Review Essay

Madrasas: Between Past and Present

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In the first line of Robert Hefner’s Introduction to Schooling Islam, he states that “Since the Taliban rolled into Kabul on September 26, 1996, Western media have grappled with the question of the nature of Islamic radicalism and its relation to religious education.” (p. 1) Hefner refers, in this statement, very specifically, to the role madrasas in both Afghanistan and Pakistan have played in politicizing young Muslim men. As the authors in this volume recognize, from that point forward, and especially after September 11, Islamic educational practices have faced repeated criticism from Western politicians and media circles. Critics of Islamic education have taken on the Palestinian Authority’s new textbooks, the United States government has pressured and offered money to Muslim countries to revise their textbooks to reflect a more American-friendly tone, and the Arab Human Development Report highlighted educational deficiencies in the Arab part of the Muslim world. Presidential candidate Barack Obama recently came under attack from segments of the American media because he had allegedly attended a madrasa while living for a short period of time in Indonesia. The important message here is not whether he attended one or not, but that the default position the media pundits took was that if he had he would have been adversely affected by the experience. No madrasas, in this analysis, could provide a modern or, for that matter, a politically moderate education, and no student
attending one could come away without being radicalized. In contrast, many American writers and politicians have pointed with enthusiasm to King Abdullah’s “King’s Academy” in Jordan, seeing it as an invaluable means for exposing Arab students to the wonders of Western education and, hopefully, political moderation. Just as these pundits fail to recognize how pervasive Western- and American-style education is throughout the Muslim world, they also do not fully comprehend the diversity of Islamic educational institutions existing there.

The editors and authors of this volume easily debunk the Western truisms of Islamic education and then go beyond that focus to provide analyses of how Islamic educational institutions changed and adapted to ever-changing socio-economic and political circumstances, in the past and the present. This strong collection of writings does so by examining the long-term traditions associated with the transmission of knowledge in Islam and the more recent developments taking place in madrasas and in other types of Islamic schooling available in societies as diverse as those in India, Egypt, Morocco, Mali, Turkey, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Britain. In their chapters, the authors provide the history behind the type of Islamic schooling prevalent in each of these countries, highlighting, in particular, the relationships that have almost always existed between Islamic educational institutions and the states in which they function. These authors show that Islam and education have not remained stagnant in any historical period; rather, as Hefner corrects explains, the madrasa is today “thoroughly embedded in the modern world” (p. 3).

This volume came out of the second of two Working Groups sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs at Boston University in October 2004 and May 2005. The organizers, Robert Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, of Boston and Princeton Universities respectively, sought “to examine the past, present, and likely future of Islamic education.” (p. 2) As Hefner further explains, the participants shared two points of view as they sought to fulfill this goal. “The first is the conviction that Islamic education is characterized, not by lock-step uniformity, but by a teaming plurality of actors, institutions, and ideas” and, second, that the members “felt it important not to allow the sound and fury of recent political events to obscure the fact that this contest for Muslim hearts and minds began well before the Western media rediscovered madrasas in the late 1990s.” (pp. 2-3) These quotes truly sum up what the editors and the authors have achieved in this collection for the over-riding themes of all the chapters, regardless of the location or the time period covered, are the diversity of influences on Islam and Islamic education.