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**The Delegation of Authority in the Tablighī Jamā'at**

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**The Delegation of Authority in the Tablighī Jamā'at**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

### **The Delegation of Authority in the Tablīghī Jamā'at**

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The Tablīghī Jamā'at is a Muslim organization for faith renewal that was founded by Maulana Muhammad Ilyas during the 1920s in North India. The Tablīghī Jamā'at, which was loosely associated with *Dāru'l-'Ulūm* Deoband, responded to the increasing importance of identity politics in twentieth century South Asia by focusing on strengthening the Muslim community through proselytism.

While the members of the Tablīghī Jamā'at have routinely claimed that their movement is strictly apolitical, some commentators have questioned the aptness of their characterization. Scholarship on the Tablīghī Jamā'at either confirms the apolitical nature of the organization or argues the opposite, claiming that its leaders have maintained an apolitical front that masks members' political activity both in South Asia and abroad. This conversation

has not advanced in recent years. This thesis asks why there have been such divergent attitudes towards the Tablīghī Jamā'at. In order to answer this question, it investigates the historical issues that shed light on the historiographical problem surrounding the organization. Through an analysis of the complex structure of authority in the organization, I argue that the Tablīghī Jamā'at is highly amenable to change and highly resistant to broad characterization.

## Table of Contents

A Note on Transliteration .....	vii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: The Origins of the Tablīghī Jamā'at.....	5
The History of Competitive Conversion in South Asia.....	5
The Tablīghī Jamā'at of Maulana Muhammad Ilyas .....	10
Chapter 2: Historiographical Review.....	19
The Tablīghī Jamā'at and Politics in the Nation-State.....	19
The Tablīghī Jamā'at and Transnational Militant <i>Jihād</i> .....	27
Summary .....	32
Chapter 3: Authority in the Tablīghī Jamā'at.....	33
Mystical Authority of the Elite Leadership .....	34
Jurisprudential Authority of the Elite Leadership.....	40
Lay Leadership.....	46
The Authority of Texts in Context: Elite Authors and Lay Interpreters.....	49
Power in the <i>Tablīgh</i> Program and the Authority of Lay Believers .....	51
The Proper Exercise of Authority .....	56
Summary .....	60
Conclusion: Authority and Politics in the Tablīghī Jamā'at .....	61
Glossary .....	64
List of Prominent Members of the Tablīghī Jamā'at and Other Reformers.....	66
Bibliography .....	67
Vita .....	72

## A Note on Transliteration

The following system, which is based on the Annual of Urdu Studies' standards, has been used for transliterating Urdu words. In some cases, un-voiced letters have been omitted in transliteration to better approximate Urdu pronunciation. For example, "سلسلہ" is transliterated as *silsila* because the final "ہ" is un-voiced. *Izāfat* is indicated by attaching "-e" to the first word of the compound. The "و" of conjunction has been transliterated with "-o-." Arabic articles are transliterated "al," as in *Dāru'l-'Ulūm*. Personal names and places have not been transliterated in the body of the text, although the names of prominent leaders appear fully transliterated in the Glossary. When quoting from transliterated texts, the author's original spelling has been reproduced.

### Vowels

*a ā e i ī o u ū ai au*

### Consonants

ب	<i>b</i>	د	<i>d</i>	ص	<i>ṣ</i>	گ	<i>g</i>
پ	<i>p</i>	ڈ	<i>ḍ</i>	ض		ل	<i>l</i>
ت	<i>t</i>	ذ	<i>z</i>	ط	<i>ṭ</i>	م	<i>m</i>
ٹ	<i>ṭ</i>	ر	<i>r</i>	ظ	<i>ẓ</i>	ن ، ن	<i>n, ñ</i>
ث	<i>ṯ</i>	ڑ	<i>r</i>	ع	‘	و	<i>v/w</i>
ج	<i>j</i>	ز	<i>z</i>	غ	<i>gh</i>	ہ	<i>h</i>
چ	<i>č</i>	ژ	<i>ž</i>	ف	<i>f</i>	ھ	<i>ḥ</i>
ح	<i>ḥ</i>	س	<i>s</i>	ق	<i>q</i>	ی	<i>y</i>
خ	<i>kh</i>	ش	<i>sh</i>	ك	<i>k</i>	‘	’

## Introduction

Maulana Muhammad Ilyas (d. 1944) founded the Tablīghī Jamā'at, a Muslim reformist organization, in 1927. He believed that the Indian Muslim community was experiencing social decline, and he sought to reinvigorate the community through religious reform. Ilyas was not alone in his concern over the state of the *ummat* (community), but rather he participated in the lively conversation about reform that was taking place in India during the first half of the twentieth century. Muslim leaders had been discussing the “decline” of the Muslim community in India since the disintegration of the centralized Mughal state in the eighteenth century, and Muslim religious and political leaders had heightened their attention to reform since the 1857 uprising, which marked the official end of Muslim rule in Delhi. The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries thus witnessed the proliferation of reformist organizations that aimed to create and empower a unified Muslim community in India.

The *'ulamā* spearheaded reforms of religious institutions and seminaries while attempting to spread knowledge of the basics of Islam among popular audiences. In the political sphere, Muslim leaders fought for the rights of the community in the context of emerging nationalism. The religious and political spheres were not mutually exclusive, and prominent members of the community often advocated combining spiritual and political approaches to reform.

Ilyas' reformist vision was influenced by his colleagues' work, but he responded to the challenges he perceived to be facing the Indian Muslim community in a unique way. The Tablīghī Jamā'at began as an organization for faith renewal that encouraged North Indian



Muslims to reinvigorate the spiritual life of their community through individual reform. Ilyas believed that firm personal commitments to Islam combined with an organized emphasis on calling others to the faith would save the Indian Muslim community. He did not, however, emphasize political organization in his program, and he deliberately advocated excluding politics from his movement for faith renewal. The Tablīghī Jamā'at spread throughout the subcontinent in the 1930s and 1940s and became a worldwide missionary movement in the 1950s. Although there are no records of Tablīghī Jamā'at membership, most observers estimate that millions of Muslims have participated in the movement worldwide, and the Jamā'at's annual meeting in Raiwind attracts between one million and two million people each year.

Interest in the Tablīghī Jamā'at has increased in response to the recognition of their widespread influence among Muslim communities worldwide, but the Tablīghī Jamā'at's avowed eschewal of politics has made it difficult for scholars to compare the organization to those that emerged within the same context. Observers of the Tablīghī Jamā'at have been deeply divided over the question of the organization's involvement in and influence on politics. Scholarship either confirms the apolitical nature of the organization or argues the opposite, claiming that the organization has maintained an apolitical front that masks their members' political activity both in South Asia and abroad. This conversation has not advanced in recent years.

This paper engages with the historiographical debate about the political character of the Tablīghī Jamā'at through an analysis of the delegation of authority in the organization. I argue that the Tablīghī Jamā'at's method of delegating authority is complex. The

organization's structure of authority relies on a careful balance of elite leadership, based on mystical and jurisprudential authority, and lay leadership. Furthermore, the individual believer is granted significant authority in religious matters to accept or reject the guidance of their superiors. Power comes from multiple sources including mystical charisma, jurisprudential education, experience in the organization, and even regular religious practice. The proper exercise of authority involves persuading others to join the movement, but compulsion and the use of delegated authority to influence other aspects of a believer's life, specifically his political life, are ideally absent from the movement.

The democratization of authority and the lack of a specific political vision for the organization sheds light on the dispute within the relevant secondary literature. The organization's eschewal of politics implicitly recognizes that members will have different stances on various issues. Members of the the organization do not need to adopt a party line nor are they forced to give up their political opinions, as long as they do not discuss them during their missionary work. Members are thus assumed to have multiple affiliations. I argue that the complex delegation of authority results in a situation in which informal influence can enter into the organization through myriad channels. Lay leaders, who are empowered through their work with the Tablīghī Jamā'at and who are not forced to abandon political affiliations even though they are encouraged to refrain from speaking about them during tours, can informally influence those who consider them their superiors. Although the religious and political spheres are ideally separate in Tablīghī Jamā'at ideology, it is very likely that they are not mutually exclusive in practice. The movement is thus highly amenable to change depending on the identity and affiliations of the people who assume authority in

local contexts.

Chapter One describes the origins of the Tablīghī Jamā'at and its early history. Chapter Two contains a detailed review of historical and ethnographic literature on the organization. I have restricted the review literature to works that focus on South Asia. Including all of the studies that have been done on the Tablīghī Jamā'at worldwide would be unmanageable. Chapter Three analyzes the delegation of authority in the Tablīghī Jamā'at, arguing that elite leaders, lay members, and individual believers share authority in the movement. The Tablīghī Jamā'at thus balances top-down and grassroots organizational approaches. This section also includes an analysis of how authority should be used in the movement. I conclude with a discussion of the political consequences of the organization's complex delegation of authority and return to the historiographical issues that prompted this study.

## Chapter 1: The Origins of the Tablighī Jamā'at

### *The History of Competitive Conversion in South Asia*

Pre-modern South Asia was characterized by significant fluidity between religious communities. Under Mughal rule, Islamic influence slowly altered the cultural landscape of the subcontinent through gradual acculturation and integration.<sup>1</sup> As a result, religious practice was often dictated by local more than communal affiliation. While reformers made efforts to strengthen the boundaries between religious communities beginning in the eighteenth century, conversions from one discrete religious system to another were rare.

Competitive conversion began in the context of colonial rule in the late nineteenth century. The British Raj began allowing missionaries to proselytize in India during the nineteenth century, and the consequences of the Christian challenge to indigenous religions continued to unfold in the twentieth century. Indigenous groups were resentful of Christian missionary activity and began countering their proselytization efforts through public debate, the publication of religious tracts in vernacular languages, and direct outreach campaigns. Furthermore, Indian religious leaders were increasingly preoccupied with strengthening their communities because, beginning with the establishment of separate electorates as provisioned by the Morley-Minto reforms of 1909,<sup>2</sup> representational politics were based on religious

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1 Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

2 Barbara Metcalf and Thomas Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 160-161.

affiliation. Granting legislative seats to religious communities based on their size intensified conflicts. Religious leaders saw the benefit of strengthening their census groups, and undertook efforts to impose strict boundaries between their communities. A race for numbers quickly ensued.

Both Hindus and Muslims embarked on aggressive missionary campaigns that were designed to strengthen the religious identities of people who shared the ritual practices of other confessional groups. For example, the Ārya Samāj, a reformist organization that was founded by Dayanand Saraswati in 1875 in the multi-confessional atmosphere of North India, developed a ritual for re-conversion called *shuddhī* (purification). Breaking with traditional high-caste Hinduism, which prohibited conversion, the Ārya Samāj began to actively seek converts. They targeted nominal Hindus and “*nau* Muslims,” or Muslims who, though partially Islamized, shared many ritual practices with their Hindu neighbors. By undergoing the Ārya Samāj conversion, Muslims and other non-Hindus were considered (theoretically, though not always in practice) to be free of the ritual impurity that resulted from their contact with other confessional groups.<sup>3</sup>

The Ārya Samāj missionaries met with significant resistance during the first decade of the twentieth century. Although the first incident of a Muslim man converting to Ārya Samāj Hinduism was reported in 1877, most individual Muslims and nominal Hindus were reluctant to undergo *shuddhī* for fear that their conversion would increase their social isolation because Hindus were slow to accept new converts into their fold and their former co-religionists would hesitate to include them in basic social relations such as inter-dining and inter-

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 101.

marriage. The Ārya Samājis addressed this problem by shifting their focus to mass conversion.<sup>4</sup> Mass conversion through *shuddhī* began in 1908 in Rajputana (present-day Rajasthan). Mass conversions garnered less attention in the 1910s and early 1920s during the brief period of Hindu-Muslim cooperation that accompanied the movements for Non-Cooperation and Khilafat. The outbreak of communal violence in Malabar in 1921, however, fueled a resurgence in religious conflict across the subcontinent. When reports circulated of Muslim workers rising up in violent revolt against their Hindu landlords, the Ārya Samāji *shuddhī* campaigns regained momentum. Hindu community leaders devoted increasing resources to mass conversion campaigns. The movement reached its height in the mid- and late-1920s.

The effect of *shuddhī* campaigns was profound. The '*ulamā*, Sufī leaders, and politicians were united in their concern over the success of Ārya Samāji conversion programs. Muslim leaders began to ask themselves why Muslims were abandoning their faith for Ārya Samāji Hindusim. Prominent reformers, particularly those active in the Jami'yat-e 'Ulamā-e Hind,<sup>5</sup> concluded that the "*taḥrīk-e irtidād*" (or the movement for apostasy) was gaining momentum in their community because of Hindu and British colonial attacks on Islam. Some were convinced that Hindus were conspiring with colonial rulers to marginalize Islam in

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4 Yoginder Sikand also points out that the Ārya Samāj shifted focus to *nau* Muslim groups that were thought to have once enjoyed high-caste status. As part of their outreach campaigns, they promised to restore them to their high status. "Interestingly," he writes, "this went directly against their own avowed principle of fiercely opposing caste as it was conventionally understood." Yoginder Sikand, "The Fitna of Irtidad: Muslim Missionary Response to the Shuddi of Arya Samaj in Early Twentieth Century India," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 17.1 (1997): 68.

5 The Jami'yat-e 'Ulamā-e Hind was founded in 1919 with the general aims of promoting the unity of the Indian '*ulamā*, bolstering the leadership of the '*ulamā* in all matters of religious and community life, strengthening contacts between Indian Muslims and the larger Islamic world, and promoting the peaceful coexistence of Muslims and non-Muslims in India. As noted below, the '*ulamā* of the Jami'yat were also concerned with strengthening the faith of their co-religionists. Gail Minault, *The Khilafat Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982): 81.

India. In their view, the British were spreading false rumors about the barbarity of Muslim rule over India in accordance with a “divide and rule” policy. Hindus were both convinced that Muslims had subjected Hindus to unjust rule in the past and fearful that low-caste groups would desert Hinduism for the more egalitarian vision of Islam, thus they propagated the *tahrīk-e irtidād*. Muslim reformers also chastised Muslim religious leaders for failing to address the pervasive ignorance of the basics of Islam among ordinary believers. Ignorance led to heterodox practices such as participating in Hindu ceremonies and idolizing legendary Sufi leaders who were thought to have miraculous powers. Contemporary *nau* Muslims were thus susceptible to Hindu missionary activity.

