

Daily Ritual, Mission, and the Transformation of the Self: the Case of Tablighi Jamaat

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Abstract

Tablighi Jamaat (TJ) is Islam's largest movement, with estimates of up to 80 million Muslims taking part in its activities. Having originated on the Indian subcontinent, TJ has expanded to have a strong presence across the globe. Traditionally, TJ is known for bringing lapsed Muslims back to a stricter understanding of Islam and the recommendation that its male (and to an increasing extent also its female) members spend a certain portion of time each year working on the “path of Allah” — that is, on missionary activities. Tablighi leaders are conscious that participation in the movement impacts not only those who are the targets of missionary activity but also those who are doing the missionizing, having a powerful effect upon the formation of selfhoods. TJ also emphasizes the importance of imitating the Prophet Muhammad, and members are encouraged to ritualize every aspect of their life in accordance with the Prophet's example. The ritualization of everyday practices, a focus on purity and mission, combined with textual (re)interpretation, contribute to individual and collective identity construction among members of TJ. For TJ, the formation of modern Muslim selfhoods is of vital importance, as they believe that an identity centered on an authentic form of Islam can protect Muslims in a fast-changing world.

Keywords

modernity – Tablighi Jamaat – subjectivity formation – ritual – purity

The impact of migration by Muslims to non-Muslim countries over the past several decades, in particular to liberal democracies in the West, has opened up avenues for new lived experiences and transformations of modern selfhoods.

Within the West, Muslims have attempted to create (whether consciously or not) modern subjectivities that allow for meaningful lives in diverse spaces. Globalization has been a catalyst in the (re)shaping of modern selfhoods, or as Paul Gilroy puts it, “identity is an anchor in globalization” (2000: 113). Iner and Yucel go even further in arguing that identity “becomes a beacon in the middle of vacillating borders and a shield to protect one from being everything or nothing” (2015: 3). In this sense, there has been an “interlacing of Islamic traditions with globally relevant social imaginaries” that has contributed to the “construction of collectively acknowledged ways of forming meaningful Muslim selfhood” (Jung 2016: 18).

For members of Tablighi Jamaat (Preaching Party),¹ an international Muslim missionary movement, much emphasis is placed on working among Muslim communities in order to shape modern Muslim selfhoods in an Islamic way. For participants in the activities of Tablighi Jamaat (TJ), the world as it is now, especially in the West, is seen to be in a state of *jahiliyyah*, that is, in the state of ignorance that existed prior to the revelation of the Qur’an. From this perspective, the world has deserted its dependence on Allah and has drifted into a state of decadence and confused immorality where identities are increasingly fused together, and less emphasis is placed on Islam as a distinguishing marker of identity. Tablighis believe that this has happened because Muslims, the vice-regents of Allah, have become lazy, forsaking their religious and social duties (Ali 2006: 182). Despite significant differences between the outlook of Tablighi Jamaat and the more overtly political ideologies of Abdul Maududi and Sayyid Qutb, discourses over the nature of *jahiliyyah* in particular seem to have converged. Many participants in TJ identify with Maududi’s re-coining of *jahiliyyah* as the “new barbarity” that is incompatible with Islam, as well as with Sayyid Qutb’s sentiment that *jahiliyyah* “is now, not in that simple and primitive form of the ancient *Jahiliyyah*, but takes the form of claiming that the right to create values, to legislate rules of collective behavior, and to choose any way of life rests with men, without regard to what Allah has prescribed” (Qutb 2006: 27). To rectify this, TJ leaders stress the importance of missionary activity by Muslims among the faithful as a means of re-orienting lapsed Muslims back to a correct understanding of Islam and solidifying an identity based on what they regard as an authentic understanding of Islam.

