BOOK REVIEW


This book treats the "people, processes, and institutions involved in higher religious education in Cairo from the middle of the thirteenth to the beginning of the sixteenth centuries" [p. 12] — that is, during the period of Mamluk rule in Egypt (648-922/1250-1517). It concentrates on the "traditional or transmitted sciences" (al-'ulüm al-naqliyya), excluding other forms of knowledge the reader might expect to find, given the title, such as the literary or humanistic fields — poetry, artistic prose, history, and so on — and what were termed the "sciences of the ancients" (‘ulûm al-awd-il) or "the rational sciences" (al-‘ulum al-‘aqliyya) — mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and philosophy — [p. 13]. Drawing on an impressive number of both published and unpublished endowment deeds (waqfiyyät) as well as treatises on education, Mamlûk chronicles, and biographical dictionaries, Berkey describes the complex collection of educational institutions in Mamluk Cairo, including mosques, madrasas, and khânqâhs, which were involved in the process of teaching the religious sciences, including Islamic law (fiqh), the oral traditions of the Prophet (hadith), and exegesis of the Qur'an (tafsîr), as well as the scholars who studied, taught, and resided there.

The book's merit lies in its portrayal of medieval Islamic education within a specific social and historical context. Makdisi's pioneering work on medieval Islamic education, The Rise of the Colleges, published in 1981, brought out the significance of many important technical terms related to the transmission of knowledge and medieval educational institutions and remains the fundamental work in the field. Its immense scope, however, leaves little room for attention to variations in local practices and institutions, and it often treats the practice of eleventh-century Baghdad as representative of the rest of the Muslim world, relying on Baghdad's status as the cultural capital of the Islamic world, a status which certainly did not hold throughout the Middle Ages if it did in the madrasa's formative period, and even so cannot support generalization without extensive further research. Berkey avoided some problems of historical generalization by focusing on a specific place and time, Cairo during the Mamlûk period, and it is this type of work that is needed in order to build on Makdisi's scholarship on the madrasa. Cairo is an obvious and excellent choice for a focus to complement the work of Makdisi which, though ranging widely in both space and time, drew particularly on his earlier studies on the intellectual history of Baghdad. Cairo during the Mamlûk period indeed became "a city of schools," and was arguably the foremost center of learning in the Arab-Muslim world following the Mongol conquest of Iraq. The sources available for the study of education in Mamlûk Cairo, particularly biographical dictionaries and waqf
documents, are relatively abundant, detailed, and reliable. It is hoped that future studies will follow Berkey's example and focus on the history of the madrasa in other major Islamic centers of learning, such as Damascus, Qayrawân, and Fez. Within this focus, Berkey extends the portrayal of the madrasa conveyed by Makdisi by examining its connections to the rest of society and showing the important social roles it played in medieval Cairo. The main thesis of the work is that education in Mamlûk Cairo was not rigid or formal, and that the madrasa and associated institutions cannot be treated as inherently separate or distinct from the city which surrounded them and the people who frequented them.

The book includes seven chapters, the first of which is an introduction giving basic background information on Islamic scholarship, the Mamlûk regime, and the institution of the madrasa [pp. 3-20]. Here Berkey stresses the high value Muslims placed on education [pp. 3-6 and passim], a point which should be obvious to anyone familiar with the sources but which bears emphasis for those who may be inclined to believe that Judaism and/or Christianity are more favorable to the pursuit of knowledge and more supportive of education than are other world religions. The following three chapters — II: "Instruction" [pp. 21-43], III: "Institutions" [pp. 44-94], and IV: "Professors and Patrons" [pp. 95-127] — concentrate on the academic environment. The last three chapters — V: "Religious Education and the Military Elite" [pp. 128-60], VI: "Women and Education" [pp. 161-81], and VII: "Beyond the Elite: Education and Urban Society" [pp. 182-218] situate the transmission of knowledge and the academic institutions involved in it within their larger social context. Berkey's analysis demonstrates that the founders of endowments, primarily Mamlûk Sultans and their relatives, military commanders, high-ranking bureaucrats, as well as a number of women, established Cairo's most prestigious schools out of piety, respect for learning, and a desire to protect — often at critical points in their careers — their accumulated wealth from the vagaries of the Mamlûk political system, thereby ensuring that at least some part of it would remain to benefit their heirs. He shows how the academic life of the madrasas permeated other sectors of society and how the line between learning as an elite activity and piety as a general religious obligation was blurred through public prayers, recitations of the Qur'ân and hadîth, visitations to tombs, and activities of the various employees and functionaries responsible for the administration and maintenance of endowed institutions. He also treats students and teachers outside this institutional framework, finding that the transmission of knowledge, especially the oral traditions of the Prophet, involved a wide cross-section of society outside the academic elite. Chapter VI, which focuses on the role played by women in the transmission of knowledge, serves as an important corrective to views, common in contemporary debates, that Arab and Muslim women in the pre-modern era were completely and systematically excluded from education.

While the information given on the madrasa's larger social role is interesting and valuable, the book leaves many questions unanswered, and it is hoped that the author will continue his research along these lines. From the