

Worlds 'Apart': The Tabligh Jamāt under Apartheid 1963–1993

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Introduction

The first effects of the Tabligh movement were felt in South Africa in the 1960s, less than three decades after the founder, Mawlānā Muḥammad Ilyās (1885–1944), died in India. Today, the Tabligh Jamāt is perhaps the strongest and fastest-growing Muslim religious movement in southern Africa.¹ In this article I will contextualize the rise of this movement against the backdrop of Muslim migration to the southern African region under colonial rule. In addition, I will also locate the Tabligh Jamāt among the profusion of Muslim voices in South Africa during a period characterized by white minority racist rule, better known as apartheid.

The demise of white colonial rule in Zambia, Malawi, Botswana, Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe from the 1960s until the 1970s signalled the dissipation of European presence in the southern African sub-region. The end of European prestige in the region, however, did not mean the decline of Christianity. One

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¹ In Arabic the movement is known as *Jamā'at al-Tabligh*; in Urdu, and among English-speaking Muslims, it is normally Tabligh Jamāt or Tablighī Jamāt. Since this movement emanates from India I have followed the Urdu form Tabligh Jamāt.

of the unexpected effects linked to the end of white rule was the creation of social space for Islam to flourish in the guise of Tabligh evangelism. In South Africa, apartheid rule not only tolerated but subtly encouraged those forms of cultural and religious activity that did not threaten white political hegemony.

Islam in South Africa had its first immigrants from the Malay archipelago as far back as 1658 with the arrival of the earliest Dutch colonizers.² Thereafter, Muslims from the Indian subcontinent arrived in 1860 as indentured labourers under British rule. Isolated from the rest of Muslim Africa by the high visibility of Christianity, Islam in southern Africa has since the middle of the twentieth century also experienced a growth in public visibility, largely as a result of the unobtrusive activities of the Tabligh movement. The exact figures for Muslims in South Africa remain disputed. The 1991 census places the number of Muslims at 338,142.³ The unofficial estimate held by members of the Muslim community places their number well over 500,000, with some even suggesting a million followers of Islam. Although the presence of Muslims of Malay origin did contribute to the proselytization of indigenous inhabitants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there are no discernible trends of significant conversion to Islam in the twentieth century.⁴

Hailing from the South East Asian islands of Malaya, Indonesia

² For a more detailed background to Islam in South Africa see my article 'Discursive Voices of Diaspora Islam in Southern Africa', *Jurnal Antropologi dan Sosiologi*, National University of Malaysia, 20, 1993–4, 27–59, repr. as 'Islam', in Martin Prozesky and John de Gruchy (eds.), *Living Faiths in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1995), 129–54.

³ Source: *Population Census 1991* (Pretoria: Central Statistical Service, 1991), 127. The actual figure before the adjustment for undercount puts the total at 298,185. A 1951 census figure counts Muslims among coloureds and Asians at 142,000 (see Harm J. de Blij, 'South Africa', in James Kritzeck and William H. Lewis (eds.), *Islam in Africa* (New York: Van Nostrand-Reinhold Company, 1969), 245).

⁴ Achmat Davids, 'My Religion is Superior to the Law: The Survival of Islam at the Cape of Good Hope,' in Yusuf da Costa and Achmat Davids (eds.), *Pages from Cape Muslim History* (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter, 1994), 59.

and also the Coromandel coast off India, the first adherents of Islam who arrived in South Africa three centuries ago found ethnic integration hard to resist. Conversion of 'free black' slaves to Islam promoted ethnic and social assimilation. Thereafter, the conversion to Islam of a few persons of Dutch origin further extended the scope of social and ethnic integration. The peculiarly East Asian religious consciousness that the early immigrant Muslims brought with them from the East in the seventeenth century soon domesticated itself to the African context. It is nevertheless noticeable that the dominant leitmotif of Islam at the Cape for instance remains the underlying Malay-Javanese character of its source. Over a period of three centuries there have also been influences from India and the Middle East on Cape Islam. These range from the period of the Ottoman empire to latter-day influences from Egypt and Saudi Arabia. These influences are transmitted by means of South African 'ulamā' (religious scholars) who are trained abroad.