Many Muslim groups developed their own style of missionary work called *tablīgh*,<sup>6</sup> which was designed to bring Muslims back into the fold of true Islam while strengthening the boundaries between Muslims and their Hindu neighbors. *Tablīgh* (from the Arabic root *balagha*) means “communication.” When combined with *da'wat* (invitation) it takes on a meaning similar to the English “proselytism.” The following section reviews the efforts of *tablīgh* made by reformist 'ulamā in the Jami'yat-e 'Ulamā-e Hind and Sufi leaders, particularly Khvajah Hasan Nizami (d. 1955).

The Jami'yat-e 'Ulamā-e Hind began to dispatch missionaries to the areas affected by Ārya Samāji conversion campaigns. In 1923, the Jami'yat set up the “Department for the Propagation of Islam,” which organized patrol groups that would spread knowledge of Islam throughout the countryside. They also recruited leaders among local *nau* Muslim groups in order to more effectively spread their message to local inhabitants. Moreover, the Jami'yat

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6 Muhammad Khalid Masud, introduction to *Travelers in Faith: Studies of the Tablighi Jama'at as a Transnational Islamic Movement for Faith Renewal* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), xx.

paid particular attention to the economic conditions that encouraged Muslim apostasy. Attuned to the fact that *nau* Muslim groups were swayed by promises that their social status would rise following their conversion, Jami'yat missionaries emphasized that the ties of “*rotī-betī*” (or inter-dining and inter-marriage) would be strengthened with higher-status Muslim groups if they did not abandon their religion.

The Firangī Mahal of Lucknow, a *madrasa* that was previously known for strict devotion to scholarly activity, joined the movement for *tablīgh* as well. The leader of the Firangī Mahal, Maulana Abdul Bari (d. 1926), also a member of the Jami'yat-e 'Ulamā-e Hind, suggested that Sufī *jamā'ats* (groups or collectives) be used to counter *irtidād*. The Sufi orders had vast networks of associates throughout India and could mobilize their followers for *tablīgh* work.

The Chishti leader, Khvajah Hasan Nizami, made significant contributions to the *tablīgh* movement. Nizami, brought up in a family of *sajjada nashīns* (custodians) at Nizam-ud-Din Auliya's shrine in Delhi, spearheaded the movement to put print technologies to use for religious purposes. He reportedly printed and distributed thousands of pamphlets about the Ārya Samāji threat to Islam and undertook several journeys to proselytize in *nau* Muslim communities. His most popular contribution to the *tablīgh* movement was his *Dā'ī Islām* (*The Missionary of Islam*), published in three editions in 1923, in which he calls upon every Muslim to devote themselves to the spread of Islam in order to “save people from the sin of *shirk* [polytheism] and to spread true love and equality in the world.”<sup>7</sup> His work details the methods of proselytism appropriate for all classes of Muslims, including Sufīs, *'ulamā*,

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7 Quoted in Sikand, “The Fitna of Irtidad,” 75.



politicians, agriculturalists, artisans, traders, artists, poets, and other lower-class believers. His message, which received significant attention, was that all Muslims have the responsibility for supporting the vitality of Islam in the subcontinent.<sup>8</sup>

The Jami'yat-e 'Ulamā-e Hind, the *madrassa* at Firangī Mahal, and Khvajah Hasan Nizami made significant advances in increasing the emphasis on proselytism in twentieth century Islam. Missionary activity, which was rare in pre-modern Indian Islam, was vindicated in response to the conversion efforts of Hindu groups.

### *The Tablīghī Jamā'at of Maulana Muhammad Ilyas*

The Tablīghī Jamā'at, founded in 1927, was a late-comer on the scene of competitive conversion in North India. Unlike other Muslims groups engaged in *tablīgh*, however, the Tablīghī Jamā'at outlasted the specific socio-historical conditions in which it was born. The organization's founder, Maulana Muhammad Ilyas (d. 1944), was influenced by his co-religionists' efforts at *tablīgh*, but he responded to the atmosphere of competitive conversion in a distinct way.<sup>9</sup> He did not emphasize public debate or the widespread circulation of religious pamphlets. Instead, he initially focused exclusively on direct face-to-face communication between Muslims engaged in missionary activity and the communities they targeted.

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8 The negative attention that Nizami's work garnered provides perhaps the best evidence of its import. Sikand notes that the Ārya Samāj considered *Dā'ir Islām* a grave threat to its conversion efforts. The Samāj published a Hindi version of the book, entitled *Hindu par Shabkhūn aur Khatra ke Ghāṭe* (*The Hours of Murder and Danger for the Hindus*). Ten thousand copies were reportedly spread throughout the Hindu community to bolster support for the Samāj's *shuddhī* campaigns. Sikand, "The Fitna of Irtidad," 75.

9 Historians of the Tablīghī Jamā'at who write from within the tradition often overestimate the novelty of Ilyas' project. As the above section suggests, the notion of *tablīgh* enjoyed wide currency among the Muslim elite of North India. Ilyas did, however, make significant contributions to the methodology of Muslim proselytism and enjoyed unprecedented success in creating a lasting movement of faith renewal.

Ilyas was born in 1885 in Kandhala. His family was committed to the reformist vision of the Deobandi school of Islam,<sup>10</sup> and both Ilyas and his older brother, Muhammad Yahya (d. 1915), were students of Maulana Rashid Ahmad Gangohi (d. 1905), the co-founder of the *Dāru'l-'Ulūm* Deoband. Ilyas studied with Rashid Ahmad Gangodhi until his death. Soon after, Ilyas began his teaching career. He taught at *Mazāhiru'l-'Ulūm* Saharanpur for several years, and he began teaching at a mosque at Nizam-ud-Din in Delhi in 1917.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to working as a teacher, Ilyas decided to help strengthen the Muslim community in India. He turned his attention to the predominately poor Muslims of Mewat (referred to as “Meos”), whose religious heterodoxy was emblematic of what Muslims leaders associated with the degenerate Islam of *nau* Muslims nationwide. Mewat, located in Rajputana, had been the site of Ārya Samāji conversion efforts, and it was an ideal location for staging a widespread experiment in *tablīgh*. In his study of the history and practice of religion in Mewat, Shail Mayaram describes the region's rich socio-religious history that is difficult to characterize in terms of contemporary census categories. She writes,

Meo narratives reveal a fascinating and multi-faceted world. Aspects of heterodox Shaivism, Vaishnava Bhakti, and tantric belief and practice are entwined with those derived from Shia and Sunni Islam. Historically, this enabled a dialogue with other groups, a repudiation of upper caste (both Hindu and Muslim) hegemony, a prolonged engagement with temporal power as well as a distinctive community identity reproduced through cultural forms.<sup>12</sup>

Ilyas did not revel in the rich heterodoxy of Mewat. Rather, he likened the situation

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10 For a review of Deoband's prominent role in reformist movements during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries see Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

11 Anwarul Haq, *The Faith Movement of Maulana Muhammad Ilyas* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972), 72-83.

12 Shail Mayaram, *Resisting Regimes: Myth, Memory and the Shaping of a Muslim Identity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 39.

there to the pre-Islamic period in Arabia called the *jāhiliyyat* (age of ignorance). S.A.A. Nadwi describes Ilyas' feeling that the Meos, most of whom were small-scale cultivators, practiced "wrong customs and usages" and their "ignorance and superstitions were merely twigs and brushwood which had grown up on a virgin soil lying fallow for centuries."<sup>13</sup> Like his Deobandi colleagues, Ilyas particularly opposed many of the practices associated with popular Sufi Islam in Mewat, such as attributing miraculous deeds to Sufi leaders and worshipping at their shrines. Ilyas first tried to reform the religious practice of the Meos through education. He organized schools for Mewatis to teach them the basics of Islam, but he was dissatisfied with the meager results of those efforts. He recognized that the largely poor Mewatis had no time to enroll in school and had little interest in pursuing religious education. Haq attributes their reluctance to the considerable demands of their work. Mayaram, on the other hand, credits Ilyas' frustration to the ambivalent reception Meos gave to his reforms, arguing that they resented what they perceived as upper-class Muslim intrusions into their autonomous cultural life. Despite these setbacks, Ilyas continued pursuing his reformist agenda.

Witnessing the failure of *madrassa*-based education, Ilyas increasingly felt that the 'ulama had become alienated from the masses. He did not believe they could be relied upon to bring people back into the fold of Islam. He wrote, "unless there is practical example before the people, mere speeches from the *minbar* (pulpit) will not be enough. In the absence of a practical scheme or plan the masses will become accustomed to treat these speeches with disrespect and insolence."<sup>14</sup> In 1927, instead of creating a rigid institutional framework for

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13 Quoted in Haq, 69.

14 Quoted in Haq, 120.

reform, Ilyas began a movement for faith renewal that emphasized face-to-face communication.

Ilyas' message was simple. He promoted an adherence to the basic articles of Islamic faith, and created a program for the organization based on six principles, referred to within the tradition as “*che bāteñ*.”<sup>15</sup> The first of his six principles is the proper recitation of the *kalima* (“There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His prophet.”) Reciting the *kalima* brings about a change in orientation, turning the believer away from the worship of worldly objects to devotion to God. Reciting the *kalima* is a lifelong duty, and not a simple affirmation of faith that can be performed once and forgotten. It is supposed to be repeated endlessly, so that a person will find that “its spirit permeates all his being, his spirit is filled with the burden of its music and all his actions are performed with the total submission of his will to Allah.”<sup>16</sup> After learning the correct pronunciation and meaning of the *kalima*, a Muslim has to learn the details and rules of *namāz*, or daily prayer. The third principle is ‘*ilm-o-zikr*, or the knowledge and remembrance of God. Knowledge here means familiarity with the fundamental teachings of Islam and required ritual practices. The second concept, *zikr* is the ceaseless remembrance of God, aimed at creating an intimate consciousness of God that makes submitting to His will an “instinctive impulse.”<sup>17</sup> *’Ilm-o-zikr* is thus a concise statement of the unification of exoteric and esoteric practice. The fourth principle is maintaining respect for other Muslims, or

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15 As I have noted below, although most people refer to the Tablighī Jamā'at's basic principles as the “*che bāteñ*,” a seventh is sometimes included. The seventh principle, *tark-e lāya'ni* (or “rejection of the pointless”) is discussed in detail below.

16 Quoted in Barbara Metcalf, “Remaking Ourselves: Islamic Self-Fashioning in a Global Movement of Spiritual Renewal,” in *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, ed. Martin Marty and Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 708.

17 Muntaz Ahmad, “Islamic Fundamentalism in South Asia: The Jamaat-i-Islami and the Tablighi Jamaat of South Asia,” in *Fundamentalisms Observed*, ed. Martin Marty and Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 513.

*ikrām-e muslimīn*. The fifth is the purification of intent. In other words, the true Muslim acts out of love of God rather than self-interest.<sup>18</sup> The sixth principle is related to *tablīgh*. Members of the organization describe *tablīgh* as “enjoining the good and forbidding evil.”<sup>19</sup> Ilyas favored direct oral communication, and enjoined the members of the Jamā'at to convey the message of Islam in their own community and away from home. Members are taught to organize short tours and *čillas*<sup>20</sup> (forty days of *tablīgh* work), during which volunteers spread the message of Islam and call others to worship. In Ilyas' words,

The main advantage of this method is to encourage people to come out of a worldly and static environment in order to enter a new, purer and dynamic one where there is much to foster the growth of religious consciousness. Besides, travel and emigration involve hardship, sacrifice and self-abnegation for the sake of God's cause, and thus entitle one to divine succor.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to the *čhe bāteñ* described above, Ilyas emphasized *tark-e lāya'ni* (or “rejection of the pointless”), which is sometimes described as the seventh principle of his organization. In Muhammad Talib's words, *tark-e lāya'ni*, “caution[s] the believer that the six fundamentals in practice form a territory whose boundary is to be constantly defended from danger. 'Pointless' is any thought or deed which takes the believer away from the commands of Allah.”<sup>22</sup> At a basic level, Ilyas advises the believer to focus his attention on God as much as possible. But

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18 Ashiq Ilahi, “Six Fundamentals,” in *Teachings of Islam*, tr. Abdul Rashid Arshad (Des Plaines: Library of Islam, 2007), 9.

19 Ehteshaamul Hasan, “Muslim Degeneration and Its Only Remedy,” in *Teachings of Islam*, tr. Abdul Rashid Arshad (Des Plaines: Library of Islam Publishers, 2007), 23.

20 Appropriation of Sufi concepts is typical of the Tablīghī Jamā'at. *Čilla*, a Sufi term for prolonged, isolated spiritual retreat, is used in the Tablīghī Jamā'at to mean the forty-day missionary tours every *tablīghī* should perform at some time in his life. For two different characterizations of the Tablīghī Jamā'at's modern interpretation of Sufism see Anwarul Haq, *The Faith Movement of Maulana Muhammad Ilyas* and Dietrich Reetz, “Sufi Spirituality Fires Reformist Zeal: The Tablighi Jama'at in Today's India and Pakistan,” *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 135 (2006).

21 Ahmad, 514.

22 Mohammad Talib, “The Tablighis and the Making of Muslim Identity,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 17.1 (1997): 39.

*tark-e lāya'ni* can also be interpreted as a companion principle to *ikrām-e muslimīn* (“respect of Muslims”). In *Tablīghī Tahrīk ke Sāt Nambar*, the author<sup>23</sup> explains Ilyas' belief in this seventh principle.

It is advised to always keep your tongue under control. The truth is that the best way to be saved from all transgressions is to keep close guard of the tongue because excessive talking alone becomes a reason for sins such as lying, slandering, back-biting, ribaldry, and fighting or disorderly conduct.<sup>24</sup>

Ilyas was deeply concerned with promoting the unification of the Muslim community. He was acutely aware of the danger of sending layman to preach to others, and he feared that participants who engaged in “useless chatter” during missionary tours would sow discord. As the above-quoted text suggests, Ilyas believed that talking alone could lead to disharmony among Muslims. This makes sense in the context of the Jamā'at's beginnings, for allowing missionaries to talk too much could allow personal and political disagreements to fracture the emerging bonds between Muslims. Over the years, *tark-e lāya'ni* has not been consistently included in the basic principles,<sup>25</sup> but its spirit is pervasive in Tablīghī Jamā'at literature.<sup>26</sup>

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23 The author of this work is not named in the edition of the text that I have access to. There are indications within the text that it was written by one of Ilyas' close disciples. It is written in a highly colloquial style in accessible Urdu. It also has simple Urdu translations of Arabic *aḥādīs* (traditions of the Prophet). These features suggest that the work could be read aloud by a literate member of a gathering for the benefit of those who could not read. It is a valuable work because of its concise yet detailed account of the Tablīghī Jamā'at's basic principles.

