter of Muslim jihad. It is
extremely dispiriting for a historian of medieval Islamic education to read a
contemporary newspaper article of which the first line is the following: “To mention the
words Muslim and madrasah today is to watch a chill run down the spine of many people” (The Jakarta Post, December 2, 2001). (Never mind the hopelessly mixed metaphors of that sentence!)

But further deliberation may suggest that such accounts unintentionally reflect something of the truth, at least in an attenuated fashion. It is not simply that these institutions did apparently provide recruits for the Taliban in their struggle against the Americans, or that one can quote educators at these madrasas who say: “We do not just impart Islamic education, but prepare students for jihad” (Amir Zia, “Pakistan Targets Religious Schools,” AP press report, November 16, 2001). Rather, it is (again) that the very conditions under which Islamic knowledge is transmitted have changed. For more than a century, education in the Near East and the Islamic world has in effect been a battleground, in which Near Eastern educational reformers have self-consciously and perhaps necessarily described their efforts in the language of competition and struggle against European governments and culture. That would suggest that describing the agenda of these new madrasas in Pakistan and elsewhere as an effort to implement jihad is not simply a response to the political chaos of Central and South Asia in the past two or three decades, or the reflection of some new, and newly-violent form of radical Islam. Rather it reflects the language in which Islamic education has been debated, and the conditions under which Muslims have had to develop their educational reforms, in a world in which the compelling force of Western culture and the projection of Western political and military power cannot be ignored. The new madrasas are indeed less the preservers of a living but established culture (as were their medieval predecessors), and
more a locus of *jihad*, of the “struggle” to work out an acceptable and indigenous form of Muslim modernity.

A final changed factor in the nexus of educational reform in the modern world concerns the presence of the modern state. This raises the fundamental question of the relation between religion and politics in an Islamic society, a question for which definitive answers have eluded both medieval and modern Islamic societies. On the one hand, it would seem that, at least on the surface, as the power of the state has increased over the last two centuries, the status and authority of the ulama has declined. That, at least, is the basic plot line with which the story of educational reform has often been told: that the establishment of new networks of state-supported schools, conceived of as a fundamental component of the twin projects of modernization and nation building, has eliminated the ulama’s earlier monopoly on education and so diminished their authority. In the mid-1960s, in the full flush of the confidence in which post-war modernization theory basked, historians and social scientists routinely cast the authority of the ulama as having been “irreparably undermined” by changes in the modern Near East, especially changes in its educational system (see for example Sharabi 1966; Crecelius 1972). In this model, the sudden appearance, or re-appearance, of the new *madrasas* represents a resurgence of traditional Islamic patterns, at the moment that the authority of the new nation-states has been undermined by their economic and political failures. Hence, for example, the Pakistani critic of the *madrasas*, who observed (inaccurately, I think) that “these schools are providing an education which is basically unchanged from the eleventh century” (USA Today, September 27, 2001). In accounts such as this, the term “medieval” becomes literally a term of abuse. And so a major Indian publication
announced in a headline shortly after 9/11: “Madrasas Should Go Back to the Middle Ages” \textit{(The Statesman, November 16, 2001)!}

But the situation is much less clear than this basic storyline would suggest. Of course, the parameters of the relationship between the ulama and the state in the modern world are so diverse as to defy generalization—the experiences of Turkey, say, and its neighbor Iran, could hardly be more different. But it appears that the rise of modern nation states, with strong centralized governments, even when those governments are dominated by a secularizing elite, has in the long run turned out to present the ulama with as many opportunities as challenges. In part, this stems from the widespread failure of the secularist ideologies that dominated politics in much of the Muslim world in the 1950s and 60s. But it also arises from a surprisingly complex relationship between the religious elites and the process of “modernization” (if I may temporarily invoke a loaded term) and state formation in the Muslim world—a complexity that sets the Muslim experience off from that in our own societies. The end result is that in some places—Egypt, for example—the ulama have increasingly found themselves in a position to shape political discourse and avail themselves of at least part of the coercive power of the modern state \cite{Zeghal 1999}. (It may be significant that Deobandi \textit{madrasas} in India, a religiously diverse and pluralist society, have given rise to accommodationist and apolitical groups, whereas those in states which have explicitly identified themselves as Islamic, such as Pakistan and Afghanistan, have tended to produce those who, like the Taliban, have embraced a radical fusion of religion and politics. \cite{Metcalf 2002})