The beginnings of the Tabligh Jamāt in South Africa are inextricably tied to the fortunes of descendants of so-called 'passenger Indians,' who settled in the British colony of Natal, now the KwaZulu-Natal province, and the Boer republic of Transvaal, now Gauteng province, towards the close of the nineteenth century. Between 1830 and 1870 the effects of British capitalism in the colonies spawned the mass emigration of some 2 million inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent. Some of them paid their passage to South Africa, rather than being indentured, and subsequently became the mercantile class among Indians. Muslims among them hailed from various parts of pre-partition India, mainly the Surat, Kathiawar and Bharuch districts of the state of Gujarat, and from the Kokan area of Maharashtra state. They served as traders in the rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal, the former Transvaal regions, now known as Gauteng, Mpumalanga and Northern Province, as well as the metropolitan areas around Durban and Johannesburg.

Early history

If Islam in East and West Africa spread at the hands of Arabic-speaking traders, then Indian traders were responsible for the influence of the Tabligh Jamāt and its interpretation of Islam to fellow Muslims in South Africa.⁵ Indian trader communities were the first to respond to the call of the Tabligh Jamāt. In a way a form of conversion occurred. By 'conversion' is meant, not a conversion from one religion to another, but rather a 'deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another.'⁶ This is precisely what the teachings of the Tabligh Jamāt inspires: a meticulous commitment to the fundamentals of faith and an unquestioning loyalty to a literal interpretation of Prophetic authority proclaimed to be *Sunna*.

Interestingly, the first meaningful contact by South Africans with the Tabligh movement was not with Delhi in India its headquarters, but with Makka in Saudi Arabia. The reason for this detour was that soon after the coming to power of the National Party and its racist policies in 1948, Indian immigration to South Africa was halted.⁷ The white minority government was reluctant to give visas to Indian visitors. Furthermore, people-to-people contact between South Africa and the Indian subcontinent was severely restricted after India and Pakistan took a strong adversarial stance towards Pretoria's domestic policies and enforced the cultural boycott against South Africa.

By the 1960s the Tabligh movement, under the leadership of Mawlānā Muḥammad Yūsuf (d. 1965), the son of Mawlānā Ilyās, saw the annual pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Makka as an ideal opportunity to promote his missionary work. Given the large number of

⁵ See Ali A. Mazrui, 'Religion and Political Culture in Africa', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 53, 3, December 1985, 817–18.

⁶ A. D. Nock, *Conversion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), 6–7; also see *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. 'Conversion'.

⁷ This party was defeated by the African National Congress, led by Nelson Mandela, in the historic first democratic election in April 1994, although it was briefly a participant in the post-election government of national unity.

pilgrims at the holy cities, Tabligh activists worked hard to gain new recruits among this diverse throng of humanity in order to spread the simple content of this fledgling movement into various countries around the world.

Local founders

One of the earliest participants in South African Tabligh work recalls that his first exposure to the activities of the Tabligh Jamāt occurred in the 1950s. An Indian, only remembered as Hafez Soojie (Ḥāfiẓ Sūjī), was on a visit to his Gujarati-speaking relatives in South Africa. Feeling compelled to share his understanding of Tabligh work, he initiated the first *gusht* (evangelical outing) by taking a group of people to a mosque in the Johannesburg suburb of Roodepoort.⁸ Although there was no continued activity after the departure of Hafez Soojie, the first seeds of the movement had been sown by that event.

In 1962 a businessman from Umzinto in KwaZulu-Natal, Ghulam Mohamed Padia, a Muslim of Indian descent, was exposed to the activities of the Tabligh Jamāt during the annual pilgrimage to Makka.⁹ Before returning home to South Africa he spent four months (three *chillah*) abroad, visiting the movement's headquarters in Delhi where he learnt the methods of Tabligh instruction. Thereafter, Hadji-Bhai Padia, as he is better known, became the movement's most influential pioneer in South Africa. At first there was opposition to his activities – the local Umzinto community felt that religious instruction and propagation was best left to the qualified '*ulamā*'. However, the sympathetic attitude of the '*ulamā*' of the Deoband school soon legitimized the activities

⁸ Interview with Mr Rashid Patel, 29 December 1993.

⁹ Also see Jacobus Lodewicus Cilliers, 'Die Tabligh-Beweging en sy Invloed op die Islam in Suid Afrika' (The Tabligh Movement and its Influence on Islam in South Africa), M.Th. thesis, Department of Missiology, University of the Western Cape, (unpublished) 1983. Also see J. L. Cilliers, 'Die Tabligh-Beweging en sy Invloed in Suid Afrika,' *Journal for Islamic Studies*, 4, 1984, 55–77.