However, Tablighi leaders are aware that participation in the movement impacts not only those who are the targets of missionary activity, but importantly

1 Tabligh is from the Arabic root b-l-gh and classically connotes to something like having arrived at a destination or reaching an objective. Over time the meaning intensified, and in the Face of Tablighi Jamaat it means propagation or preaching.

also those who are doing the missionizing. There is an understanding that the process of engaging in missionary activities has a powerful effect upon the formation of selfhoods, and some stress that this is one of the main benefits of joining the movement. Indeed, those who partake in the activities of TJ often view themselves as participants rather than followers or adherents, and this serves to capture the experiential and transformative aspects of the movement. This is captured very well by Noor, who notes that participation in the work of TJ is seen by Tablighis as “a state of being, a process of becoming” (Noor 2012: 166). For Tablighi leaders, the process of engaging in missionary activities and traveling away from the familiar to the unknown in order to preach to other Muslims is essential for the development of an appropriate modern selfhood.

This article will examine the ways in which members of TJ shape modern selfhoods as a result of participation in the movement and will address the following interrelated questions: Do the daily rituals of TJ and going out on mission help participants to develop a sense of agency? And do these activities impact the formation of new Muslim subjectivities? To address these questions the article moves away from a pure analysis of the canonical and important texts of TJ toward an exploration of forms of discourse and social practices in the everyday lives of its members. The article will investigate how everyday ritual practices, aspects of purity, and the ways in which texts are (re)interpreted contribute to individual and collective identity construction among members of TJ living primarily in Britain but also more broadly in the West. For TJ, the formation of modern Muslim selfhoods is of vital importance, as they believe that an identity centered on an authentic form of Islam acts as protection in a fast-changing world. It is clear that missionary activities can serve to impact the lives of those being proselytized, but my focus here is on Tablighi missionary tours as a means to the transformation of the self.

1 Methods

The research for this article is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork among Tablighi communities in the UK for almost a decade between 2009 and 2018. The period between 2009 to 2012 included regular (almost weekly) attendance at Thursday evening *bayan* (motivational preaching), interviews with leaders and grassroots members, collecting and analyzing Tablighi literature (e.g. Elahi 1992; Elias 2004; Hasani 1982; Ilyas 1967; Kandhlawi 1997; Miah 2001; Nadwi 2002; No'mani 2002). Between 2013 and 2018, visits were made to Tablighi mosques in the UK for Thursday evening *bayan* during the summer months (June–August), while also keeping up with video lectures by prominent

Tablighis online, as recommended by different TJ participants. Elements of risk and security were important considerations in the research design and implementation. Anonymity was granted to all participants so as to mitigate what Lambert terms “risks of harm,” except in instances where their role was a matter of public record and their consent was forthcoming (Lambert 2010: 75). All names used in this article are pseudonyms to protect the identity of individual participants.

While in the past Urdu was the most common language associated with Tablighi gatherings in the UK, over time the use of English has become more prominent, and now any sermons delivered in Urdu at TJ’s key mosques in the UK are translated into English, and in some cases Arabic. TJ’s mosque in West Ham, where I spent most of my time researching the movement (and which has since relocated due to failure to comply with planning permissions), was divided into three separate prayer halls, with each room having the sermon translated into English, Urdu, or Arabic, depending on the language understood. Given the central importance of teaching to TJ, efforts are made for the talks to be accurately translated, although some words — for example, *amal* (work or effort), *imam* (faith), *haq* (truth) — are left untranslated, as it is assumed that the majority of those present will understand the meanings. All my interviews were conducted in English, and I was able to purchase the official publications of the movement in English from TJ’s mosques in London and Dewsbury. Almost all discussions on the internet forums recommended to me by TJ activists were in English (demonstrating that English has become a key language alongside Urdu for many Tablighis), and many, though not all, of the recommended YouTube videos had English translations.

TJ enforces strict segregation of the sexes, and as such all the participants in this study are men. Though these men talked liberally about the ways in which women can participate in the movement, I was not able to verify any of the details with female members. Additionally, I was not able to observe any women attending any sessions at any Tablighi mosque that I visited, due to women not being permitted to attend the gatherings. In interviews with senior members of the movement, the claim was made that women were encouraged to pray at home rather than being prohibited from attending the mosque. In order to try to gain a better perspective about women’s involvement with TJ, I supplemented interview data with ethnographic accounts provided by female researchers, including Barbara Metcalf (2004) and Marloes Janson (2014).