24 *Tablīghī Tahrīk ke Sāt Nambar*, 129.

آپ نے ہمیشہ زبان کو قابو میں رکھنے کی ہدایت فرمائی ہے اور حقیقت بھی یہی ہے کہ تمام برائیوں سے بچنے کا بہترین ذریعہ زبان کی نگہداشت ہے۔ کیونکہ زیادہ بولنا ہی بہت سے گناہوں کا باعث بنتا ہے۔ جیسے جھوٹ، چغلی، غیبت، گالم گلوچ، جھگڑا، فساد۔

25 *Tark-e lāya'ni* is sometimes described in different terms. Yusuf sometimes refers to the “*che bāteñ*,” of *tablīgh*, but includes a seventh principle in his discussion. See Aziz ul-Rahman Bijnauri, *Tazkira-ye Amīr-e Tablīgh* (Karachi: Zam Zam Publishers, 2001), 67.

26 A speech that Ilyas' son, Muhammad Yusuf, made in Raiwind three days before his death in 1965 is exemplary. He said, “Save yourself from the kind of talk that will give Satan a chance to introduce schisms. When there are three people sitting together, remember that the fourth person is God, [...] and He is listening and watching whether we are saying something that will create the *ummat* or break it apart, whether we are

Ilyas' sympathetic biographers and those writing from within his tradition describe a near miraculous transformation within the Meo community following the organization of Ilyas' Jamā'at. The following excerpt from Nadwi's *Life and Mission of Maulana Mohammad Ilyas* is exemplary. The romanticized vision of spartan *tablīgh* workers who recreated the golden age of Islam to remake the contemporary world is common in Tablīghī Jamā'at literature.

The tremendous change that came over Mewat as a result of the untiring efforts of *tablīgh* workers who moved from village to village, carrying their luggage on their backs, is, perhaps, without a parallel in recent times. Within a few years, the whole region emerged from darkness into light. [...] The ideal method of the preaching and propagation of faith, indeed, was what was witnessed during the earliest phase of Islam when Muslim crusaders brought their own arms and other provisions and fought solely out of love for martyrdom and eagerness to earn the countenance of the Lord. [...] In the *tablīgh* endeavor of Mewat, one could see a glimpse of those marvelous times.<sup>27</sup>

Shail Mayaram draws a different conclusion regarding the efficacy of the Tablīghī Jamā'at's work in her historical and ethnographic study of the Mewat. She notes that Ilyas' own letters cast doubt on the vision of the Tablīghī Jamā'at's transformational impact in Mewat.<sup>28</sup> A review of Ilyas' letters confirms his frustration at the slow pace of reform until his death in

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engaging in backbiting and slander, whether we are conspiring against someone. This *ummat* was made from the blood and arrows of the Prophet; now our common/unimportant talk is breaking it apart.” Bijnauri, 251.

ان باتوں سے بچیں جن سے شیطان کو پھوٹ ڈالنے کا موقع ملے، جب بھی تین فرد بیتھیں تو اس کا خیال رکھیں کہ چوتھا ہمارے ساتھ اللہ ہے، [...] اور ہماری ہر بات سن رہا ہے اور دیکھ رہا ہے کہ ہم امت بنانے کی بات کر رہے ہیں یا امت پن توڑنے کی، ہم کسی کی غیبت اور چغل خوری تو نہیں کر رہیں ہیں، کسی کی خلاف سازش تو نہیں کر رہیں ہیں۔ یہ امت حضور (صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم) کے خون اور فاقوں سے بنی تھی، اب ہم اپنی معمولی معمولی باتوں پر امت کو توڑ رہیں ہیں۔

27 Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, *Life and Mission of Maulana Mohammad Ilyas*, tr. Mohammad Asif Kidwai (Lucknow: Academy of Islamic Research and Publications, 1983), 51.

28 Mayaram, *Resisting Regimes*, 264.

1944. In one letter, Ilyas describes a recent effort to recruit *tablīgh* workers in Mewat. He writes:

Along with the expression of gratitude to the Lord, we should, also, feel ashamed that after 15 years of striving and observing the blessedness of *tablīgh* with our own eyes, only 80 persons, out of millions of Muslims, could set out of their homes, and they, too, were so eager to return that it took a lot of effort to hold them back.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, he writes, “the tide of mischief and irreligiousness is running faster than an express train while the *tablīgh* movement which, alone, can turn darkness into light is advancing very slowly, at the pace of an ant.”<sup>30</sup>

While Ilyas surely had a significant number of loyal followers and participants in *tablīgh*, mass participation in the movement began only after Ilyas' death. Mayaram argues that the *Tablīghī Jamā'at* enjoyed great success in the years immediately preceding the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan and in the aftermath of its upheaval. Refugee camps became a particularly fruitful locus of *tablīgh* missions. Muhammad Yusuf (d. 1965), Ilyas' son and successor, gained the approval of the governments of India and Pakistan by avoiding politically charged issues in the new states. He also began to actively advocate the expansion of the movement for *tablīgh* beyond South Asia. Under his leadership, the *Tablīghī Jamā'at* spread across the globe. Following Yusuf's death, Inamu'l-Hasan (d. 1995), Ilyas' grand-nephew through his sister's son, assumed leadership of the organization.<sup>31</sup> He continued to organize the movement at an international level and, like Yusuf, eschewed politically charged

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29 Nadwi, 145.

30 Nadwi, 144.

31 According to Masud, the transition was not as smooth as the sources from within the tradition assert. Some of the organization's elders preferred Maulana Harun, Yusuf's son, but Inamu'l-Hasan prevailed with the help of Maulana Zakariyya, Yahya's son and highly respected *'ālim*. Muhammad Khalid Masud, “Growth and Development of the *Tablighi Jama'at*,” in *Travelers in Faith: Studies of the Tablighi Jama'at as a Transnational Islamic Movement for Faith Renewal* (Leiden: Brill, 2000) 18.



issues. Since Inamu'l-Hasan's death, a *shura* (council) of leaders has overseen the organization's activities. Muhammad Sa'd (Muhammad Yusuf's son), Zubayru'l Hasan (Inamu'l-Hasan's son) share present-day leadership of the Tablīghī Jamā'at, although by most accounts, Muhammad Sa'd is emerging as the more charismatic leader.<sup>32</sup> Throughout the years, elite leadership of the movement has remained in Ilyas' family, but the popularity of the movement has resulted in loose central “control” of the global movement. Although there are no records of Tablīghī Jamā'at membership, most observers estimate that millions of Muslims have participated in *tablīgh* tours worldwide, and the Jamā'at's meeting in Raiwind alone attracts between one million and two million people each year.<sup>33</sup>

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32 Reetz, 36-37.

33 Ahmad, 458.

## Chapter 2: Historiographical Review

Members of the Tablīghī Jamā'at often claim that the movement is strictly apolitical. Ilyas encouraged members of his organization to refrain from politics and leave their potentially divisive political views out of their *tablīgh* work.<sup>34</sup> Many scholars have confirmed their self-assessment while others have questioned whether the movement can accurately be described as “apolitical.” The following sections review the secondary literature on the Tablīghī Jamā'at, parsing out the discussion of the Tablīghī Jamā'at's “politics” by focusing first on representational politics based on the nation-state and, second, contemporary transnational politics.

### *The Tablīghī Jamā'at and Politics in the Nation-State*

Barbara Metcalf has described the movement as an “a-political, quietist movement of internal grassroots missionary renewal.”<sup>35</sup> In “Living Hadith in the Tablighi Jama'at,” she characterizes the *tablīghis* as indifferent to both representational politics based on the nation-state and other large-scale social and political activities.<sup>36</sup> She reviews the main body of Tablīghī Jamā'at literature and concludes that they focused on the spiritual reformation of individuals while explicitly withdrawing from the emerging public arena of elections and parties. They did not oppose politics, but rather ignored them, and “by not entering into

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34 Haq, 170-171.

35 Barbara Metcalf, “‘Traditionalist’ Islamic Activism: Deoband, Tablighis, and Talibs,” in *Understanding September 11*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Paul Price and Ashley Timmer (New York: The New Press, 2002), 2.

36 Barbara Metcalf, “Living Hadith in the Tablīghī Jamā'at,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 52. 3 (1993): 603.

conversation, in significant ways did not participate in the creation of a shared discursive field.”<sup>37</sup> In addition to focusing on the individual, the Tablīghī Jamā'at upset the narrative of nationalism by routinely ignoring borders of community, state, and nation during their tours. Language and nationality did not divide members of the Tablīghī Jamā'at; rather, the community extended beyond these traditional borders. She writes that the *tablīghis* offered a “counternarrative” to nationalism because they suggested an identity that was “spatially located nowhere.”<sup>38</sup> In Metcalf's view, the combined emphasis on individual spiritual awakening and the movement of individuals beyond traditional community borders not only separated the Tablīghī Jamā'at from the “emerging historical narrative of the nationalist movement but has continued to ignore the versions of that narrative told in the new nation states.”<sup>39</sup>

Mumtaz Ahmad writes that the Tablīghī Jamā'at “detests politics” and does not involve itself in divisive socio-political issues in part because *tablīgh* can only be successful if it is free of, in one leader's words, “erroneous politicking.”<sup>40</sup> Ahmad also argues that Tablīghī Jamā'at leaders believe that true religious faith is incompatible with politics, which requires deceit and double-dealing. Furthermore, Ahmad notes that *tablīghis* believe that establishing an Islamic polity based on coercive state tactics would have no religious value because it would not be based on the voluntary piety of individual believers.<sup>41</sup>

Peter Van der Veer confirms Ahmad's characterization of the Tablīghī Jamā'at's

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37 Metcalf, “Living Hadith,” 593.

38 Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Contestations: Essays on Muslims in India and Pakistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 186.

39 Metcalf, “Living Hadith,” 594.

40 Ahmad, 519.

41 Ahmad, 519.

repudiation of state politics in his ethnography of worship at a Sufi shrine in Surat, a city in Southern Gujarat. His study investigates the debate within Surat's Muslim community about the propriety of worshipping at a popular Sufi shrine. The Tablīghī Jamā'at, which opposes some aspects of the ritual worship as “un-Islamic” *bid'at* (innovation), is at odds with Muslims who insist that their prayer is entirely legitimate. Despite this dispute, however, Van der Veer insists that the Tablīghī Jamā'at explicitly eschews framing their disapproval in communal terms. In other words, they do not focus on the fact that significant numbers of Hindus join the worship at the shrine nor do they emphasize that the *bid'at* that they condemn is due to syncretic influences. He writes that the debate is not about ritual boundaries between a Muslim minority and a Hindu majority. In refusing to reiterate the theme of degenerate “Hindu influence” on Islamic ritual in Surat, the Tablīghī Jamā'at maintains an apolitical and non-confrontational stance.<sup>42</sup>

Muhammad Talib offers another ethnographic study on the Tablīghī Jamā'at in post-independence India in which he argues that the organization offers an alternative process of identity formation for Indian Muslims that is not readily mobilized for the purposes of electoral politics. He compares *tablīghī* identity formation to that exemplified in the 1966 Nine-Point Manifesto of the Muslim Majlis-e Mashvarat (a federation of Indian Muslim organizations), which expresses concern that the Muslim minority community is in danger because of its marginalization in state and national politics. Talib argues that the Manifesto constructs Muslim identity by objectifying “certain endangered yet chosen emblems in society – Aligarh Muslim University, Urdu, Muslim Personal Law, *et cetera*. Constituted of social

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42 Peter Van der Veer, “Playing or Praying: A Saint's Day in Surat,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 51.3 (1992): 562.

and cultural simulacra, the ensemble of objectified emblems denotes Muslim community.<sup>43</sup> The Manifesto laments the lack of state support for these emblems of Muslim identity to argue that the community is being marginalized and Muslims are consequently falling behind socially and economically. Casting Muslim identity in such terms creates a religious community that is readily mobilized during elections, and Muslims are encouraged to elect candidates that would further the interests of their community. Talib argues that, in contrast, the *tablighis* do not base their religious identity on such frequently mobilized political emblems and may even describe the disputes over them as distractions. He describes several encounters with *tablighis* to illustrate his point. For example, Talib reports that, in response to the arguments over the Supreme Court's judgment on the Shah Bano case,<sup>44</sup> his informant argued that Personal Law was “of little value in comparison to the personal conduct of an individual who follows the command of *Allah Ta'ala* and adopts Muhammad's way of life. He added, 'You may scribble any injunction in the book of law, so what? It makes little difference to the everyday conduct of a Muslim.’<sup>45</sup> Responding to the demolition of the Babri Masjid,<sup>46</sup> another *tablighi* said, “Let them take away the mosque, but can anyone rob you of your *iman* (faith) which makes you a *namazi* (regular performer of the prayers at the

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43 Talib, 32.

44 Shah Bano was an Indian woman of 62 who was divorced by her husband in 1978 and denied alimony. She sued her ex-husband for maintenance. Outspoken Muslim critics questioned the legitimacy of her case being decided in secular courts, and accused the Hindu-majority state of intervening in Muslim Personal Law and encroaching on their cultural autonomy. The case reached the Supreme Court and spurred a national controversy in India about the legitimacy of having different civil codes for different religions. Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Shah Bano Controversy* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1987).

45 Talib, 33.

46 The Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, which the Hindu nationalist Sangh Parivar claimed had been built on the Hindu god Ram's birthplace, became a symbol to many Hindus of Muslim oppression of Hindu culture in the highly charged religious atmosphere of the 1980s. Rioters, incited by leaders associated with the Sangh Parivar, destroyed the mosque in 1992. Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 175-188.

mosque)? What is awful is to have mosques without *namazis*.”<sup>47</sup> Thus instead of focusing on the issues that dominate identity politics for many Indian Muslims, *tablīghis* often focus on the spiritual life of the individual, which should be based on the example of the Prophet of Islam, and aims to strengthen the relationship between the believer and God. State-based politics hold little promise for *tablīghis*, whose “absolute trust in Allah's succor equips [him] to negotiate the dark and deceptive alleyways of the world safely.”<sup>48</sup> Like Metcalf, Talib believes that the Tablīghī Jamā'at's activities are based on the individual, family, and neighborhood, and *tablīghī* identity is not readily mobilized in electoral politics.