of the Tabligh Jamāt.¹⁰

The earliest participants in the Tabligh movement were, like Hadji-Bhai Padia and those in his immediate environment and family in the KwaZulu-Natal province, businessmen of Indian descent, whose ancestors came from the Surat area of India. Gradually, the movement began to attract individuals from the other sub-ethnic groups that make up the range of Muslims of Indian descent in South Africa. These sub-ethnic groups consist of language communities whose ancestors came from different parts of India. These language communities also constitute the inter-ethnic divisions within the Muslim community; they have class implications and also reveal the historical religious practices of these communities. The Tabligh movement over time began to get into its ranks persons from the Urdu-speaking community whose ancestors come from Hyderabad; Kachi or Memom speakers from north Gujarat; and Konkani speakers from Maharashtra. By the 1970s the movement had also made inroads into the Western Cape area, where it gained adherents from the historical Malay and 'coloured' Muslim communities. Among African and European communities the Tabligh movement has had little, if any, significant success.

Growth

In 1966, three years after the inception of the Tabligh Jamāt in South Africa, the first nation-wide annual gathering (*ijtimā'*) attended by some 300 persons was held at Ladysmith. Thereafter, the size of these annual meetings became an index of the movement's growth and strength. In the mid-1970s annual Tabligh gatherings became an important fixture in the Muslim religious calendar, attracting thousands and necessitating elaborate and

¹⁰ For further discussion on the Deoband school, see Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

detailed organization. In a very short time the numbers at the annual Tabligh *ijtimā's* eclipsed those of the annual convention of the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM), a reformist-styled religio-cultural movement.¹¹ The latter event was subsequently abandoned due to a decline in support.

There is a range of factors accounting for the large-scale gravitation of Muslims towards the Tabligh movement. First, it represents a type of Islam with a *ṣūfī* orientation, which provides it with broad religious appeal to a variety of audiences. At least some sections of the Indian community can identify with this kind of sober *ṣūfī* spirituality. The common group identity and ethnicity that a section of the 'converts' to Tabligh share with India provides a natural religious 'home' in a 'symbolic' diaspora.¹² In a culturally alienating environment such as South Africa, the natural gravitation of diaspora communities towards ethnocentrism is not surprising. It would indeed be reductionist to suggest that ethnocentrism is the only factor contributing to the appeal of Tabligh Islam, but it is a significant factor in certain quarters.

Second, the theological commonality between the Tabligh Jamāt and the theological orientation of the Deoband school is of critical importance. Deoband, a seminary in northern India (founded in 1867) and the proponent of a *Sunnī-Ḥanafī* doctrine that is sympathetic to sober *ṣūfism* in the subcontinent, has a significant following among a section of South African Muslims, namely the descendants of Indian immigrants. At least three

¹¹ See Abdulkader I. Tayob, 'The Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) of South Africa: Challenging the 'ulamā' Hegemony,' *Journal for Islamic Studies*, Centre for Islamic Studies, Rand Afrikaans University, 12, November 1992, 101–24.

¹² I am not asserting that South African Muslims of Indian ancestry consider India as their home. Many of them have been here for more than four generations. The younger generation in particular have very little in common with Indian and Eastern culture. The same applies to Muslims of Malay-Javanese descent. However, that there is a symbolic connection with India, Malaysia and Indonesia cannot be denied. For this reason, I chose to call it a symbolic diaspora, not intending thereby the Jewish connotation of 'diaspora.'

'ulamā' associations are pro-Deoband.¹³ They provide legitimacy to the discourse of the Tabligh movement even though not all 'ulamā' subscribe to the Tabligh teachings. Yet it would be rare to find pro-Deoband 'ulamā' who actively oppose the Tabligh. What contributes significantly to the growth of the Tabligh Jamāt in certain regions of South Africa is the hegemony and authority that the Deobandī 'ulamā' exercise in these areas.

Graduates from the two pro-Deoband seminaries in Newcastle (KwaZulu-Natal) and Azaadville (Gauteng) not only swell the ranks of the Tabligh as leading activists but also provide the intellectual authority for the movement. Both these seminaries actively encourage their students to participate in the Tabligh movement. Once graduates qualify as 'ulamā', most of them vigorously further the goals of the movement from the mosques and pulpits they occupy. A sizeable number of these graduates hail from the Western Cape region and although they differ in ethnic make-up from those who control these seminaries, they make a noticeable impact on the Cape landscape by expanding the influence of the Deoband school.