The article will draw on the ethnographic data to argue that donating time to Tablighi activities is integral to shaping the subjectivities of Tablighis and that everyday practices that the movement seeks to inculcate in every member are very important and influential in solidifying these subjectivities.

Important to this process will be the notion that all participants in TJ, whether on mission or not, are to structure their daily lives in direct imitation of the *sahaba*, the companions of the Prophet Mohammad. The daily lives of committed Tablighis are regulated in minute detail from how to drink a glass of water to how to sleep in bed at night. Through the everyday experiences of members — the seemingly mundane — we can gain a better understanding of how following rules in every aspect of life can serve to internalize those behaviors and over time forge a distinct Muslim subjectivity. Aspects that were explored in interviews with participants included the ways in which the religious traditions of TJ condition the formation of modern Muslim subjectivities and the extent to which taking part in TJ missionary tours changed the ways in which participants view themselves.

These questions are of vital importance when looking at the impact of Tablighi missionary tours on the formation of modern subjectivities, especially as on missionary tours Tablighi men are expected to cook, clean, iron, and do many other tasks that at home would traditionally fall to their female relatives, and as a result they claim that they return as better husbands and as better members of society. The movement also claims that teenage boys who take part in missionary activities are less prone to use drugs or engage in gang activities when back home. As such the movement in the West argues that far from being isolationist they are a force for producing responsible citizens who are active and ethical members of the community (Pieri 2015).

2 Theoretical Framework

The notion of how individuals form their subjectivities was central to the thinking of Michel Foucault, whose work continues to be influential in debates on subjectivity formation. Foucault was primarily concerned with how subjects regulate themselves and how “a human being turns him or herself into a subject” (Foucault 1988: 19). Foucault described “the encounter between technologies of domination of others and those of the self” as governmentality, and he saw subjectivity produced through individual self-regulation as an effect of power (1998: 147). A central aspect of the concept of governmentality is what Foucault calls

technologies of the self ... which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so

as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.

FOUCAULT 1988: 18

At the core of this is a subject that Garland (1997) calls the “responsibilized actor,” that is, the individual who actively participates in shaping his or her self and governs him or herself to align with larger social, governmental, and institutional aims (Schneider 2012: 406). Thus, governments or socio-cultural institutions exert power over individuals “not through coercion of passive subjects, but through the production of subjects who choose to be active in their own government” (407). This is something that is clearly seen with participants in Tablighi Jamaat; for example, they willingly choose to live their lives according to the rules that govern every aspect of the way they live, or to participate in missionary tours with the expectation that these will impact their notions of their own self.

As Foucault states, “Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free” (Foucault 1982: 790). While individuals may choose the various ways in which they care for the self and constitute themselves as subjects, they are limited by the patterns that are available in their culture. That is, the constitution of subjects always takes place within some system of truth. For members of the TJ, this system of truth is found in the structuring, or ordering, of the world according to Tablighi principles, and it is shaped through the daily rituals of the movement and in the missionary activities in which members participate. The truths that TJ as a movement holds dear often jar with the prevailing outlook in the societies in which TJ operates, and this is especially the case in the West, where secular and liberal values form the socio-cultural milieu.

Through ritualizing every aspect of daily life and through using proselytization as a central tool in its activities, participants in TJ gain a sense of agency that frees them from local norms and cultures. Stewart argues that through providing connections between “individual participants and an imagined transnational community,” participants gain agency, which he defines as “acting autonomously from cultural constraints ... to purposefully fashion one’s perceptions of and interactions with external actors, events, and situations.” It is this that is referred to as subjectivity, and Stewart suggests that “[consciously shaping] a more pious subjectivity is a primary means by which Tablighis assert agency” (Stewart 2018: 4). As such, the form of power that Foucault talks about “applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity,

imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him" (Foucault 1982: 781).