It is important to point out that the authors mentioned above do not explicitly deny that the Tablīghī Jamā'at's activities have the potential to influence state-based representational politics. While Van der Veer and Talib seem to argue that the Tablīghī Jamā'at's activities are largely irrelevant to nationalist politics in the Indian context, Metcalf and Ahmad pay close attention to the possibility that the Tablīghī Jamā'at's reformist agenda can influence the affairs of the nation-state. Metcalf notes that the Tablīghī Jamā'at in India has made Muslims into a more visibly distinct group, a development that has had varied political implications. On one hand, she views the Tablīghī Jamā'at as playing a moderating role in politics by participating in and accepting ruling regimes.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, the organization's “counternarrative” to nationalism implicitly delegitimizes the idea that the nation forms a natural and sacrosanct part of a citizen's identity.<sup>50</sup> In another article, Metcalf writes, “Tablighi Jama'at is particularly striking with respect to its accommodationist strategy since it

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47 Talib, 33.

48 Talib, 47.

49 Metcalf, “Traditionalist' Islamic Activism,” 15.

50 Metcalf, *Islamic Contestations*, 185.

implicitly fosters the privatization of religion associated with the modern liberal state.”<sup>51</sup> Ahmad provides a detailed analysis of the political consequences of the Tablīghī Jamā'at's “apolitical” stance in Pakistan. For example, Ayub Khan's regime sought to punish government employees who were known to be sympathetic to the Jamā'at-e Islāmi, a reformist organization founded by Maulana Maududi (d. 1979) whose mission includes instituting a regime in Pakistan based on Islamic principles. In contrast, the state patronized the Tablīghī Jamā'at because it was viewed as a moderating force in the nation's religious life. Similarly, while state forces disrupted the Jamā'at-e Islāmi's public meetings, the government provided special trains from major cities in Pakistan to accommodate the Tablīghī Jamā'at's annual meeting in Raiwind. Ahmad quotes a former official of the Ayub Khan government who describes the president's orders to support the activities of the Tablīghī Jamā'at in order to “neutralize” the influence of the Jamā'at-e Islāmi and other politically activist *'ulamā* groups.<sup>52</sup> He also notes Muhammad Zakariyya's *Fitna-ye Maudūdīyat*, which condemns Maududi's vision for the Jamā'at-e Islāmi. His related *fatwa* against the organization has been a major source of hostility between the groups with significant political implications.<sup>53</sup> In brief, these scholars assert that, while the Tablīghī Jamā'at distances itself from state-based politics, its activities are not necessarily devoid of political implications.

On the other hand, some scholars have questioned whether the Tablīghī Jamā'at is truly disinterested in state-based politics. While their characterization of the political interest of the Tablīghī Jamā'at differs, the scholarship reviewed below shares some degree of opposition to

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51 Metcalf, “Traditionalist' Islamic Activism,” 17.

52 Ahmad, 518.

53 Ahmad, 522.

the characterization of the Tablīghī Jamā'at as sincerely “apolitical.”

Shail Mayaram writes that his position is in “explicit contrast to that of Metcalf, Mumtaz Ahmed, and Van der Veer, all of whom emphasize the non-political or apolitical nature” of the Tablīghī Jamā'at. Based on ethnographic work on the Tablīghī Jamā'at in Mewat, Mayaram's position is also in direct conversation with Talib's work. Mayaram argues that the Tablīghī Jamā'at has helped rigidify boundaries between communities, stoking the flames of Hindu-Muslim violence. As a counter-point to Hindu organizations like the Vishwa Hindū Parishād, which seeks to purify Hinduism of “foreign” (i.e. Islamic) influences in Mewat, the Tablīghī Jamā'at emphasizes a universal, fundamentalist vision of Islam that rejects South Asian syncretism as *bid'at*. Unlike Van der Veer, who insists that *tablīghis* in Surat avoid placing the blame for such innovation on Hindu influences, Mayaram argues that the Tablīghī Jamā'at has contributed to a growing tension between religious communities in Mewat. She writes that the fourth principle of *tablīgh*, *ikrām-e muslimīn*, means that according respect to non-Muslims is a low priority.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, *kāfir* (infidel) is enjoying growing currency as a term for non-Muslims. This linguistic shift correlates to an increase in communal tension. Mayaram writes that, although proselytism should be grounded in persuasion, “in fact, threats of retribution/promise of heaven are used by tablīgh volunteers.”<sup>55</sup> In explicit contrast to Talib, Mayaram also argues that Urdu, a politically salient marker of Muslim identity, is actively promoted in *tablīgh* circles to counter non-Muslim influence. In sum, he says *tablīghis* emphasize “rule-governed behavior” that rigidifies communal

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54 Mayaram, *Resisting Regimes*, 242.

55 Mayaram, *Resisting Regimes*, 245.



boundaries by prohibiting the influence of local custom.<sup>56</sup> As a result, communal violence in Mewat, which was largely absent in the region before the twentieth century, has seen a disturbing rise in recent decades.

Yoginder Sikand provides a different analysis of the political vision of Ilyas' movement in *The Origins and Development of the Tablighi Jama'at*. He argues that avoiding potentially divisive issues while proselytizing is not the same as being disinterested in politics. Ilyas believed that Muslims had lost power and were being politically marginalized in India and elsewhere because they had lost true faith. By working to bring Muslims back to the basics of Islam and reinforcing their faith in God, Ilyas hoped that God would again bless Muslims with political power. Sikand argues that Ilyas agreed with other politically-minded reformers that the ultimate goal was to reinstate a society based on the pristine Islam practiced in the Prophet Mohammad's time. The Tablighi Jamā'at intended to complement the efforts of more politically-oriented Islamist groups, not oppose them. Sikand attributes the differences between these organizations to a "fine division of labor – the TJ focusing on the spiritual realm of the individual, with other groups spearheading Islamisation efforts in the this-worldly realm, including the political sphere."<sup>57</sup> Sikand also suggests that the Tablighi Jamā'at's detachment from politics was a practical policy rather than a matter of faith. He describes a conversation between Ilyas and a group of Indian Muslim politicians as recorded by Manzur Nu'mani (d. 1977), one of his close disciples. During this conversation, Ilyas claimed that he was indebted to Muslim politicians for two reasons. First, he was indebted to

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56 Mayaram, *Resisting Regimes*, 243.

57 Yoginder Sikand, *The Origins and Development of the Tablighi Jama'at (1920-2000)* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2002), 266.

them because they were ““engaged in trying to improve the worldly conditions of Muslims,”” and secondly, they had ““diverted the attention of the British (colonial) authorities towards them,”” by their involvement in politics, leaving the Tablīghī Jamā'at free to proselytize throughout India.<sup>58</sup> The Tablīghī Jamā'at helped create a strong Muslim communal identity in India by emphasizing the need to excise syncretic customs that bound Muslims to Hindus. Furthermore, their insistence on *tablīgh* missions, which removed Muslims from their immediate surroundings, created strong intra-communal bonds by breaking inter-communal ones. Thus the goal of the Tablīghī Jamā'at was the same as that of other politically-minded Islamist groups who wanted to create an Islamic society based on the principles of *shari'at*. Their methods for creating such a society differed, but the political vision was the same.

Jan Ali echoes this argument in “Islamic Revivalism: The Case of the Tablighi Jama'at.” He compares Ilyas’ conception of the Tablīghī Jamā'at’s mission to that of the founder of the Jamā'at-e Islāmi, Maulana Maududi. Both shared the goal of creating an undivided Muslim *ummat* (community), whose political, economic, and social life would be guided by *shari'at*. Ali equates Maududi’s hope that the *ummat* would return to “pristine Islam” with Ilyas’ practical program of building a unified Muslim community through the work of *tablīgh*. He argues, along with Sikand, that both reformers shared the goal of returning to pristine Islam, but their methods were different.<sup>59</sup>

### *The Tablīghī Jamā'at and Transnational Militant Jihād*

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58 Sikand, *Origins and Development*, 266.

59 Jan Ali, “Islamic Revivalism: The Case of the Tablighi Jama'at,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 23.1 (2003): 170-180.

Following the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001, there has been heightened scholarly and popular attention on transnational Muslim movements. In recent years, scholarship has addressed the role of militancy in the Tablīghī Jamā'at. As in the case of scholarship on the organization's role in nation-state politics, commentators have been deeply divided on the issue of whether the Tablīghī Jamā'at participates transnational militancy.

Marc Gaborieau reviews the influence of Sufism on the Tablīghī Jamā'at in order to understand the organization's relationship with political affairs. He argues that the Tablīghī Jamā'at is not a “Sufi” organization because, although it recognizes leadership on the basis of charisma and teaches its members some Sufi practices, it lacks two characteristics of “medieval” Sufism. First, he writes that a Sufi order is an “‘initiatic’ institution, into which people are recruited and trained individually,” and the Tablīghī Jamā'at does not regularly require that their members undergo a mystical initiation.<sup>60</sup> Second, the Tablīghī Jamā'at emphasizes “external” rather than “internal” practice. Ecstatic experience is sidelined in the pursuit of formal adherence to “totalitarian” behavioral guidelines. He argues that, “all this resembles little the internalized Sufi path, and differs little from the Wahhabi emphasis on following literally the prescriptions of *hadith!*”<sup>61</sup> Gaborieau asserts that the Tablīghī Jamā'at and their “apologists” have cultivated an image of Sufistic piety because it grants the organization legitimacy. Sufism lends a good reputation to the movement because it is seen as promoting inter-religious peace. The organization's apolitical, mystical image masks its core

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60 Marc Gaborieau, “What is Left of Sufism in Tablighi Jama'at,” *Archives des Sciences Sociales des Religions* 135 (2006): 64.

61 Gaborieau, 65.

militant fundamentalism. Gaborieau views the Deobandi school of Islam as a progenitor of Muslim fundamentalism that embraces militant *jihād*. He cites Maududi's work, *Al Jihād fil Islām*, which was first published in installments in a Deobandi journal in 1927 to argue that Deobandis are militant. He writes, “the [tablīgh] movement was born out of conflict; and the defense of the community and of its religious boundaries is central in its motivations, as it is central in the whole Deobandi tradition. Thus, born in a time of Islamic reassertion and deepening religious conflict, Tablīghī Jamā'at is a militant fundamentalist movement.”<sup>62</sup>

The Tablīghī Jamā'at has been the subject of significant negative attention in the past several years due to the alleged involvement of several of its affiliates in militant activity in Afghanistan. Some American observers and policy-makers have begun to view the organization as an “antechamber of fundamentalism.”<sup>63</sup>

An article by Alex Alexiev, former analyst for the Rand Corporation and researcher at the Hudson Institute, entitled “Tablighi Jamaat: Jihad's Stealthy Legions” and published in the *Middle East Quarterly*, exemplifies this position. To the very legitimate objection of including a non-peer-reviewed article published by the Middle East Forum, a think tank criticized for its consistently hawkish positions on international affairs,<sup>64</sup> in the present

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62 Gaborieau, 61.

63 Alex Alexiev, “Tablighi Jamaat: Jihad's Stealthy Legions,” *Middle East Quarterly* 12.1 (2005): 5.

64 The Middle East Forum is an American think tank that professes the following mission. “The Middle East Forum promotes American interests in the Middle East and protects the Constitutional order from Middle Eastern threats. The Forum sees the region — with its profusion of dictatorships, radical ideologies, existential conflicts, exportation of extremism, border disagreements, political violence, and weapons of mass destruction — as a major source of problems for the United States. Accordingly, it urges active measures to protect Americans and their allies. U.S. interests in the Middle East include fighting radical Islam; working for Palestinian acceptance of Israel; robustly asserting U.S. interests vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia; and developing strategies to deal with Iraq and contain Iran. Domestically, the Forum combats lawful Islamism; protects the freedom of public speech of anti-Islamist authors, activists, and publishers; and works to improve Middle East studies in North America.” “About the Middle East Forum,” Middle East Forum, [www.meforum.org/about.php](http://www.meforum.org/about.php).

historiographical review of the *Tablīghī Jamā'at*, I would reply that publications like the *Middle East Quarterly* play an important role in the way academia meets politics and governance in the contemporary world. The *Middle East Quarterly*, which is not a peer-reviewed journal, is catalogued with other scholarly publications in many libraries and digital databases. This points to the likelihood that the line between peer-reviewed scholarship and that produced by think tanks is increasingly blurred. Furthermore, think tank publications have recently had a more significant impact on governmental policy than most peer-reviewed scholarship.<sup>65</sup> As this paper is as much about understanding the myriad ways the *Tablīghī Jamā'at* has been characterized in secondary literature as it is about understanding the organization itself, I consider this aspect of the debate to be relevant.

Alexiev argues that the *Tablīghī Jamā'at* is a “wolf in sheep's clothing,” and all *tablīghis* “preach a creed that is hardly distinguishable from the radical Wahhabi-Salafi jihadist ideology that so many terrorists share.”<sup>66</sup> He alleges that the organization maintains strict secrecy through a structure of authority that has a “dynastic flavor.”<sup>67</sup> The organization's finances are shrouded in secrecy as are their ties to other terrorist organizations. Furthermore, the *Tablīghī Jamā'at*'s organizational structure can be easily adopted to recruiting for terrorist missions and militant jihad. Their apolitical reputation has also made intelligence agencies overlook their activities in the U.S. and Europe. In conclusion, he says, “contrary to their benign treatment by scholars and academics, *Tablighi Jamaat* has more to do with political

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65 Andrew Rich, *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

66 Alexiev, 4.

67 Alexiev, 4.

sedition than with religion.”<sup>68</sup>

This kind of literature on the Tablighī Jamā'at has encouraged intelligence officials to treat the organization with suspicion. In one highly publicized case, a Turkish citizen and Tablighī Jamā'at affiliate was arrested following a trip to Pakistan and was held in extrajudicial detention in the U.S. Military at Guantamano Bay Naval Base, Cuba. When his case came up for review, Barbara Metcalf, Qamar al-Huda, and Jamal Elias were asked to contribute expert opinions on the Tablighī Jamā'at and terrorism. In response, all three authors emphasized the unlikelihood of the Tablighī Jamā'at participating in or aiding in the recruitment of militants. Metcalf writes, “There is no 'organization' as such, in the sense of paid staff or formal hierarchy. There is no membership. Any Muslim, man or woman, who seeks to be a better Muslim can participate as a way of honing one's own faith through encouraging others to participate. Thus to speak of the Jama'at as a 'front for' or 'allied with' another organization [such as Al-Qaeda or the Taliban] does not make sense.”<sup>69</sup> Jamal Elias, after noting that *tablighis* believe that engaging in missionary work discharges the obligation of militant *jihād*, writes,

there is some circumstantial evidence to suggest that extremist groups have been trying to infiltrate the Tablighi Jama'at's annual gathering at Raiwind either to make trouble or else to win converts from the million-strong crowd that congregates there. However, it is important to note that these extremist groups are not condoned by the structure, leadership or teachings of the Tablighi Jama'at, that they would be using a very large crowd as cover as opposed to infiltrating the rank and file of the movement, and that they would be there to win converts AWAY from the tablighis, not to share with them in

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68 Alexiev, 9.