Opposition to the Tabligh movement comes mainly from two sections of the Muslim community. The first comprises those whose commitments are linked to what may be called popular religious practices that are opposed by more puritan strains of Islam on doctrinal grounds. Among the two main strains of popular Islam in South Africa is the Barelwi school of thought founded by an Indian, Aḥmad Riḍā Khān (d. 1922) of Barelwi. This school has a sizeable support base in the regions of KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng and the Western Cape.¹⁴ The other strain is the vintage Cape Islam that reflects elements of South East Asian *ṣūfism*. Less

¹³ The Jamiat al-'Ulamā' of Transvaal, the Jamiat al-'Ulamā' of Natal and the Majlisul 'Ulamā' of South Africa. See J. A. Naudé, 'The 'Ulamā' in South Africa', *Journal for Islamic Studies*, 2, 1982, 23–39.

¹⁴ See Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) for further details of the Barelwi school.

vociferous opposition voices to Tabligh come from the youth, student and politicized sectors of the Muslim community as well as sections of the neo-conservative Cape 'ulamā' who align themselves to religious trends in the Middle East, such as those associated with the al-Azhar University in Cairo and the pro-Wahhābī institutions of Saudi Arabia, such as the Islamic University of Madīna and Umm al-Qurā in Makka.

The neo-conservative 'ulamā' of the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) who constitute the leading 'ulamā' council in the Cape region, members of the MYM, the Muslim Students' Association (MSA) and previously political activist groupings, such as the Call of Islam and the Qibla Mass Movement, do not readily associate with the Tabligh Jamāt.¹⁵ On the other hand they do not overtly criticize the Tabligh. Thus it would seem the Tabligh Jamāt has managed to neutralize opposition in instances where it has failed to gain allies.

However, the opposition towards the Tabligh Jamāt possibly finds its strongest opposition from the Barelwi group.¹⁶ In 1987 this hostility was inflamed by an incident which had tragic consequences. A group of Barelwi supporters decided to hold a *mīlād* (celebration of the Prophet's birthday) in one of the halls of Azaadville, home of the Madrasa 'Arabiyya Islāmiyya seminary. Some prominent teachers at the seminary were also highly placed within the ranks of the Tabligh. After failing to obstruct the plans of the Barelwi group, the Tabligh followers, headed by the seminary leadership, decided to express their outrage at what they considered to be the *bid'a* (heretical) practice of the Barelwis. Opposition to such an event was quickly declared a religious cause that deserved

¹⁵ See C. du P. le Roux and I. Jhazbhay, 'The Contemporary Path of Qibla Thought: A Hermeneutical Reflection', *Journal for Islamic Studies*, 12, 1992, 85–100.

¹⁶ A full-length tract entitled *Tableegh Jamaat: In the Light of the Facts and Truth*, by Hazrat 'Allama Arshadul Qādirī of Culcutta, trans. Prof. Na'im Jamālī (Durban: World Islamic Mission, 1987) is evidence of the vituperative debate between the Barelwi movement and the Tabligh Jamāt.

physical action and belligerence, and was deemed a *jihād* by the seminary leadership close to the Tabligh. The ensuing pandemonium led to armed clashes in which one person was killed.¹⁷

In the Western Cape, Islam has a longer history than it does in the rest of South Africa, and has a rich and diverse character. Muslims in this region are mainly of Indonesian, Malay and, to a lesser extent, Indian ancestry. Given the diversity and indigenous acculturation of Islam in this region, it is not surprising that the Tabligh has been comparatively less successful there. Furthermore, among a large section of the Konkani-speaking Indian community in the Western Cape, the influence of the Barelwi school is significant and thus resists Tabligh encroachment. However, for many working-class Muslims of 'Malay' and 'coloured' ancestry the Indianization of Islam is also an index of upward social mobility. Comparatively and superficially there is a widespread belief that Muslims of Indian descent are more affluent than those of 'Malay' ancestry.¹⁸ The demonstration-effect of the Tabligh consisting of a dress code, beard and other ritualistic tenets, as well as the *charismata* that the movement offers individuals, makes it an attractive prospect to many seeking a more committed religious life. A survey of Tabligh activists indicates that the movement holds greater attraction for middle-aged persons, many of whom have for most of their lives not been devout in observing the daily rituals. They experience a new kind of religiosity in Tabligh work. As a kind of charismatic religious movement it serves as a vehicle for personal atonement and to redress the lack

¹⁷ See Ahmad Mukadam, 'Islam, Violence and Motives: An Analysis of the Schismatic Differences and Otherness between Wahhabism and Sunnism as enacted in Aspects of the Azaadville Incident', unpublished paper, Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town, 1987.