One of the most prominent themes of recent research on modern educational reform in the Near East has been that of the role of religion, and of the ulama, in shaping
the course of these reforms. Some religious scholars have certainly resisted, but others have participated actively in establishing new state-supported school systems and their curricula. The observation that religion has in fact played a vital role in modern, state-sponsored educational reform accords well with the project, familiar to most specialists in the field if not yet to a wider lay public, of deconstructing the liberal “modernization” model, with its neat dichotomy pitting the religious against the secular, the traditional against the modern. So, for example, Gregory Starrett has called the received notion that the Egyptian government of Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak is a secular one “an astounding fiction.” Nowhere, he argues, has the connection between religion and state in contemporary Egypt been clearer than in the public schools. This alters completely the historical framework in which the so-called Islamic resurgence, including the new religious schools, should be understood. Islamism then is not so much a response to secularism as it is the product of the religious discourse used by the modern state to justify itself. So, Starrett concludes, “the culturally mediated choice between tradition and modernity rest[s] on false premises.” Put another way, the new madrasas and everything they represent are not simply a reaction against modernity, but also a distinctively Muslim approach to it (Starrett 1998).

Further complicating the situation is some uncertainty as to who the new ulama actually are. As I have stressed, the ulama in the pre-modern period were very much an open elite. To be sure, they developed carefully constructed principles and procedures for determining the nature of an individual scholar’s authority, as a means of attempting to control the transmission of knowledge and limiting the circle of those privileged to do so. But those principles and procedures were highly personal and flexible, and were
entirely independent of state authority. Sultans and amirs might support the ulama and
their activities by, say, providing funds for the construction and endowment of madrasas.
But the distribution and recognition of status among the ulama was largely a matter of
their own concern and regulation. That system was thrown into some confusion by the
rise of modern, centralized states. Already in the Ottoman Empire one can see a
regularization of the ulama, their inscription into precisely defined ranks and their
induction as employees of the state, a process which has of course continued down to the
present day. The rise of new schools and new religious elites independent from, even in
opposition to those supported by the state, could be seen as a throwback to earlier
conditions.

But again the situation is not so simple. In the first place the new religious class
is still tied in some ways to the modern state. The madrasas of Pakistan, for example,
derive a portion of their funding directly from the national government, from a tax the
Pakistani government calls zakat (Malik 1997, 174)—something that, as far as I know,
was unheard of in the medieval period. Secondly, the creation of new religious elites has
been driven largely through modern technologies and in the so-called “modern” sector:
through printing, cassettes, television, and now of course the Internet. This expands the
pool of people who can participate in and shape the new religious dialogue, and renders
irrelevant and unworkable the traditional mechanisms for regulating access to ulama
status and to defining the parameters of the knowledge which is to be transmitted.
Commitment to the faith, and a recognized status as a carrier of its “knowledge” and
traditions, may now be established by individuals very different in background and
training than their medieval predecessors. Hence, of course, the well known tensions that
frequently arise, in Egypt, in the sub-continent, and elsewhere, between more traditional ulama and the new Islamist intellectuals. The religious elites are thus a very diverse, even fragmented group. They range from ulama cast in a medieval mode, asserting their authority through written commentaries on classical texts and replicating themselves through *ijazas* and other traditional instruments of control, to figures such as Usama bin Ladin’s house intellectual Ayman al-Zawahiri, trained in one of the modern professions, who stake a claim to religious authority in what an Azhari shaykh could only consider a rather unorthodox manner. In the middle is a vast array of preachers and other minor religious functionaries, trained in the institutions dominated by the traditional ulama, but who may also have a sociological or ideological affinity to the new Islamist intellectuals—a group of religious figures who are only now beginning to receive significant scholarly attention (for example, Zeghal 1999). Finally, of course, the new religious elites tied to the new institutions of education see themselves as playing a very different role in contemporary society than did their medieval precursors. The hysteria in the Western press over the *jihad* preached in the new *madrasas* may be a product of an over-active Western imagination—we may look with suspicion upon the simplistic dichotomy which sees the denizens of the new *madrasas* as “traditionalists” and hostile to what is blithely called the “modern”—but there is little doubt that many of those who study and teach in them very often have a distinct and radical political agenda.

Even if there are no direct historical ties between the *madrasas* of the Middle Ages and those which have become so popular in recent years, the issues of religious authority faced by the medieval ulama and their intellectual heirs in the modern world are strikingly similar. From the very beginning, Muslims have had to reconcile the tension
between a tradition which is fundamentally diverse and polyvocal, in which religious authority is fluid and fragmented, and ideological and other pressures which have encouraged a more univocal, homogenous, or “objectified” construction of Islam. In other words, it is possible to see developments such as the new \textit{madrasas} as organically connected to the medieval heritage of the Islamic Near East Muslims, and not simply as a manifestation of some new and radicalized Islam. At the same time, the historical conditions faced by contemporary Muslims, whether traditional ulama or the newer Islamist intellectuals, are quite different than those faced by their medieval predecessors. How they work to resolve the irresolvable question of the relation of religious and political authority, whether in \textit{madrasas} or in other religious forums, will shape the character of Islam for decades to come.
References


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