69 Barbara Metcalf, “Letter to Baher Azmy,” in *Unclassified Summary of Evidence for Administrative Review Board in the Case of Karnaz, Murat*, (Office for the Administrative Review of the Detention of Enemy Combatants, Department of Defense, 2005), 20095.

any ideological or political sense.<sup>70</sup>

### *Summary*

This historiographical review reveals a significant difference in observers' perceptions of the Tablīghī Jamā'at. Is the Tablīghī Jamā'at a grassroots, apolitical organization for faith renewal that “disdains politics?” Or is the Tablīghī Jamā'at a more organized party that encourages its members to maintain an apolitical front while secretly aligning with movements that have clearer political agendas? Are they funneling recruits into terrorism? Are they a moderating force in politics or do they promote extremism? A review of the secondary literature reveals almost as many opinions on these issues as there are commentators.

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70 Jamal Elias, “Letter to Baher Azmy,” in *Unclassified Summary of Evidence for Administrative Review Board in the Case of Karnaz, Murat*, (Office for the Administrative Review of the Detention of Enemy Combatants, Department of Defense, 2005), 20103.

### **Chapter 3: Authority in the Tablīghī Jamā'at**

The debate within the historical and ethnographic literature on the Tablīghī Jamā'at and politics can be seen as a dispute over the nature of authority in the organization. The preceding review of literature reveals that the differences of opinion regarding the organization are implicitly related to disagreements about its structures of authority. Characterizations of the organization as “rigid,” “rule-governed,” and even “totalitarian” imply a structure of authority that leaves little leeway for diversity within the membership. Such descriptions also imply an emphasis on top-down leadership in a system in which the elite determine rules for behavior and impose those rules throughout the ranks. This conception of the organization is in direct contrast with the “grassroots” character of the movement that other commentators describe. A more detailed investigation into the delegation of authority in the Tablīghī Jamā'at will help shed light on the historiographical debate.

The following chapter investigates the sources of authority in the Tablīghī Jamā'at. The first section discusses elite and lay leadership in the Tablīghī Jamā'at. It comprises an analysis of, first, how authority is established and sustained and, second, what the Tablīghī Jamā'at considers proper exercise of that authority. Drawing on primary and secondary source material, I argue that the Tablīghī Jamā'at recognizes mystical and jurisprudential authority among the elite leadership and defends elite authority with recourse to mystical and jurisprudential discursive traditions. The Tablīghī Jamā'at also recognizes lay leadership in



day-to-day operations of the organization. Elite and lay authority intersect through the circulation of Tablīghī Jamā'at literature, and authority is continually re-articulated with their distribution. Furthermore, the program of *tablīgh* is a source of power in itself, and the individual believer is granted significant authority by adhering to it. In light of the multiple sources of authority recognized by Tablīghī Jamā'at ideology, I argue that the structure of authority in the organization is complex, fluid, and highly amenable to change. The last section of this chapter argues that the ideal exercise of authority is gently persuading others to join the movement. Coercion and using delegated authority to influence other aspects of another's life, particularly his political life, are strongly discouraged.

#### *Mystical Authority of the Elite Leadership*

The Tablīghī Jamā'at's orientation to religion combines esoteric mysticism and strict attention to exoteric practice. An investigation of the structure of leadership in the Tablīghī Jamā'at reveals that authority is likewise based on the leadership's mystical and jurisprudential qualifications. Mystical charisma and jurisprudential competence contribute to the construction of authority in the Tablīghī Jamā'at, and that authority is sustained with recourse to their respective discursive traditions.

In his article, "The Sufi Shaikh as a Source of Authority," Simon Digby reviews the literature of medieval Sufism and outlines the attributes a Sufi should be recognized to possess to legitimate his authority. They include the following: descent from the Prophet or his Companions; connection with a Sufi *silsila* of established prestige; reputation for orthodoxy; austerity in devotional practice; mastery of Islamic doctrine or Sufi texts; literary

talent; supernatural powers; a reputation for inaccessibility and the dislike of human society; solicitous attention to his disciples and visitors; and the ability to experience ecstatic states of consciousness during *ẓikr*. A *shaikh* could possess any combination of these attributes to be acknowledged as a recipient of divine grace.<sup>71</sup>

In keeping with the Deobandi reformist approach to Sufism, the leaders of the Tablīghī Jamā'at are credited with only those attributes that are considered *ba'shar*, or those practices that conform to Islamic law. Supernatural power, of course, is excluded from their list of distinctions as is the belief that *shaikhs* could serve as an intermediary between the human and the divine. Literary talent is also not emphasized. In other respects, however, the leaders of the Tablīghī Jamā'at, and Ilyas in particular, fit the bill for a Sufi *shaikh*. The hagiographical literature on the leaders of the Tablīghī Jamā'at participate in the discursive tradition of Sufism and help construct the pious personas of the elite leadership. Though Ilyas was not a prolific writer, his discourses (*malḥūzāt*) and letters (*makātib*) were published posthumously. Both are important genres of the mystical tradition.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, a *tazkira* (biography or remembrance) of Ilyas' successor, Muhammad Yusuf was published after his death. It includes his life story, selected correspondence, excerpts from his speeches, and various sayings. The following discussion draws on these works. Unfortunately, less has been published on Inamu'l-Hasan and the current Amirs of the Jamā'at, Muhammad Sa'd and Zubayru'l-Hasan. The limited primary source material on these leaders has been included

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71 Simon Digby, "The Sufi Shaikh as a Source of Authority in Medieval India," in *India's Islamic Traditions, 711-1750*, ed. Richard Eaton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

72 Yoginder Sikand, "The Tablighi Jama'at in Mewat, India," in *Sufism and the 'Modern' in Islam*, ed. Martin van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1988), 131. For a detailed analyses of the history and significance of the *malḥūzāt* genre of literature, see Amina Steinfels, "His Master's Voice: The Genre of *Malḥūzāt* in South Asian Sufism," *History of Religions* 44.1 (2004).

where appropriate.<sup>73</sup>

Demonstrating the presence of an honorable lineage has been important for legitimizing the authority of the Tablīghī Jamā'at leadership. Connecting the family to a reputable *tarīqa* (Sufi order) is also necessary for establishing the leaders' basis for mystical authority, and in the case of the Tablīghī Jamā'at leadership, lineage mixes with mystical genealogy. In his hagiography, Nadwi elaborates on the respected lineage of Ilyas and his family. Likewise, the *Tazkīra-ye Amīr-e Tablīgh* begins with a “*khāndani ta'arof*,” (or praise of the family). The hagiographies of Ilyas and Yusuf begin with the family's ancestral patriarch, Mufti Ilahi Bakhsh (d. 1829), who was considered one of the most prominent students<sup>74</sup> of Shah 'Abdu'l-Aziz (d.1823), son of Shah Waliullah (d. 1762), the reformist Sufi to whom Deoband traces its intellectual lineage. The authors then list the other members of the family and the details of their illustrious accomplishments. The prominent attention given to family and mystical lineage in these hagiographies serves to bolster the credibility of the Tablīghī Jamā'at leadership by providing them the necessary background.<sup>75</sup>

The hagiographical literature on the elite leadership of the Tablīghī Jamā'at also draws connections between Ilyas, his successors, and the Companions of the Prophet. The organization's literature creates this connection by attributing the same virtues to Ilyas, his successors, and the Companions of the Prophet. For example, the qualities that Nadwi attributes to Ilyas in his *Life and Mission of Maulana Muhammad Ilyas* are similar to those

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73 The lack of literature on the current *amīrs* might suggest that mystical charisma as a source of authority has become less important since Yusuf's death, but Dietrich Reetz argues that Sufism is still a powerful basis of leadership even if it is expressed in a different way. His essay will be explored in detail below.

74 Bijnauri, 30.

75 The Tablīghī Jamā'at bolstered their credentials further by centering their movement at the shrine of Nizām-ud-Dīn Auliya in Delhi. This established a connection between the *Chishtī tarīqa* and the leadership of the Tablīghī Jamā'at.

attributed to the Companions in *Hikāyat-e Ṣahāba*. Ilyas is described as exhibiting *īmān* (faith), *eḥsān* (beneficence), absorption in work, anxiety for the state of the *ummat*, high-mindedness, observance of the *sunnat*, forbearance, consideration for others, good manners, magnanimity, steadfastness, repentance, and so on.<sup>76</sup> Nadwi uses these qualities as topic headings for relevant descriptions of Ilyas' good character. The *Hikāyat-e Ṣahāba* uses an identical format. Zakariyya organizes the book's chapters according to the virtues of the Companions. For example, the first section, entitled “Steadfastness in the Face of Hardships,” describes the Companions' forbearance while suffering in the path of *Allah*. The other chapters are entitled, “Fear of *Allah*,” “Abstinence and Self-Denial of the *Ṣahāba*,” “Piety and Scrupulousness,” “Devotion to *Salāt*,” and “Sympathy and Self-Sacrifice.” The correspondence between the texts' formats creates a conceptual link between Ilyas and the Prophet's Companions. As a complement to Ilyas' hereditary lineage, the organization's hagiographical literature establishes an imaginary line of descent from the Companions of the Prophet to the contemporary elite leadership.

Establishing a reputation for austerity in religious practice is equally important for legitimizing the mystical authority of the Tablīghī Jamā'at leadership. Ilyas is often portrayed as being plagued by physical ailments and blessed with unusual devotional strength. His weak constitution enabled him to focus his attention on religion from an early age. Exempt from performing physical labor in his household, Ilyas spent most of his free time in private prayer and study. His health was poor throughout his life, and he was forced to practice extreme austerities such as giving up drinking water for years at a time at the request of his

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76 Nadwi, 125-175.

doctor.<sup>77</sup> Ilyas continued such austerities regardless of his health, and they are regularly portrayed as a major source of his spiritual strength. He also paid particular attention to fulfilling the duties of orthodox Islam. For example, in March 1944, Ilyas became too weak to stand, and yet, his biographers say, he would perform his prayers with “serenity and agility.”<sup>78</sup> The *Tazkīra-ye Amīr-e Tablīgh* delves into the details of Yusuf's life, emphasizing his discipline in devotional practice. He scrupulously performed his religious duties and devoted all of his spare time to the Tablīghī Jamā'at.<sup>79</sup>

Although the *amīrs* of the Tablīghī Jamā'at were not famous for their juridical talent, they were well trained in the Deobandi tradition. Ilyas, as noted above, was trained by Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, one of the most famous Deobandi scholars of his time. Hagiographers report that both Yusuf and Inamu'l-Hasan had natural talent and interest in their religious education. For example, Bijnauri writes that Yusuf began memorizing the Qur'an when he was seven years old. He adds that “*Ḥaẓrat Jī* [Yusuf] from the very beginning had a great interest in reading and studying. He would rush to set aside time to study and he considered pausing to contemplate the volumes to be a blessing.”<sup>80</sup> Yusuf and Inamu'l-Hasan studied with Ilyas until they began formal training at *Mazāhiru'l-'Ulūm* Saharanpur. In hagiographical literature, they are described as being close companions during their time at

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77 Haq, 84.

78 Haq, 96.

79 Bijnauri, 102-107.

80 Bijnauri, 54.

حضرت جی کو شروع ہی سے کتب بینی اور مطالعہ کا بہت زیادہ شوق تھا، باوجود دعوتی، ہجوم کار کے وہ مطالعہ کتب کے لئے وقت نکال ہی لیتے تھے اسفار میں وہ تھوڑے سے وقفہ کو مطالعہ کتب کے لئے غنیمت سمجھتے تھے۔

*Mazāhiru'l-'Ulūm* and are reported to have earned top honors every year.<sup>81</sup> In *Muntakhab-e Ḥadīs*, Muhammad Yusuf demonstrates his knowledge of *ḥadīs*, an important component of Deobandi education. The text is divided into six sections and organized according to the *che bāteñ* of the Tablīghī Jamā'at. The text is a defense of *tablīgh* work that draws upon *aḥādīs* (pl. of *ḥadīs*) that address each of the organization's basic principles. It also serves to demonstrate Yusuf's religious authority. The construction of jurisprudential authority in the Tablīghī Jamā'at will be explored in further detail in the following section.

As Digby describes in his article, Sufi *shaikhs* cultivated an aura of exclusivity in their affairs. They often had a reputation of enjoying solitude while, on the other hand, showing great care for the people they let into their inner circle. Balancing private retreat and social engagement allows a leader to maintain his charismatic persona. Ilyas, much more than the other leaders of the Tablīghī Jamā'at, is said to have regularly sought out solitude while remaining solicitous about the well-being of those around him. His childhood illnesses accustomed him to private study and devotion, and he enjoyed frequent seclusion as an adult. Ilyas' biographers report that he spent long periods of time in silent meditation and contemplation, only emerging from seclusion to teach his classes.<sup>82</sup> He also exhibited *khalvat dar anjoman*, or solitude in the company of others, a traditional sign of devotional fervor. Inamu'l-Hasan is described as possessing the same enthusiasm for private withdrawal.<sup>83</sup>

Dietrich Reetz details the role of Sufism in the Tablīghī Jamā'at, paying particular attention to the historical shifts in the reliance on mystical authority in the organization. He

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81 Bijnauri, 56

82 Haq, 84-96.

83 Bijnauri, 22.

argues that informal criteria of Sufi leadership, such as personal, charismatic, and moral authority, have been a consistent part Tablīghī Jamā'at ideology. The construction of authority based on what Reetz calls “informal” criteria has been discussed above. Reetz pays more attention to the “formal” aspects of Sufi leadership in the organization, such as creating a personal attachment to the elite leaders through mystical initiation. This was an important aspect of extending Ilyas' influence during the movement's early years. Ilyas established personal connections with the inhabitants of Mewat in particular in order to create a strong base for the movement. Though Reetz recognizes that Yusuf relied on a less personal style of leadership after Ilyas' death, establishing a connection between the elite leadership and lay members has continued to rely on mystical initiation. Reetz describes rituals of initiation that Inamu'l-Hasan conducted and Muhammad Sa'd continues to conduct during the organization's annual meetings in Raiwind. Mewati refugees are particularly eager to receive their blessings. While the rituals are sometimes conducted *en masse*, participation is granted selectively and prepared for in advance of the meeting.<sup>84</sup> Thus, while there has been a shift away from the highly personalized style of leadership that Ilyas used to start the movement, mystical authority has remained an important aspect of establishing elite leaders' legitimacy.