¹⁸ This is evident from the fact that all efforts for major fundraising events in the Muslim community in the Western Cape which has the largest concentration of Muslims inevitably result in requests for aid from their affluent co-religionists in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal regions.

of piety and religiosity prior to finding the Tabligh. Above all, it makes it possible for the individual to espouse a new identity. The profile of Tabligh adherents ranges from students and blue-collar workers to businessmen and professionals. At the same time the turnover of Tabligh activists is also high. Although a core group of people remains dedicated to Tabligh work throughout their lives, the average member is a fervent activist for periods ranging from five to ten years. Thereafter, the person may either become an active or, as is usually the case, a passive sympathizer.

Among women the Tabligh Jamāt has carved out an influential constituency. Female adherents are often converted to the movement by family members or other women, but the majority are spouses of male activists. In many instances men succeed in making their families join them in their newfound religiosity. Women too have their own circles and operate from homes. Their activities are similar to those of men, with an emphasis on regular weekly *ta'lim* (teaching circles) sessions where the stock literature encourages one's commitment to Tabligh and teaches how to promote the organization through a range of *faḍā'il* (virtues) literature. The rationale in Tabligh teachings is to make the activist understand the rewards and virtues that every act of devotion is worth and by this logic devotions are eagerly pursued.

The instructional literature remains very steadfastly the *Tabligh Nisāb*, which can literally be translated as the 'Evangelical Curriculum,' but is better known as the *Teachings of Islam*. The manual consists of several short chapters dealing with the virtues (*faḍā'il*) of various devotional acts, such as prayer, fasting, knowledge and all the practices stressed in the movement. The *Teachings of Islam* was composed by the late *shaykh al-ḥadīth* (master of *ḥadīth* studies) at the Sahāranpūr seminary, Maẓāhir al-'Ulūm in India, the late Mawlānā Muḥammad Zakariyya. It consists primarily of narratives (*ḥadīth*) and reports attributed to the Prophet and anecdotes of the Companions, a large number of which are contested by some scholars of *ḥadīth*. The purpose of

these reports is to instil zeal among the faithful in order to engage in activities of religious merit.

Activities

Tabligh activists travel frequently within cities as well as to all parts of South Africa. Operating on austerity budgets they sleep in mosques and share food communally. Meagre resources are stretched to optimum levels to allow activists of all economic backgrounds to participate and to reach as many people as possible during evangelical travels. The movement's major strength is its access to grassroots communities through its evangelical visits (*gushr*) to fellow Muslims, the most effective means of recruiting neophytes.

There is a remarkable global uniformity in the format of Tabligh *modus operandi*. Functions are divided into national, regional and local levels. In every locality and region, one mosque is identified as the headquarters (*markaz*) for activities. On weekends, from Friday evening until Sunday, each locality will send groups of men to the regional headquarters. From here they are redeployed to spend time in targeted areas. This kind of *da'wa* (proselytizing) work requires voluntary involvement and travel at personal expense domestically or abroad as an itinerant lay preacher.

In this way laypersons are trained to articulate the ideas and message of Tabligh and are required to reflect on their experiences in faith (*īmān*). The entire programme is designed to make the individual an active participant in the dissemination and teaching of religion, a task that was generally assumed by the '*ulamā*'. Missionary zeal combined with individual empowerment bolsters the confidence and religious identity of persons who would otherwise consume religion passively. The religious experience gained through the intense exercise of prayer, a commitment to mission and the sanctified living environment of mosques results in the Tabligh activist discovering a new self-identity.

Ideology and discourse

Tabligh discourse projects the movement as Noah's Ark. It is a simple but attractive slogan. Whoever boards the ark (i.e. Tabligh Jamāt) is saved, and those who fail to do so are doomed. Observation of Tabligh workers has shown that they display all the characteristics of 'conversion'.¹⁹ The rhetorical indicators of Tabligh 'conversion' are that adherents adopt a language steeped in Islamic metaphor and espouse an ideal and purist universe with its attendant discourse and paraphernalia. All events and happenings experienced by activists are causally attributed to God alone. The convert adopts a master attribution scheme which states that success can only be achieved if there is an unflinching commitment to the commands of Allah. Commitment to Allah means performing ritual acts of piety, imitating the Prophetic lifestyle which includes the personal and customary habits of the Arabian Prophet as well as his religious practices. The emphasis is that 'success' in a religious sense is only attainable if one imitates the lifestyle of the Prophet of Islam. This kind of discourse makes the Tabligh movement closely resemble a 'prosperity cult.'

To describe the Tabligh movement as a 'cult' or 'sect' would be to risk distorting the sociological analysis. The Tabligh Jamāt has an unconscious sense of community.²⁰ In fact, adherents tend to see themselves and their religious experiences as unique and not comparable to those outside the group. Belief in their unique experiences results in Tabligh activists suspending analogical reasoning. This means that they are unable to compare their own

¹⁹ See David A. Snow and Richard Machalek, 'The Sociology of Conversion', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 10, 1984, 167–90; also Clifford L. Staples and Armand L. Mauss, 'Conversion or Commitment? A Reassessment of the Snow and Machalek Approach to the Study of Conversion', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 26, 2, 1987, 133–47.

