

Free to Choose Madrassas: A Tribute to Milton Friedman

Introduction

Tonight, PBS premieres *The Power of Choice*, a biography of Milton Friedman. In tribute to the Nobel prize winning economist, we shall today look at the application of his ideas on choice and education to the issue of Muslim madrasas.

This may seem like an odd pairing of topics. Milton Friedman was an intellectual who championed freedom of choice and, if one goes by the analysis on Fox News, madrasas are kindergartens for terrorism. Of course if you believe Fox News, you also believe that Barack Obama attended a terrorist kindergarten. In reality, “madrasa” is an Arabic word that simply means “school” any kind of school, charter school, government school, private school, or religious school. When I was a youth attending the Durkee Street elementary school in Pennsylvania, my Arab-speaking parents would inform anyone who asked of my whereabouts that I was “at the madrasa.” No doubt everyone in this room attended a madrasa.

But there is more to the story than pathetic Fox propaganda. To the contrary the classical madrasa demonstrates the reality that underlies Friedman’s ideas and the causes of the problems with certain madrasas today can also be explained with the aid of some of Friedman’s ideas.

Friedman’s insights:

Milton Friedman had many insights in his life. There are two of particular interest to us here:

- (1) choice brings about cooperation between the supplier and the consumer.
- (2) In recent times in America, there has been a tragic absence of choice in education.

Protectionism and government intervention breed conflict while free markets breed cooperation. The only way to make money in a free market is to provide consumers with something for which they willingly pay. Thus, says Friedman,

in order to make money, you have to promote cooperation. You have to do something to your customer wants you to do. You don’t do it because he orders you to... you do it because you offer him a better deal than he can get anywhere else. Now that’s promoting cooperation. But there are other people who are trying to sell to him, to. They’re your competitors. So there is competition among sellers, but cooperation between sellers and buyers.¹

1 “Free to Choose: a Conversation with Milton Friedman,” *Imprimis* July 2006 35 #7, 1.

In education, things have been different. Friedman argues that in the process of effectively serving its members, the teacher's unions have "destroyed American education."² Friedman argues that education in America suffers from the same problems as health care in that they "both suffer from the disease that takes a system that should be bottom-up and converts it into a system that is top-down."³

Friedman's first article of advice is to move education out of the federal arena and back to the state and local governments. Next, he wants parents to have control, as the education of their children is their responsibility. He argues that "in order to make it a parental matter, he must have a situation in which parents are free to choose the schools their children attend. They aren't free to do that now. Today the schools pick the children. Children are assigned to schools by geography -- by where they live."⁴

The link between Friedman's ideas on choice and on education is the fact that who pays the piper calls the tune. If the state is to fund education, then it is necessary for the decision-making authority over how that money is spent to be in the hands of the consumers, or, rather, the guardians of those consumers. For Friedman, an economist, the simplest way to do this was to issue vouchers.

Madrasa in historical perspective

The classical Islamic madrasa demonstrates how schools can be protected from state control without vouchers. George Makdisi, in his seminal work on *The Rise of Colleges*,⁵ explains how the madrasa gave rise to modern institutions of advanced learning. The first thing one must understand about the classical madrasas is that they are examples of *awqaf* (s., *waqf*) or charitable endowments.

The debate about the alleged links between madrasas and terrorism has tended to obscure both the madrasas' long histories and the differences among them. Throughout much of Islamic history, madrasas were the major source of religious and scientific learning, just as church schools and the universities were in Europe. Between the seventh and twelfth centuries, madrasas produced free-thinking luminaries such as Alberuni, Ibn Sina, and al-Khwarizmi. They also produced America's bestselling poet throughout the 1990s, the thirteenth-century Sufi mystic and poet of love and longing, Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi, who, it is often forgotten, was trained as a Muslim jurist, and throughout his life taught Sharia law in a madrasa in Konya. It is true that Rumi rejected the rigidity of

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges : Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981).

thought and spirituality characteristic of the ulema of his day, but he did so as an insider, from within the system.”⁶

The independence granted the schools by their endowments freed them from the control of their initial funders, except in the broadest sense that they had to adhere to the purposes in their charter. The competition provided by the plurality of the schools gave the consumers the power of choice that Friedman championed without the necessity of either being wealthy themselves or being concerned with new conditions being imposed upon the curriculum.