### *Jurisprudential Authority of the Elite Leadership*

Despite Metcalf's apt characterization of the Tablīghī Jamā'at as an organization that “eschew[s] debate with other Muslims over jurisprudential niceties and resultant details of practice,”<sup>85</sup> establishing jurisprudential authority has been an important aspect of establishing

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84 Reetz, 37.

85 Metcalf, “Traditionalist' Islamic Activism,” 8.

the organization's legitimacy. As seen above, it is important for the leadership of the Tablīghī Jamā'at to establish their competence in Islamic doctrine. Associated with both *Dāru'l-'Ulūm* Deoband and *Mazāhiru'l-'Ulūm* Saharanpur, the leadership of the Tablīghī Jamā'at legitimates their religious authority through reference to their scholarly achievement. This section demonstrates the Tablīghī Jamā'at's use of commentaries on the Qur'an and *ḥadīṣ* to construct jurisprudential authority in the eyes of both religious specialists and lay Muslims.

My approach to this topic draws on Muhammad Qasim Zaman's *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*. In his book, Zaman investigates how the *'ulamā* have adapted to the challenges of modernity. Mass higher education, highly accessible print technologies, burgeoning state bureaucracies, global capitalism, and so on have required the *'ulamā* to be flexible in their adaptation to the contemporary world. He argues that, far from receding into the background, the *'ulamā* have, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, continued to play an important role in society. Constructing their religious authority in a way that is relevant to the contemporary world has been a critical aspect of their success. His wide-ranging study thus includes an analysis of how religious authority is “constructed, argued, put on display, and constantly defended.”<sup>86</sup>

Zaman notes that the *'ulamā* have continued to write for their fellow religious specialists. Their religious authority is established in elite circles through highly specialized commentaries on the Qur'an and *ḥadīṣ*. Written in Arabic and Urdu, these commentaries legitimate the *'ulamā* in the eyes of their peers. But the *'ulamā* have also embraced print media to reach lay audiences as well. They have adapted to a context in which texts that were

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86 Zaman, 55.



previously restricted to elite circles are enjoying widespread dissemination and are open to interpretation by non-specialists. By using print media to reach popular audiences, they are able to construct their authority in the eyes of ordinary Muslims. This has been central to the continuing importance of the *'ulamā* not only in restricted religious contexts, but also in broader social situations.<sup>87</sup>

Ilyas' nephew and elite member of the Tablīghī Jamā'at, Muhammad Zakariyya (d. 1982), is the foremost representative of jurisprudential authority in the organization. Zakariyya was a prolific writer whose audiences included both elite *'ulamā* and ordinary Muslims. His specialized works include Arabic commentaries on the Qur'an, *ḥadīṣ*, and other works designed for use in *madrasa* education. Zaman notes that one of his works in particular, a commentary on the recorded lectures of Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, solidified his authority in the Deobandi community. On the canonization of the text and its commentators, Zaman writes:

It is not only Rashid Ahmad's presence, or his personal authority that is perpetuated through this commentary. Muhammad Yahya, who wrote down the lectures; his son Muhammad Zakariyya, who added an introduction and glosses to the commentary; and Abu'l-Hasan 'Ali Nadvi (d. 1999), the former rector of the Nadwat al-'ulamā' of Lucknow and the most influential Indian religious scholar of his generation [...], who added a short biography of Muhammad Zakariyya to it, are all part, in varying measures of a select group that this commentary helps to constitute, celebrate, and link both with the earliest generations of Islam, and with other scholars of all times engaged in the venture of transmitting similar materials. Each scholar, dead or living, shares some of the lustre of the others and adds some of his own authority to this company.<sup>88</sup>

Zakariyya's work has earned him the title of “*Shaikhu'l-Ḥadīṣ*” (“Master of *Ḥadīṣ*”). In

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87 Zaman, 38-59.

88 Zaman, 52.

Tablīghī Jamā'at literature, he is often referred to by his title alone.

Zakariyya's role in Tablīghī Jamā'at was significant. He authored several works for the organization at the request of his uncle, Ilyas, between 1928 and 1940 including, *Hikāyat-e Ṣahāba* (Stories of the Companions of the Prophet), *Faḏā'il-e Qur'ān* (The Virtues of the Holy Qur'an), *Faḏā'il-e Namāz* (The Virtues of Prayer), *Faḏā'il-e Zikr* (The Virtues of *Zikr*), *Faḏā'il-e Tablīgh* (The Virtues of *Tablīgh*), *Faḏā'il-e Ramazan* (The Virtues of *Ramazān*). These essays were collected and published in two volumes under the title *Tablīghī Niṣāb* (Curriculum for *Tablīgh*) in 1955 and under the title *Faḏā'il-e A'māl* (The Merits of [Virtuous] Practices) in 1980.<sup>89</sup> It has since been translated into English as *The Teachings of Islam*. *Tablīgh* workers are advised to carry a copy with them while on tours. Zakariyya has also published a variety of works in Urdu and in English translation. His *Ikhtilāfu'l-A'ima*, published in English as *The Differences of the Imams*, is of particular relevance to this study, and, in addition to the essays included in *Faḏā'il-e A'māl*, will be discussed in further detail below.

These works implicitly demonstrate and explicitly defend the religious authority of the *'ulamā*. Zakariyya starts each essay in *Faḏā'il-e A'māl* with select verses from the Qur'an that demonstrate the virtues of the practices under consideration. He then reproduces relevant *ḥadīṣ* to bolster his argument. Some of the essays also include stories from the lives of the Companions, whose own experiences confirmed the merits of the practices discussed. Zakariyya inserts his own commentary throughout the texts, often beginning and ending each essay with his own words of advice. Each Qur'anic verse and each *ḥadīṣ* are followed with

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<sup>89</sup> Metcalf, "Living Hadith," 585.

Zakariyya's translation of the text into Urdu and an explanation of its meaning. Thus, the pious material presented in the essay is revealed to the reader through Zakariyya's guidance, and his voice is a powerful presence. The essays' heavy reliance on commentary helps construct Zakariyya's religious authority.

In *Fazā'il-e A'māl*, Zakariyya explicitly defends the authority of the *'ulamā* to help guide the Muslim community. Zakariyya includes a section entitled “Respect of Learning and the Learned in Islam” in his essay on *tablīgh*. It is a reminder that, although the lay members of the organization need not know more than the basic articles of Islamic faith to participate in *tablīgh*, the guidance of jurisprudential authorities is necessary. He reproduces the following *ḥadīṣ* to prove his point.

The Holy Prophet (Sallallaahu alaihe wasallam) has also said: 'I fear particularly for three shortcomings in my Followers. First, due to increasing worldly benefits and achievements, they will envy one another; second, discussion of the Holy Qur'an will become so common that even the ignorant will claim that they know the meanings of the Holy Qur'an, although many meanings are such that cannot be understood by anyone except the well versed Scholars of that Book, who say: 'We have a firm faith in it, and that it is from Allah,' so how much more careful should be the common people; third, the religious Scholars will be neglected and will not be patronized properly.'<sup>90</sup>

With this *ḥadīṣ*, Zakariyya admonishes the reader to avoid becoming proud of his religious knowledge, for no one but a scholar can understand the more difficult aspects of the Qur'an. Among the subjects necessary to understand the deep spiritual meanings of the Qur'an are philology, syntax, etymology, semantics, rhetoric, and oration. Zakariyya enumerates the advantages of these fields of study in his essay and advises the reader who does not have the requisite education to avoid expressing opinions about the Qur'an. It is a powerful justification

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90 Zakariyya, “The Virtues of the Holy Qur'an,” 44.

for the authority of the *'ulamā*.

Zakariyya elaborates on a similar theme in *The Differences of the Imams*. He describes the various reasons for the apparent differences in the four schools of Islam and describes why jurists might come to different conclusions on the same issue. This is an important problem for Zakariyya because he believes that lay audiences can develop doubts about the legitimacy of the *'ulamā*'s authority if they take contradictory positions. This doubt about the *'ulamā* can lead ordinary Muslims to experience a crisis of faith.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the apparent contradictions in the narrations of the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. The second section deals with the contradictions found in the words and deeds of the *ṣahāba*. The third section describes the reason for the differences among the schools of jurisprudence. Throughout the text various examples are given to explain to the lay reader how differences emerge and the necessary knowledge one must have to understand how to interpret these differences while exercising jurisprudential authority. For example, contradictions arise in the *ḥadīṣ* of the Prophet if he recommended different actions for different people according to their situation. For example, he says that the Prophet would allow some of his companions to practice more extreme austerities than others based on their physical strength. In such cases, reports would be transmitted that are apparently contradictory. The Prophet's act of mercy in prescribing different conduct for different people would be misunderstood without the requisite expertise in interpreting *ḥadīṣ*. Zakariyya enumerates several other reasons for apparently contradictory *aḥādīṣ* and gives suitable examples for each. He provides enough specificity to allow the reader to understand the complexity of interpreting *ḥadīṣ*, but does not

reveal more than he thinks his audience can understand. He writes,

Apart from the aforementioned reasons, there are many other reasons for the differences of opinions, many of which are not worth delving into before a mainstream audience, who may not possess the full intellectual capacity needed to grasp these extremely complex issues. [...] Zayn al-'Irqai said, “One of the shortcomings of the Preachers (*wa'izin*) is their tendency to lecture to the laymen on issues which they (the laymen) are unable to understand. This in turn leads to corrupt beliefs.” 'Abdulla ibn Mas'ud says, “If you narrate such hadiths to a group of people who are unable to understand what you are saying, it will be a cause of turmoil (*fitna*) to them.”<sup>91</sup>

Justifying the authority of the elite leadership with reference to their jurisprudential competence is pervasive in Tablīghī Jamā'at literature. Lay members of the organization, who constitute the intended audience of these publications, are encouraged to respect the learned members of the Muslim community. The authority of the elite leadership of the Tablīghī Jamā'at is “constructed, argued, put on display, and constantly defended” in these texts, and they are implicitly identified as worthy of respect and obedience. Thus, the elite leadership establishes and defends their jurisprudential authority.

### *Lay Leadership*

One of the most notable innovations in proselytism that the Tablīghī Jamā'at instituted was, in Metcalf's words, the “laicization”<sup>92</sup> of leadership.<sup>93</sup> The diffusion of leadership is emphatically not a replacement for elite authority. As was explored above, lay leaders are discouraged from assuming too much authority if they lack formal religious education.

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91 Zakariyya, *The Differences of the Imams* (Santa Barbara: White Thread Press, 2008), 63.

92 Metcalf, “Traditionalist' Islamic Activism,” 11.

93 Metcalf also argues that “the holiness associated with the Sufi *pīr* was in many ways defused into the charismatic body of the Jama'at so that the missionary group itself became a channel for divine intervention. The kind of story typically told about a saint – overcoming ordeals, being blessed with divine illumination, triumphantly encountering temporal authority – was in fact often told about a group engaged in a mission.” “Traditionalist' Islamic Activism,” 11.

However much the Tablīghī Jamā'at encourages people of all ranks and educational backgrounds to participate in *tablīgh*, they are not supposed to assume too much authority. The structure of authority amongst lay leaders is explored in detail below.

Every tour of *tablīgh* is headed by an “*amīr*.” The leader, who is usually a lay member of the community, supervises the participants during their mission. *Amīrs* are selected according to their experience in the organization, their knowledge of the *tablīgh* program, and their less-definable leadership qualities. The *amīr* of a *tablīgh* tour has the responsibility of supervising the logistical aspects of the journey. Resting, eating, sleeping, consulting local leaders, and inviting others to worship are done at the discretion of the *amīr*, and the participants on the tour are admonished to obey him completely. Maulana Ashiq Ilahi includes a section entitled “Obedience to the Leader” in his essay on the *ḥe bāteñ*.<sup>94</sup> The leaders he refers to are the *amīrs* of *tablīgh* tours. He writes:

Every order of the leader should be obeyed, provided he does not ask you to commit a sin. Yes, obey him, though he is not so much educated as you are. [...] Hadhrat Ubaadah bin Saamit (رضى الله عنه) says, “we took a pledge at the hands of Rasulullah (صلى الله عليه و سلم), that we should obey him in prosperity and in calamity, in pleasure and sorrow, and will not obey the suggestions of our evil self, against his wish, and will not prefer ourselves to others against his choice; that we shall not try to snatch leadership from another; that we will speak the truth, wherever we are; that we will not mind the criticism of anyone, while obeying the commandments of Allah.”<sup>95</sup>

Thus the lay leadership of the Tablīghī Jamā'at is granted significant authority in the day-to-day operations of the movement.

On the other hand, there are limits to the lay leaders' authority. Excessive distinction

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94 Ilahi's discussion also includes a seventh “lesson” he calls “quit[ting] vanity.” Ilahi, “The Six Fundamentals,” 13.