²⁰ Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 103. Also see *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. 'Community'.

experiences with similar, if not identical, practices by other contemporary groups within Islam or other faith communities; it is easier for them to identify with an Islamic past dating back centuries to the Prophet or his Companions. The most persistent analogy one encounters in Tabligh discourse is when activists identify with the Companions of the Prophet (*Ṣaḥāba*) and hold them up as absolute role models. It is therefore not surprising that the *Teachings of Islam* contains hagiographical accounts of the Companions and well-known religious personalities, especially *ṣūfīs*. Committed Tabligh activists embrace the mission of the movement in an uncompromising manner. Many new activists direct all their social interactions towards recruitment and the furtherance of the aims of the movement.

It is perhaps the accessibility and simplicity of the Tabligh teachings that give the movement its greatest appeal. Every activist aspires to reach and share the prophetic *charismata* that is believed to be transmitted by means of strict emulation (*ittibā'*) of the Prophet, a notion which lies at the core of its teachings. The famous six-point programme involves a commitment to: the article of faith and its implications of strict monotheism and the unfettered imitation of the Prophet Muḥammad; the regular observance of the five daily prayers (*ṣalāh*); the acquisition of knowledge (understood to mean religious knowledge) and remembrance of God, listed as '*ilm wa dhikr* (knowledge and remembrance); sincerity of intention, *ikhhlāṣ al-niyya*; service and the effort to honour a fellow Muslim, *ikrām al-Muslim*; to avoid idleness and engage in *da'wa* work.

The international connection

The relative affluence of the most visible ethnic group in the Tabligh Jamāt, Muslims of Indian descent, allows the South African chapter to engage in extensive international work. Groups from this country regularly visit all neighbouring states and have been instrumental in the success of the movement in Zimbabwe,

Zambia, Malawi, Mauritius and Mozambique. Before 1990 access to countries north of Zambia was restricted because of South Africa's pariah political status in the international community. With the readmission of South Africa into the international fold, the South African Tabligh movement is expected to increase its activities in sub-Saharan Africa at large. In the past, the South African chapter concentrated its efforts in South American countries such as Brazil and Argentina as well as parts of North America and Britain.

Ethos

On their first international outings most Tabligh activists visit India and Pakistan, especially the main centres in Nizāmuddīn in New Delhi and Raiwind in Pakistan. In the subcontinent initiates are subjected to the proverbial baptism of fire with unique living conditions that test the individual's ability to make *mujāhada* – a voluntary mental and physical ability to endure. *Mujāhada* is not a concept unique to Tabligh; it is fully developed in the lexicon of *sūfism*.

The Tabligh movement attempts in a number of ways to bring about a synthesis between sober *ṭarīqa* (esoteric) tendencies and more orthodox *sharī'a* (exoteric) practices. Although this mix is characteristic of the school of Deoband, it also reflects the close association of the founder, Mawlānā Ilyās, with the more prominent figures of the Deoband school such as Rashīd Aḥmad Gangohī (d. 1905) and Khalīl Aḥmad Sahāranpūrī (d. 1928), both of whom were *sūfī* mentors (*shaykhs*) in addition to being religious scholars. Many seasoned South African Tabligh activists end up taking the *bay'a* (oath of spiritual initiation) with the prominent mentors of *taṣawwuf* associated with movement. The previous international leader (*amīr*) of the movement, Mawlānā Ināmul Ḥasan, a *shaykh* of the Naqshbandī order (*ṭarīqa*), had several South African disciples (*murīds*). Mawlānā Muḥammad Zakariyya, the author of the *Teachings of Islam*, also generated a substantial following

among Tabligh workers in South Africa. The ordinary routine introduces the lay person to a moderate discipline of daily oral remembrance (*dhikr*) of the divine, a feature enthusiastically embraced by new activists. In short, the goal is to create missionaries who are inspired by a sober *sūfism* that will not clash with the demands of the law (*sharī'a*). In summary, it would be fair to say that the Tabligh Jamāt adheres to mainstream Sunnī doctrines, practices and symbols of a moderate puritan kind. This moderation is possibly one reason why the movement is well suited to pan-Islamic and trans-national ideals of individual rehabilitation.

