

# BOOK REVIEW

## FAITHFUL EDUCATION: MADRASSAHS IN SOUTH ASIA

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Riaz Ali's *Faithful Education: Madrassahs in South Asia* examines the institution of the madrassah, the traditional Islamic educational system, in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. Through an examination of the reforms and transformations that take place within the madrassahs of the three countries, this book sheds light on the contested place of Islamic education in Muslim civil society.

The book is divided into 7 chapters. Chapter 1 discusses the shortcomings of the dominant discourses surrounding madrassahs today. Chapter 2 explores the formation and changes the madrassah underwent throughout British rule of the Indian subcontinent. Chapters 3 through 5 are devoted to examining the particularities of the madrassah educational system in Pakistan (Chapter 3), Bangladesh (Chapter 4), and India (Chapter 5). Chapter 6 is devoted to modern madrassah reform movements. Chapter 7 offers a brief conclusion of the forgoing discussions.

Since JMPCS is particularly interested in Muslim civil society, this review will have a narrower focus of assessment: what role do madrassahs play in shaping Muslim society? As the book reveals, the trajectory of the madrassahs since their inception in South Asia demonstrate their dynamism in responding to the failures of the state to address the needs of all its citizens, particularly for the most vulnerable and impoverished members of society.

The continued presence of madrassahs in South Asia is in many cases a direct result of access (or lack thereof) to state-supported education. In addition to providing Islamic knowledge, a madrassah education provided lodging and food for poor children. The discipline that came along with a madrassah-style education has been seen as a boon by many parents, as it kept these children from otherwise engaging in unsocial or criminal activities (p.13). As Riaz writes, "the fragmentation of education along social divides has left the poor, particularly the rural poor, with very little option but to send their children to madrassahs..." (p. 115). The current state of madrassahs in India is particularly interesting, as the Muslim population in the country is a minority. While the number of Muslims enrolled in Indian madrassahs is small, it remains to be seen whether there will be a surge in enrollment given the current political environment in which Muslims face increasing persecution by the far right.

Chapter 6 is particularly relevant as it examines reforms of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. After nationalizing Islamic endowments in the mid-20th century, the Pakistani government moved to establish control of the madrassahs themselves. As Riaz writes, this move and its repercussions would "define the meaning and role of Islam in Pakistani society and polity." He further on

comments: “the regime’s efforts were intended to undermine the ulama’s authority and therefore privilege the state’s interpretation of religion and religious education” (p 196). This brings into question: who gets to define the meaning of Islam and particularly the role of Islam in society? Should it be the ulama or the state? Moreover, what of the laity – are they to have no say in the matter?

In all the reform efforts, one of the most vociferous arguments has been that madrassahs were antiquated and incapable of producing a workforce necessary for a modern state and economy. The ulama have not shied away from a response. While some supporters have made the case that functioning in a capitalist system is either of no concern or of secondary importance, some have argued that madrassahs do in fact provide students the skills necessary to be active participants in society. In their understanding, graduates of madrassahs go on to become religious scholars and this, the ulama believe, is the best way for Muslims to be active participants in society (p.207). The contestation of what makes an active citizen in society is one I find to be extremely interesting. It seems to me that neither side on this issue is incorrect – perhaps both are correct at the same time. This debate between reformists/secularists and traditionalists points to the larger question of how one even defines “Muslim civil society.” Is it simply a body of individuals who happen to self-identify as Muslim or do Islamic practices and their prevalence determine whether a society is well functioning?

One particular example in Bangladesh illustrates the difficulty of assessing the effectiveness of madrassahs. In 1934, The Momen Committee commented that traditional madrassahs “turn out men who are generally a burden on society and a drag on the educational progress of the community” (Riaz, p. 210). Interestingly enough, the committee did not feel that these madrassahs should be dismantled completely. As they noted, the Muslim community “cannot be satisfied with a system of education which aims at providing a modicum of Islamic education and culture along with secular training.” It wants a system which can “turn out savants and religious preceptors who will devote themselves to the acquisition of theological knowledge and diffusion of religion and serve as guides and final authorities in all theological matters” (p.210). This is an important point, as it draws into question that civil society and its proper functioning cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach – i.e. what works in one country will not necessarily work in another.

While acknowledging the failures of madrassahs, one professor of Calcutta University remarked, “if Muslim masses are to be influenced and improved, learned Muslim divines are needed, and they can only be nurtured in the cradles of time-honoured madrassahs of olden type” (Riaz, p. 211). This tension demonstrates the importance of traditional madrassahs: that as a center of theology, they do have a place within a society in which Islam is important to its citizens.

My sole critique is with Riaz’s simplified notion of secularization. He draws on the fact that secularization privatizes religion. In Muslim-majority countries, he writes, “the privatization of religion undermines the Islamic scholarly tradition and consequently alienates communities... two contending visions face each other; they concern the identity of the community or nation, and the future of the nation” (p.10).<sup>1</sup> While this might be true in some countries, whether religion has truly been privatized in either Pakistan or Bangladesh in particular I think is open for debate.

Notwithstanding this minor critique, *Faithful Education: Madrassahs in South Asia* is an important read for anyone interested in learning about the role of Islam, particularly traditional educational institutions such as the madrassah, in shaping civil society for Muslims both in

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<sup>1</sup> The two contending visions being the Islamic tradition vs. the secular tradition

countries where they are the majority (as in the case of Pakistan and Bangladesh) and where there are not (as in the case of India).

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**References**

Riaz, Ali. (2008). *Faithful Education: Madrassahs in South Asia*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.