95 Ilahi, 24.

between members of the organization is discouraged. As part of the fourth principle of the Tablīghī Jamā'at, *ikrām-e muslimīn* (respect for Muslims), leaders are instructed to avoid making of show of their seniority. Furthermore, *amīrs* are encouraged to avoid invoking their authority in their relationships with fellow *tablīghis* and fellow Muslims. All the participants eat together, and all of the *tablīgh* participants share the burden of menial tasks. Mentioning educational superiority and economic status are especially taboo.<sup>96</sup> *Amīrs* are also instructed to consult the other members of the group before making decisions that affect their work. There is a highly defined process of *mashvara* (consultation or council) that allows all the members of a *jamā'at* to voice their opinions about specific issues. The consultation begins by reciting the rules of the *mashvara*. The rules specify that every member of the group should give his honest opinion about issues when his *amīr* requests it. He must not expect or insist that his suggestion be accepted. If his opinion is accepted, he should ask God for His forgiveness and pray for security against possible negative consequences of carrying out his advice. If it is not accepted, he should thank God that no negative consequences followed from his participation in the council. It is necessary to consult everyone on every matter, but the final decision is left to the *amīr*. When announcing his decision, he must not make a show of his authority or belittle the opinions of others. The *amīr* should thank the other group members for their participation. Group leaders are also encouraged to allow people the opportunity to assume leadership of specific tasks during *tablīgh* tours even if they are newcomers to the organization. For example, every group must have a *mutkallim* (spokesman) and a *rahbar* (guide). The organization of local missionary groups thus

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96 Talib, 39.

encourages the active participation of new members.<sup>97</sup> Responsibilities are shared by the group, and the fluid structure of leadership amongst the members of the Tablīghī Jamā'at creates checks and balances on lay authority.

*The Authority of Texts in Context: Elite Authors and Lay Interpreters*

Elite and lay authority intersect through the circulation of Tablīghī Jamā'at literature. The authority of the author is re-confirmed through the text's circulation, and the context in which the text is read bolsters the leadership of lay members by encouraging commentary and elaboration. Thus, the authority of the text in context is an important window into the convergence of elite and lay leadership. The construction of elite authority *within* the texts has already been explored above. In contrast, this section analyzes how elite authority is re-articulated through the *circulation* of texts and discusses the construction of lay authority in the context of their oral delivery.

Metcalf explores how elite authority is constructed through the circulation of texts, particularly the *Faḏā'il-e A'māl*, in “Living Hadith in the Tablighi Jama'at.” She writes,

The movement's foundational book, the *Faza'il-i-a'mal*, claims authority by its very appearance and presentation. A person using this book is marked as someone engaged with a text that is both weighty (literally, since it runs close to a 1,000 pages) and religious. [...] In size and presentation they recall the Qur'an, the Book *par excellence*, but offer a book meant to be used casually, albeit respectful, and organized for ready consultation and guidance. [...] <sup>98</sup>

Metcalf's description reveals several ways in which elite authority is implicitly re-confirmed through the circulation of the text. First, she notes the appearance of the book itself. The use

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97 Masud, “Growth and Development,” 28-29.

98 Metcalf, “Living Hadith,” 596.



of religious iconography is pervasive. For example, calligraphic renditions of the *kalima* are often used to give the text a sense of religious significance. In the edition of the text that I have access to, the same style of calligraphy is used for the titles of each essay. Muhammad Zakariyya's name also enjoys a prominent place in these works and is always preceded by his title, “*Shaikhu'l-Hadīṣ*.” The texts thus serve as advertisements announcing the religious authority of their authors.

The texts also announce the religious merit of the reader. Specifically, a member of the *Tablīghī Jamā'at* who is recognized by his peers as particularly well-versed in the organization's literature has a share in the text's authority. Metcalf argues that the printed book was never meant to stand alone, but rather, it was intended to be read aloud in group meetings.<sup>99</sup> Talib confirms Metcalf's argument in his ethnography when he describes how leaders of local *jamā'ats* are invited to lead discussions on the principles of *tablīgh*. Lay leaders are given the honor of presenting the six principles and leading discussions. Furthermore, he notes that the leader is allowed to embellish his description of the six principles with allegories, metaphors, and stories from the tradition. The degree to which a leader's deviations are acceptable corresponds to the extent of his experience in the organization.<sup>100</sup> Commentary, which is a major genre for constructing the authority of elite leaders, is thus equally important in establishing lay authority. The public settings of the texts' oral recital bolster the credibility of lay leaders within their local community.

The printed book thus serves as a nexus of elite and lay authority. The printed book makes religious education outside of the seminary possible while reinforcing the status of elite

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<sup>99</sup> Metcalf, “Living Hadith,” 491.

<sup>100</sup> Talib, 37.

members of the community with traditional religious education. Lay leadership balances elite authority.

### *Power in the Tablīgh Program and the Authority of the Individual Believer*

In one of Yusuf's speeches to his Mewati followers, he is reported to have said, "There are many amongst you who have come with the purpose of visiting me and 'joining hands' with me, and then you leave. Understand the magnitude of this work for which God has placed love and respect for me in your hearts. Put your life and wealth into this work, and put love into it, too. I, myself, am but mortal."<sup>101</sup> Yusuf, whose position as *amīr* of the Jamā'at is impermanent, instructs his followers to place their trust in the program of *tablīgh*, which he views as much more powerful than any individual, even himself. As Talib notes, this sense of power is also recognized by the participant in the program of *tablīgh*. He writes, "a *dai* (a *tablīghī* would like to be called by this term) achieves true self-image while engaging in the work of *dawat* and becomes conscious of the tremendous reserves of resources at his command. This, according to a *tablīghī*, is a source of real power."<sup>102</sup> The following section seeks to understand the power that is inherent in the program of *tablīgh* and the consequent authority that the individual believer enjoys through his participation.

The program of *tablīgh* becomes a source of power for the participant because it is based on the deep, personal relationship between the believer and God. The relationship

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101 Bijnauri, 212.

میواتیوں سے فرمایا، "تم میں سے بہت سے صرف میری زیارت اور مصافحہ کی نیت سے آتے ہیں اور چلے جاتے ہیں، میں کہتا ہوں اس کام کی عظمت سمجھو جس کی وجہ سے خدا نے تمہارے دل میں میری محبت اور عقیدت ڈالی ہے اس کام میں اپنا وقت جان اور مال لگاؤ اور اس کام سے پیار جوڑو میری ذات تو فانی ہے۔"

102 Talib, 36.

between the believer and God begins with the earnest recitation of the *kalima*. In *Tablīghī Tahrīk ke Sāt Nambar*, the author writes that true understanding of the *kalima* means that the believer needs to “put his life under the power of its words. He needs to refuse a place in his heart to those things that are against the *kalima*.”<sup>103</sup> Thus a meaningful relationship with God begins.

Zakariyya explains this relationship through the common mystical metaphor of a lover, who symbolizes the devotee, and the beloved, or God. Zakariyya writes that, in the case of “earthly” love, a mere glimpse of the beloved has a magnetic effect, producing in the lover a desire to see more. But, he says, “love may increase and the yearning of the heart may be satisfied, but the stage of satisfaction is never reached. As an Urdu poet says:

مرض بڑھتا گیا جوں جوں دوا کی

The disease worsened as the treatment progressed.”<sup>104</sup> If earthly love produces such a strong longing in the lover, then the magnetic effect of God's glory is extraordinary. He writes, “Almighty Allah, the Pure and Sanctified, who is the fountainhead of all elegance and beauty, (and in fact there is no beauty in this world except His) is certainly such a beloved whose loveliness and perfection knows no bounds and is limitless.”<sup>105</sup>

God, in turn, grants the beloved His favor. Zakariyya quotes the following Persian and Urdu poems to prove his point.

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103 Bijnauri, 5.

اپنے اس عہد اور اقرار کے بعد ساری زندگی پر اس کا قبضہ ہو جانا چاہیئے۔ پھر اپنے دل و دماغ میں کسی ایسی بات کو جگہ نہ دینی چاہیئے جو اس کلمہ کے خلاف ہو۔

104 Zakariyya, “The Virtues of the Holy Qur'an,” 97.

105 Zakariyya, “The Virtues of the Holy Qur'an,” 99.

ہست ربّ الناس را با جان ناس  
اتصال ہے تکیف و ہے قیاس

The Creator of mankind has, with the life of Man,  
a connection that is incomprehensible and unimaginable.

سب سے ربط آشنائی ہے اسے  
دل میں ہر اک کے رسائی ہے اسے

He has a relationship of friendliness with all;  
He reaches out to the heart of each and everyone.<sup>106</sup>

This relationship with God grants the believer comfort and peace of mind. In “The Virtues of *Salāt*,” Zakariyya describes how the Companions of the Prophet turned to prayer to regain peace of mind after suffering through personal tragedies such as the death of a loved one.<sup>107</sup> Likewise, in “The Virtues of *Zikr*,” Zakariyya writes that the believer who regularly engages in *zikr* enjoys happiness and peace of mind. He writes, “Today there is a wave of discontentment in the whole world; and the letters that I receive daily contain mostly accounts of worries and anxieties. [...] Almighty Allah has Himself said, [...] 'Lo! The Zikr of Allah provides satisfaction for the hearts.’”<sup>108</sup> Those who practice *zikr* out of obedience to God will soon feel an urge to continue because they recognize the benefits it brings. *Zikr* is, in fact, “a great wealth.”<sup>109</sup> Following the program of *tabligh* thus grants the believer a relationship with God that brings comfort and contentment.

The above-quoted excerpts from Zakariyya's essay reveal that the believer is envisioned to be naturally inclined to establish a strong relationship with God; in doing so, he

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106 Zakariyya, “The Virtues of the Holy Qur'an,” 108-109.

107 Zakariyya, “The Virtues of *Salāt*,” 17-21.

108 Zakariyya, “The Virtues of *Zikr*,” 11.

109 Zakariyya, “The Virtues of *Zikr*,” 12.

automatically becomes a better Muslim. Once the believer earnestly recites the *kalima*, he feels compelled to seek divine love. Maintaining his relationship with God through prayer, *zikr*, and devotion to the work of *tabligh* becomes easy. In Zakariyya's metaphor, the lover completely submits to God's will. He explains, “when a person falls in love with someone, submission and obedience to the beloved becomes his habit and second nature. Disobedience to the beloved becomes as hard as unwilling obedience to one whom one does not love.”<sup>110</sup> The idea that faithfully following the exoteric guidelines of the *tabligh* program will naturally impel the believer to become a better Muslim is pervasive in other texts as well. Ilyas is reported to have emphasized this point when explaining the appropriate attitude towards *tabligh* work. In one of his letters, he wrote, “Remember the eradication of the evils rampant among the Muslims does not take place by enumerating them or dwelling upon their evilness. What needs be done is to enlarge and heighten the few virtues that may be present in them. *The evils will disappear by themselves.*”<sup>111</sup>

The program of *tabligh* is a source of power because it also gives participants ready access to religious truth. Yusuf's *Tazkira* reports his recommendation to his followers that, “when you are listening to the Qur'an, consider that you are conversing with God himself, and when you are reading or listening to a *hadīṣ*, think that you are conversing with the Prophet.”<sup>112</sup> Yusuf implies that the ordinary believer can have a direct, communicative relationship with God. His words empower his followers, giving them a sense that they, too,

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110 Zakariyya, “The Virtues of the Holy Qur'an,” 96.

111 Emphasis added, Nadwi, 97.

112 Bijnauri, 211.

جب قرآن شریف سننے بیٹھو تو یوں سمجھو کہ اللہ تعالیٰ مجھ سے مخاطب ہے اور جب حدیث پڑھنے یا سننے بیٹھو تو یہ سمجھو کہ حضور (صلی اللہ علیہ و سلم) مجھ سے مخاطب ہیں۔

can understand the divine if they only put in the requisite effort. Most importantly, a strong personal connection between the believer and God grants the member of the Tablīghī Jamā'at authority in religious matters. Ilyas is reported to have said:

'My position should not be deemed to be higher than that of an ordinary believer. It is irreligiousness to do something simply because I say it. Examine whatever I say in the light of the Quran and the Sunnah, and think over it yourself, and, then, act on your own responsibility. I can only advise. As Hazrat Omar used to say to the Companions: 'You have placed a heavy responsibility on my shoulders. Now, all of you must keep a watch on what I do.' I request my friends to observe my actions vigilantly and check me when I go wrong, and also to pray for my guidance along the right path.'<sup>113</sup>

The power of the individual believer is not insignificant to the overall structure of authority in the Tablīghī Jamā'at. The leaders of the organization implicitly and, rarely, explicitly acknowledge that there are many leaders of the Muslim community who may have differing opinions about certain issues. Zakariyya, by virtue of being the most prolific elite member of the Tablīghī Jamā'at, reveals a deep concern over the problem of leadership in the *ummat*. As was discussed above, he wrote extensively on why educated members of the Muslim community often have different answers to jurisprudential questions. In the contemporary context, religious texts are easily accessible and open to interpretation. He defends the *'ulamā* and repeatedly laments the fact that non-specialists and “so-called intellectuals”<sup>114</sup> freely comment upon religious texts without the necessary expertise. But this leads to a logical impasse for the believer. If non-specialists are not supposed to step beyond their prescribed religious roles, how are they to judge the reliability of their leaders? When two prominent members of the *ummat* have differing opinions on an issue, who are they supposed to follow

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113 Nadwi, 231.

114 Zakariyya, *The Differences of the Imams*, 89.

and how do they make their decision? Zakariyya does not explicitly acknowledge this problem, but he does address it in a seemingly unrelated discussion of how the Imams of jurisprudence judged the reliability of a particular *ḥadīṣ*. He writes:

Since the basis of the weakness or reliability of a narration is based upon the conditions of its narrators, there are bound to be differences in practicing upon the narrations as well. The metaphor is a sick person who seeks the treatment of various doctors. One of them might say his illness is fatal, while the other might consider it mild. The third doctor might brush it off as a psychological problem, and he will not consider it an illness at all. In exactly the same manner, a narrator might be considered unreliable and rejected by some, while others might regard him as reliable, trustworthy, and truthful. In such circumstances, neither the doctors nor the Imams of hadith can be criticized. The nurse attending to the sick person or the followers of the *Shari'a* will be advised to adhere to *whomever they feel is reliable*.<sup>115</sup>

Ideally, the believer who follows the program of *tablīgh* will be able to recognize a reliable guide in religious matters. His personal relationship with God and his religious experience will guide him to a true leader. The lay believers of the Tablīghī Jamā'at thus support its elite leaders. Top-down and bottom-up approaches to organization balance one another and are ideally mutually supportive.

### *The Proper Exercise of Authority*

The proper exercise of authority in the Tablīghī Jamā'at includes persuading others to practice reformist Islam. Coercion and compulsion are ideally absent from the organization. Tablīghī Jamā'at texts repeatedly emphasize that the *tablīghis* (elite and lay alike) are encouraged to discharge their duty of inviting others to follow correct practice, but should not step beyond persuasion into coercion or compulsion. Ilyas addressed the All-India

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115 Emphasis added, Zakariyya, *The Differences of the Imams*, 87.