Method of work: differences and changes

The leadership structure at its very inception consisted of a national leader (*amīr*), with provincial *amīrs* in the previous provinces of Transvaal (Gauteng), Natal (KwaZulu-Natal) and the Cape (Western Cape).²¹ In the Western Cape, the oldest seat of Islam in southern Africa, the Tabligh movement is comparably at its weakest. Despite nearly three decades of continuous work it has failed to capture the imagination of a broad cross-section of Muslims in this region as it did elsewhere in the country. In comparison to other Muslim organizations in the Western Cape, the Tabligh Jamāt does possibly command more support than any other single formation. A complex set of reasons can account for the mixed fortunes of the movement in the Western Cape. This region is known for its diversity of Islamic trends, the constructed nature of inter-Muslim ethnicity and class differences. Given the confluence of political and cultural heterogeneity, no single hegemonic religious trend can claim to command the complete loyalty of all Muslims. The fractured nature of religious politics in the Western Cape probably accounts for the fact that the Tabligh

²¹ The previous four provinces have been redivided into nine provinces under the 1996 Constitution.

may ostensibly seem to have larger support, but that is no indication of its hegemony.²²

In the 1980s the Tablighi Jamāt abandoned the practice of having a single regional *amīr* after a leadership crisis in the Western Cape. The issue of leadership here became a matter of serious acrimony and politicking within Tablighi circles. This contradicted the Jamāt's claim that it is free from the flaws and bureaucratic strictures of organization that follow western management and administrative styles. In the other regions the Jamāt has a more coherent leadership, given the close affinity between its leadership and the socio-cultural proclivities of its target audiences.

Impact on society

One of the most visible effects of the Tablighi movement is its ability to promote a routinized Islam in a conservative guise. By 'routinization' I mean the regulated discipline of religious rituals, which become the main preoccupation of a group. In the case of the Tablighi it is more than just being ritualistic: rituals are the very fulfilment of the religion. By 'conservative' I mean when the preoccupation with the preservation of tradition rather than innovation becomes the major thrust of the social expression of religion. Every act, practice or idea is referred to an *ur-text*, the prophetic model, as visualized within the very specific confines of Tablighi Islam.

One of the direct results of this movement has been the introduction of rigid segregation between the sexes in those social spheres, institutions and communities where the influence of Tablighi is dominant. A completely veiled (*purdah*) woman is the definition of an ideal woman in the Tablighi ethos. However, there is also a tolerance for women wearing *hijāb*, where the entire

body, except the face, is covered. In order to cater for the increased demand for sexual segregation, several single-sex Muslim private schools have opened in the last decade. Since there are few sexually segregated facilities at the level of tertiary education, many young Muslim women are forced to pursue post-secondary education by means of distance learning at the world's largest correspondence university – the University of South Africa (UNISA).

Courting the Tablighi Jamāt in the 1960s and 1970s has paid handsome dividends to the pro-Deoband '*ulamā*'. Today the Tablighi is the most zealous purveyor of the Deoband school of theology, Indo-Pak interpretation of Ḥanafī law as well as other aspects of religious ideology. This has led to influence of the Deoband school expanding beyond its original settings in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal provinces, into the Western Cape, in particular.

Political quietism

Tablighi conservatism is not restricted to religious and gender matters, but also extends to politics. Although its spokespersons constantly emphasize that their mission is not to dislocate people from their 'normal' roles in society and their professions, a commitment to the Tablighi Jamāt inevitably has the effect of detachment from mainstream society and political isolation. Given their focus on eschatological matters and concern for personal salvation, the social and political ethos of Islam is not only neglected, but ignored. In the South African context, except for self-confessed right-wing religious groups, virtually all significant self-respecting religious denominations and movements had demonstrated their abhorrence for the political system of apartheid.

Religious determinism is a noticeable feature of Tablighi ideology. In fact, Tablighi discourse explains the plight of millions of black people under the yoke of apartheid in the very deterministic language of Islamic theodicy. It comes perilously close to saying that apartheid was a divine visitation upon the people of this land due to their sin and disobedience to God. The

²² For a historical account of this complex terrain see Shamil Jeppie, 'Leadership and Loyalties: The Imams of Nineteenth Century Cape Town, South Africa,' *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 26, 2, 1996, 139–62.

belief is that when all Muslims follow the ritual obligations of Islam with sincerity and obedience then God will change the material conditions of people. During the dark years of racial discrimination, Tabligh ideology found it prudent not to question the morality of the apartheid state and its attendant practices of racial discrimination.