Foucault places importance on context as a determining factor in subjectivity formation. In the case of this article, contextual factors refer to the experiences of members of TJ living in relatively secular Western liberal democracies as well as to the image of the good life that TJ as an institution carves out for its members, based on a specific understanding of Islam. Belonging to a transnational organization such as TJ "both frees one from local constraints on agency and encourages one to assert agency by reshaping one's subjectivity to embody a perception of transnational orthodoxy" (Stewart 2018: 4).

As a movement, TJ is an example of governmentality beyond the state, because for participants in TJ, true piety is defined as *iman* (faith), and this is located in the heart and cannot be enacted or forced by the state or through legislation (see also the article by Cevik, this issue); it is a voluntary choice. This article also draws upon Jung and Sinclair's definition of modernity: "the principal belief in the contingent nature of social life" (Jung and Sinclair 2015: 25). Modern individuals and collectives, as Jung and Sinclair put it, "live in constant tension between order and uncertainty. At the macro level this social contingency raises the question as to the way in which a man-made social order is possible; at the micro-level individuals are confronted with the task of constructing their own meaningful forms of subjectivity" (25).

3 Tablighi Jamaat

Tablighi Jamaat was founded in India in 1926 by Maulana Muhammad Ilyas (d. 1944). Since then TJ has expanded at a rapid pace and now has a presence in almost every country across the globe. Estimates of participation in the movement's activities range up to 80 million (Pieri 2015: 50). The key drivers behind the movement have been discussed in detail by a number of studies to date, and all refer to the "Six Points of Tabligh" as outlined by Ilyas (Ali 2006; Horstman 2007; Janson 2014; Nadwi 2002; Pieri 2015). These points focus on: (1) the *kalima*, the articulation of the Muslim faith by all TJ adherents; (2) *salat*, commitment to performing all of the daily prayers and in the correct manner; (3) *ilim* and *zikr*, commitment from all TJ adherents to acquire religious knowledge and to remember God; (4) *ikram*, always to respect fellow Muslims; (5) *niyyat*, striving to re-orient one's own self through pure intentions; and (6) *nafr*, the donation of time to go out in the path of God to bring others to the correct understanding of the faith (Ilyas 1967; Elahi 1992).

While the first five of the six points conform to the regular expectations for all practicing Muslims, Ilyas's innovation was in the sixth point, that of donating time for missionary purposes. At the time, Ilyas called for his followers to become travelling lay preachers to be dispatched all over India to bring lapsed Muslims back into the fold of Islam. As Reetz argues, the objective of the travelling groups was twofold: "the participants should reform themselves on these tours and they should carry their faith to other fellow Muslims who so far had remained passive or disinterested in the observance of religious practices" (Reetz 2003: 296). For Ilyas the six-point program of the TJ aimed at the revitalization of faith and in reforming the whole character of the individual, providing a complete system and structure for living in the world (Elahi 1992: 11–12).

TJ's initial emphasis was on establishing firm boundaries between Muslim and Hindu identities in India during the colonial period and on protecting Muslims from Hindu conversion efforts. At the time, Muslims were engaging in inter-faith activities, such as celebrating Hindu festivals, and Ilyas and early Tablighi leaders saw this as an affront and something to be challenged. Ilyas regarded Mewat, the area in India where the movement first started, as a "backward" area in which the inhabitants, although nominally Muslim, had lost touch with what it was to be Muslim. In other words, they were in a state of *jahiliyyah* — ignorance of what it was to be Muslim. Mayaram comments that the Meos — those who live in Mewat — professed a "happy combination of Hinduism and Islam" (1997: 43). TJ's goal was to reignite a passion for Islam among lapsed Muslims, to bring them back into the fold of Islam, ensuring that Muslims developed strong Muslim identities.