Madaris in recent times.

Today the word *madrasa* can apply to any school or to the seminaries for higher religious studies. A religious elementary school is distinguished not by the name *madrasa* at all, but by the name *maktab*. Few of these schools have anything to do with teaching hatred or terrorism, and those that do are the consequence of a violation of the principle of separation of school and state, as I shall argue later.

Juan Cole has summarized the inanity of the smear on Barack Obama:

The rightwing smear campaign against Barack Obama, waged by a magazine funded by the far rightwing Korean businessman and part-time messiah, the Reverend Moon, has foundered on CNN's good reporting. The allegation was that he had gone to a radical "Saudi-funded" madrasah. Wolf Blitzer had the professionalism to send out an experienced reporter to the school that Obama attended when he was 6 years old in Indonesia. He found it just an ordinary modern school with boys and girls and both male and female teachers, which taught modern subjects.⁷

The quality of education in the Muslim world varies dramatically from school to school, as it does in the U.S. If the quality of education is overall more poor than it is in the United States, that has more to do with the status of educational philosophy in the Muslim world where, for reasons I outlined in my book *Signs in the Heavens*,⁸ critical thinking is held suspect and knowledge is perceived as the body of facts to be memorized. This is the same philosophy that dominates our failing public school system in America.

Who pays the piper calls the tune. The state sees as its objective the creation of what it calls “good citizens” but may be more precisely described as “obedient subjects.”

⁶ William Dalrymple, “Inside the Madrasa, part 2” Interreligious Insight, <http://www.interreligiousinsight.org/October2006/Dalrymple10-06.html>, orig. published as “Inside the Madrasa” NY Review of Books 52 #19 (Dec. 1, 2005)

⁷ Juan Cole, <http://www.juancole.com/2007/01/rightwing-smearers-of-obama-dont-know.html>

⁸ Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad, *Signs in the Heavens: An Astronomer’s Perspective on Religion and Science* (Berltsvile: amana, 2006)

Religious schools are established by those who have a religious perspective to sell. Thus, both in the Muslim world and here in the United States, they are somewhat better and much more efficient (consider the reputation of Catholic schools), but you have to resign yourself to the perspective pushed by the providers. This perspective will by definition be religious, but it need not be intolerant or violent.

From where then, did the schools about which we hear, in which intolerance and/or violence are taught? These schools, unlike the classical *madaris* have no endowments, but usually receive funds from governments. The reputed intolerance of the Wahabi school of thought can be understood in terms of the genesis of the school of thought from the entanglement of its founder, Muhammad ibn Abdul-Wahab with the political ambitions of Muhammad ibn Saud. Ibn Abdul Wahab endorsed Ibn Saud's claim of royal authority in return for the establishment of his interpretation of Islam as the state religion.

The violent teachings found in Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan are the result of the American proxy war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Pakistani intelligence, together with the CIA and the Saudis arranged for the creation of books that set the pattern for the intolerant and violent material about which we have heard. Businessweek commentator Stan Crock blames state intervention:

“Politics played a major role in financing these schools. And nowhere has the growth of madrassas been more of an issue than in Pakistan. Saudi Arabia and Gulf States with majority Sunni populations wanted Pakistan to serve as a buffer against the Shiites who had come to power in Iran in the late 1970s. So they bankrolled madrassas in Pakistan. The Saudis in particular exported Wahhabism, a particularly rigid expression of the Islam faith that relies on strict interpretation of the Koran. But while religion plays an important role in the schools, jihadism by and large doesn't.”⁹

Crock concludes: “Stamping out madrassas may prove nearly impossible, simply because state-run schools are not yet an alternative for the middle and upper classes. Ironically, it's state-run schools that are more likely to give students the skills they need to be terrorists, though how much anti-Western sentiment is taught varies from country to country.”¹⁰

In conclusion, the madrasa as a waqf institution played an important role in the emergence of modern education. The problems attributed to some madrasas today—and they are a minority—are related to state intervention. Freedom of choice is necessary to depoliticize the schools. Vouchers, as recommended by Milton Friedman would be preferable to direct state intervention, but a better solution would be the separation of school from state.

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⁹ Stan Crock , “Korans, Not Kalashnikovs at Madrassas,” Business Week online 10-27-04, http://www.businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/oct2004/nf20041027_5509_db056.htm

¹⁰ Ibid.