Conference of *'ulamā* and Muslim Political Leaders, held in Delhi in 1944, the year of his death. Christian Troll reviews his speech and translates excerpts of the recorded text in “Two Conceptions of Da'wá in India.”<sup>116</sup> Ilyas distinguished between two methods of spreading Islam. The first option involved acquiring power and then prevailing upon the inhabitants of a territory to conform to the standards of Islam. The second option emphasized “striv[ing] among the people with heart and soul and then employ[ing] the consequent favours of Gracious and Merciful God, seeking His further pleasure.”<sup>117</sup> Ilyas rejected the first option, reminding his listeners of the Qur'anic verse asserting that there is no compulsion in religion. “To do a religious duty under compulsion cannot be an act of worship and devotion. It will in fact be an act of subservience to men in power.”<sup>118</sup> This excerpt reveals that Ilyas believed that the proper exercise of authority is persuasive. Improper, explicitly coercive exercise of authority is not condoned in the organization's ideology because the person demanding obedience would be appropriating an unacceptable degree of authority.

In contrast, gentleness is highly praised as the best means of enjoining others to good. Great care is taken to avoid harsh criticism of another Muslim. In one of Ilyas' letters to a follower engaged in *tablīgh*, he writes that the Tablīghī Jamā'at does not condone severity during proselytizing missions. He says:

Understand that our movement and the *tablīgh* of Islam do not like to cause anyone anxiety or hear words that foment discord. You talked to people in several places about *bid'at* (innovation). In the future, you should avoid quarrelsome and divisive words. [...] To dwell on the imperfections of others is indecorous and casts a dark shadow on our work. When we criticize others,

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116 Christina Troll, “Two Conceptions of Da'wa in India: Jama'at-i Islami and Tablighi Jama'at,” *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 39.87 (1994): 115-133.

117 Troll, 121.

118 Troll, 121.



we ourselves are debased.<sup>119</sup>

Talib confirms that gentleness in guiding others to good practice remains a concern amongst Tablīghī Jamā'at leadership. For example, Talib reports that members recite Qur'anic verses and *hadīṣ* reports during meetings, and all are encouraged to participate. Special attention is paid to correct pronunciation of these passages, but great care is taken to make sure that a person who makes a mistake is not embarrassed. Furthermore, he says that the background of a novice is treated with indifference. He records a conversation with a senior member regarding a newcomer to the Jamā'at who was identified as belonging to a *shi'a* sect. He responded, "How does it matter if he is a *shia*, communist, or Barelvi? It is enough that he is a Muslim who is eager to learn the commands of Allah and the ways of the Prophet."<sup>120</sup> Gentle persuasion rather than severe criticism or compulsion is the ideal method of exercising authority in the Tablīghī Jamā'at .

Zakariyya ends his essay on the virtues of *tablīgh* with the following poem, which summarizes the ideal attitude of the *tablīghī* to his work:

مراد ما نصیحت بود و کردیم  
حوالت با خدا کردیم و رفتیم

My object was to advise you,  
and I have done that.

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119 Muhammad Ilyas, *Maktubat* (Delhi: Anjuman-i Taraqqi-ye Urdu, 1972), \_\_\_\_.

آپ لوگ خوب یقین فرما لیجئے کہ ہماری تحریک اور اسلامی تبلیغ نہ کسی کی دل آزاری کو پسند کرتی ہے اور نہ کسی فتنہ فساد کے الفاظ سننا چاہتی ہے۔ آپ لوگوں نے بدعتی کے لفظ سے بعض جگہ کے لوگوں کو یاد کیا ہے۔ آئیندہ سے ایسے الفاظ سے احتراز چاہیئے، جو اشتعال انگیز فتنہ حیز ہوں۔ دوسروں کی عیب کی کوشش ہے بنری اور کام کو بے رونق کرنیوالی چیز ہے۔ دوسروں میں عیب نکالنے سے اپنا مایہ بھی جاتا رہتا ہے۔

120 Talib, 39.

Now I entrust you to God.<sup>121</sup>

It is also important to note that the proper exercise of authority in the Tablīghī Jamā'at is restricted to the religious sphere. The ideal *tablīghī* will use gentle persuasion to influence a fellow Muslim to reform his personal religious practice. Avoiding controversial issues, including political disputes, is very important to the movement. The above discussion of the principle of *tark-e lāya'ni* has described the organization's commitment to strict focus on religious matters while avoiding other issues. Historical sources also confirm that the Tablīghī Jamā'at leadership has continued to maintain a separation between religious and political spheres. Muhammad Khalid Masud writes that in 1967, the Tablīghī Jamā'at came into conflict with the Jamā'at-e Islāmi during a meeting in Saharanpur. Following the speeches of several local Tablīghī Jamā'at leaders, members of the Jamā'at-e Islāmi tried to take advantage of the large gathering to discuss their views on the Israel-Palestine conflict. The Tablīghī Jamā'at leadership stopped them, and a bitter dispute between the organizations ensued.<sup>122</sup> The Tablīghī Jamā'at's refusal to articulate firm positions on politically-charged issues implies a recognition of their diverse membership. The Tablīghī Jamā'at does not require its members to adopt a party line nor does the organization mandate that its members abstain from political activity completely.

The ideal exercise of authority in the Tablīghī Jamā'at thus involves gently persuading others to reform their spiritual life. Severe criticism, coercion, and the use of delegated authority to influence other aspects of another's life, specifically his political life, are explicitly discouraged.

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121 Zakariyya, "Virtues of Tablīgh," 47.

122 Masud, "Growth and Development," 19.

### *Summary*

The Tablīghī Jamā'at's method of delegating authority is complex. The organization's structure of authority relies on a careful balance of elite leadership, based on mystical and jurisprudential authority, and lay leadership. Furthermore, the individual believer is granted significant authority in religious matters to accept or reject the guidance of their superiors. Power comes from multiple sources including mystical charisma, jurisprudential education, experience in the organization, and even religious practice. The proper exercise of authority involves persuading others to join the movement, but compulsion and the use of delegated authority to influence other aspects of a believer's life, specifically his political life, are ideally absent from the movement.

### **Conclusion: Authority and Politics in the Tablighī Jamā'at**

The complex, fluid structure of authority described above, combined with the organization's vision for how authority should be exercised, is significant for an analysis of the organization's "politics." The organization's eschewal of politics implicitly recognizes that members will have different stances on various issues. Members of the organization do not need to adopt a party line nor are they forced to give up their political opinions, as long as they do not discuss them during missionary work. Members are thus assumed to have multiple affiliations. The organization's complex delegation of authority results in a situation in which informal influence can enter into the movement through myriad channels. Although in Tablighī Jamā'at ideology, religion and politics are separate spheres, they are not as easily disentangled in practice.<sup>123</sup> Lay leaders in particular, who are empowered through their work with the Tablighī Jamā'at and who are not forced to abandon political affiliations even though they are encouraged to refrain from speaking about them during tours, can informally influence those who consider them their superiors. The movement is thus highly amenable to change depending on who assumes positions of leadership in a local branch. In other words, if a particular branch of the Tablighī Jamā'at is seen as more "political" than another, it is a result of the democratization of authority and the *lack* of elite control of the organization's ranks. I believe my analysis explains, to some extent, the diversity of opinion in historiographical literature on the Tablighī Jamā'at. For example, the ethnographies of Shail

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<sup>123</sup> A review of the elite leadership's extensive efforts to keep the organization insulated from politics and the continued emphasis on avoiding "pointless" talk is perhaps the best evidence of the difficulty the organization has had in maintaining separate religious and political spheres.

Mayaram and Peter Van der Veer, though they come to very different conclusions about the Tablighī Jamā'at, seem equally plausible.<sup>124</sup>

On the other hand, my analysis does not support some commentator's opinion that the Tablighī Jamā'at maintains an apolitical cover while secretly aligning with organizations with clear political agendas nor does it support the position that the leadership of the Jamā'at secretly aides in the recruitment of militants. The letters, speeches, and essays written by several elite leaders of the organization repeatedly and explicitly discourage members of the Tablighī Jamā'at from injecting politics into the movement. It is implausible to suppose that they have been secretly advocating a specific political agenda. The elite leadership not only eschews controversial or politically important issues, but it also would not have the organizational capacity to impose a party line throughout the ranks if it decided to change course. The assumption that their members have diverse affiliations combined with the complex, diffuse delegation of authority makes it very unlikely that the elite leadership would be able to pursue a specific political agenda, such as secretly recruiting militants for transnational *jihād* or aligning with more politically-minded organizations.

It is important for future scholarship to avoid making broad claims about the “apolitical” or “political” nature of the organization. Arguing over the “political” nature of the entire movement seems besides the point in light of my research and, in any case, does little to advance a comparative analysis. Moreover, scholarship that argues that the Tablighī

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124 The Tablighī Jamā'at's disavowal of politics also does not ensure that the movement's activities are devoid of political implication. The scholarship of Muhammad Khalid Masud and Mumtaz Ahmad, for example, are very convincing preliminary studies on the affect of the Tablighī Jamā'at's presence in Pakistan, specifically in relation to the Jamā'at-e Islāmi. Future scholarship that elaborates on this issue, as opposed to prolonging the argument about the “political” nature of the organization as a whole would be very welcome.

Jamā'at as a whole is covertly political, despite the evidence to the contrary, can have dangerous political consequences during the ongoing “War on Terror.” The Tablīghī Jamā'at is a fascinating example of an organization for religious revival in a contemporary, transnational context. Their method of delegating authority has made them widely successful in adapting to new environments. Prolonging the argument over the “politics” of the movement will reveal less about the organization than it will about our inability to understand the mechanisms of its success.

## Glossary

**amīr:** leader

**ba'shar:** practices that conform to the *shari'at*

**bid'at:** “innovation,” the introduction of new, usually corrupting, elements into Islam

**čilla:** A Sufi term meaning prolonged retreat for private prayer. In the Tablīghī Jamā'at, it is used to refer to proselytizing missions lasting forty days.

**dā'ī:** missionary of Islam

**čhe bāteñ:** the “six principles” of the Tablīghī Jamā'at

**da'wat:** “invitation,” proselytism

**ḥadīs (pl. aḥādīs):** the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad as assembled by Muslim scholars

**ikrām-e muslimīn:** respect for Muslims, the fourth principle of the Tablīghī Jamā'at

**‘ilm-o-zikr:** the knowledge and remembrance of God

**jāhilīyat:** the term used to describe pre-Islamic Arabia

**jamā'at:** a collective, party, or group with varying degrees of organization

**jihād:** “struggle,” the term for both spiritual striving and militant activity

**kalima:** the profession of faith in the unity of God and the prophecy of Muhammad

**madrasa:** Islamic school

**makātib:** the collected writings of a religious leader, particularly in the context of Sufism

**malfūzāt:** the recorded sayings of a religious leader, particularly in the context of Sufism

**mashvara:** the consultation of all members of a jamā'at before making decisions that affect the group.

**mutkallim:** spokesman

**namāz:** prayer

**nau Muslims:** Muslims in South Asia who were partially Islamized and shared ritual practices with other confessional groups

**rahbar:** guide

**shuddhī :** “purification,” the Ārya Samāji ritual of conversion

**tablīgh:** “communication,” proselytism

**taḥrīk-e irtidād:** “movement for apostasy,” the term used by Muslim reformers to describe Ārya Samāji conversion campaigns

**tark-e lāya'ni:** “rejection of the pointless,” a seventh principle of the Tablīghī Jamā'at

**tazkira:** used here as a term for biographical memoir

**ṣahaba:** the Companions of the Prophet

**sajjada nashīn:** custodian of a Sufi shrine

**shaikh:** a spiritual leader, particularly in the context of Sufism

**shari'at:** Islamic law

**shirk:** polytheism

**shūra:** “council,” referring both to the elite council that oversees the Tablīghī Jamā'at's central activities and local councils that direct the organization's local branches.

**'ulamā (singular 'ālim):** scholars of Islam

**ummat:** “community,” usually used to describe the Muslim community



## Prominent Members of the Tablīghī Jamā'at and Other Muslim Reformers

**Rashīd Aḥmad Gangohī (d. 1905):** The co-founder of the *Dāru'l-'Ulūm* Deoband and teacher to Muḥammad Ilyās and his brother, Muḥammad Yaḥyā.

**Ehteshāmu'l-Ḥasan (d. 1971):** A scholar and close associate of Muḥammad Ilyās who wrote an essay entitled “Muslim Degeneration and Its Only Remedy,” which describes the reasons for the “decay” of the Indian Muslim community and describes the Tablīghī Jamā'at's plan for reform.

**Ināmu'l-Ḥasan (d. 1995):** Muḥammad Ilyās' grand-nephew through his sister's son and third *amīr* of the Tablīghī Jamā'at.

**Zubayru'l- Ḥasan:** Son of Ināmu'l-Ḥasan and current co-leader of the Tablīghī Jamā'at.

**Muḥammad Ilyās (d. 1944):** Student of Rashīd Aḥmad Gangohī, teacher, and founder of the Tablīghī Jamā'at.

**Abū A'alā Maudūdī (d. 1979):** Founder of the Jamā'at-e Islāmi, a religious and political party that was formed in British India and established branches throughout the subcontinent.

**Ḥasan Nizami (d. 1955):** A *sajjada nashīn* (custodian) at Nizam-ud-Din Auliya's shrine in Delhi, prolific writer, and leader of a popular movement for *tablīgh* during the first half of the twentieth century.

**Muḥammad Sa'd:** Son of Muḥammad Yūsuf and current co-leader of the Tablīghī Jamā'at.

**Muḥammad Yaḥyā (d. 1915):** Muḥammad Ilyās' older brother who studied with him under Rashīd Aḥmad Gangohī and helped him during the early years of the Tablīghī Jamā'at's organization. Father of Muḥammad Zakariyyā.

**Muḥammad Yūsuf (d. 1965):** Muḥammad Ilyās' son and successor who spearheaded the movement to make the Tablīghī Jamā'at a transnational movement.

**Muḥammad Zakariyyā (d. 1982):** Son of Muḥammad Yūsuf and famous scholar of *ḥadīth* at *Mazāhīru'l-'Ulūm* Saharanpur. Prolific scholar who wrote several essays for the Tablīghī Jamā'at at the request of his uncle, Muḥammad Ilyās.

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