The political quietism of the Tabligh Jamāt, especially in conflict situations, can possibly be traced to a specific type of *ṣūfī* ethos that it embraces. In this world-denying ethos the emphasis is on personal salvation. This is evident in the movement's six-point programme, which has negligible social content. Its sufism differs markedly from that embraced by 'Uthmān dan Fodio (1754–1817) in the Sokoto caliphate in northern Nigeria, the Mahdiyya of Muḥammad Aḥmad (1845–85) in the Sudan, or Sayyid Aḥmad Shahīd (1786–1831) in India. All of the last mentioned attempted to establish a socio-political order based on Islam. In the case of the Tabligh the focus is on the individual. In the Tabligh movement the ideal of a socio-political Islam is not articulated. Obviously there are advantages to this strategy. An emphasis on the individual makes the Tabligh amenable to the definition of religion as a private matter in secularized societies. Certain strains of political Islam which espouse socio-political ambitions among Muslim communities in the West and the Middle East are under regular surveillance by nervous and suspicious governments. Tabligh activity does not elicit such suspicion and has had relatively free movement in the West with little, if any, significant opposition from Muslim governments.

It is possibly the phenomenon of a personalized religion that explains why Tabligh activity was acceptable in some Eastern Bloc countries such as Hungary and Yugoslavia during the closing years of communism. A private and individualistic Islam is less of a threat to an autocratic state that also has to devise strategies of appeasement for the religious sector of its citizenry. Similarly, under successive apartheid regimes evangelical groups, including

the Tabligh Jamāt, had no restrictions imposed on their activities. On the contrary, the apartheid state readily offered assistance to conservative evangelical groups as part of a counter-revolutionary strategy. On the other hand liberation theologians of all persuasions who opposed apartheid were closely monitored and subjected to imprisonment and torture for their religious convictions.

Tabligh activists in South Africa are either hostile or indifferent to political Islam. Informally, and not officially, the Tabligh activists engage in sustained propaganda to discredit the ideologues of the Pakistan-based Jamāt-i Islāmī, the Egyptian-based Muslim Brotherhood and the Iranian revolution. All this is done in a bid to prevent local youth and student organizations from being influenced by tendencies that are seen as doctrinally deviant. Since the Tabligh movement sees itself as a genuine torchbearer of Sunnī Islam, opposition to these political groups has a theological motivation. In the case of the Jamāt-i Islāmī, the doctrinal *bona fides* of its chief ideologue, Abu 'l-Āla al-Mawdūdī, are deemed suspect and hence undesirable for Muslims in South Africa. The Egyptian Brotherhood is dismissed for its lack of religious propriety. Most Brotherhood activists adopt European attire and fashionable beards as opposed to the 'Islamic dress' of flowing robes and untrimmed beards the Tabligh require. The revolution in Iran in turn is clearly an anathema because of its Shī'a leadership.

Conclusion

In South Africa the Tabligh Jamāt has proved to be a very successful religious movement in terms of its own objectives and has made an impact on local Islam. From the viewpoint of its supporters it is the very fulfilment of the ideals of Islam in pursuing the goals of personal piety and the search for salvation. For its opponents it reduces Islam to mere rituals and adds to the intellectual stupor and social decline in Muslim social life. Some opponents go further and charge the Tabligh Jamāt with being a conspiracy against Islam, a charge that cannot be sustained by evidence.

The biggest beneficiary of the Tablīgh Jamāt has been the Deoband school, whose authority and influence has been enhanced. The fortunes of the Deoband school in South Africa will to a large extent be linked to that of the Tablīgh Jamāt.

It has been observed that 'conversion' to Tablīgh ideology paves the way to a personalized religion.²³ In seeking to satisfy an inner spiritual need, such converts may not always appreciate the role of 'community' in which political considerations play a vital role. In South Africa, Tablīgh activists displayed an apolitical attitude during the apartheid era. Some of its critics argue that this apolitical stand was in itself inspired by a political posture of defending the status quo. South Africa is gradually entering an era of full secular democracy with a strong market economy, in which the state will not be hostile to religion, but will treat it as a private concern. With this there remains a strong possibility that personalized religion will have a comfortable 'fit' with the new political order. It may just be that personalized religion à la Tablīgh Jamāt will coalesce with the rapid market-orientated liberal democracies of the twenty-first century.

²³ Richard Bulliet writing in the context of conversion to Islam in medieval times made two pertinent observations that may be relevant to the notion of 'conversion' as used in this article: first, conversion almost inevitably leads to the weakening of, or dissolution of, centralized government; and second, the conversion process in and of itself gives rise to a clash of interests between elements of the population that convert at different times (see Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 128–9).