Bringing lapsed Muslims back to Islam is an objective that still resonates in the contemporary period. While TJ leaders believe that Muslims need reorientation in all societies, the need is seen as more pressing in the West, where secularism and liberal attitudes (they argue) can have a disastrous impact on individual believers. For example, Ilyas once said that "atheism and apostasy, which is coming hand-in-hand with the western government and political system ... these sources of waywardness will rush like the flood" (quoted in No'mani 2001: 97). The perception here is that minority Muslims would lose their religious identities in the wave of Western education and cultural dominance that would follow. In the view of TJ, many Muslims in the West have deviated from the straight path of Islam, being Muslim in name but secular in custom. One participant in this study noted, perhaps with some ironic humor, that "it has now become so difficult to distinguish Muslims, that the only option left if someone was to suddenly die, is to pull down their pants to see if

they are circumcised.”² Many of my participants also stressed that the situation in Britain is so bad that it is akin to a modern-day Mewat and British Muslims are the new Meos.

TJ cannot be understood without placing it within the context of the Deobandi tradition of Islam from which the movement first emerged and with which close ties are still maintained. Deobandism had its origins in 19th-century India. It was established in the aftermath of the so-called Indian Mutiny to create a consciousness of Islam among Indian Muslims, and to set them apart from their British masters and Hindu neighbors (Pieri 2012: 15). The emphasis of this tradition is to inculcate in Muslims the central importance of Islam as the very essence of what it means to be a contemporary Muslim, that the way one dresses, acts, works, and socializes is of central importance to one’s identity and character as a spiritual being. The Deobandis were determined that through their standard of correct belief and practice, they would be defined as a group not only separate from but also morally superior to the British (Metcalf 1982: 153). In the 1920s, TJ would emerge from this tradition, stressing and intensifying many of the concepts of individual renewal and moral purity.

Worried that existing Islamic educational institutions were not capable of fending off the Hindu challenge, Ilyas envisioned a movement that would send missionaries to villages to instill Muslims with core Islamic values. Many participants of the movement see their activities in the organization as central to their own formation of modern Muslim selfhoods, and this is because TJ stresses the importance of forming distinct Muslim subjectivities that can root an individual deep within the practice of Islam and protect them from secularizing and Western influences. As Horstman states, TJ participants “support a view of social change that is characterized by a transition from a primitive past to a civilized present” (2007: 28). Because of this, TJ has fallen under suspicion for providing a platform in which its members can become radicalized, and in the West it has been branded as a vehicle for promoting segregation and rejecting the values of liberal democracies (Pieri 2015).

For its male members (and increasingly its female members as well), TJ recommends spending a certain portion of time each year working on the path of Allah, i.e., that they donate time to the missionary activities of the movement, going door-to-door to call back Muslims to a stricter and more authentic version of Islam. This process of going out on *Jamaat*, or missionary tour, is known as *khuruj*. The missionary activities cannot be separated from any other activity that a Tablighi engages in. Members are to strive to implement Tablighi

² Participant 1, Thursday 21 January 2010.

principles in every aspect of their daily lives, including the workplace and in all activities from the ordinary to the extraordinary. This process of constant striving in the path of piety has a deep impact on the ways in which Tablighis form modern selfhoods.

TJ is based on the understanding that Muslims have grossly neglected the teachings of Islam and that many Muslim elites have become too comfortable with luxurious lifestyles and have given up their obligations to Allah. Furthermore, for TJ the religious establishment — the *ulama* — focus excessively on knowledge construction within the confines of educational institutions and mosques, and in the process they have neglected their duty to preach to the majority of Muslims (Ali 2010: 105). To counter this “division between learned and lay Muslims, Mohammad Ilyas (1885–1944) invoked the fundamental principles of Islam in these communities. He argued that the responsibility of spreading Islam was not confined to the *ulama* but was incumbent on every Muslim” (Ali 2010: 105). The idea was that every Muslim by virtue of simply being a Muslim could educate fellow Muslims in the fundamentals of the faith. As Ali argues, this type of educational process is potent not only in encouraging correct practice and knowledge of Islam in other Muslims but also in “helping the educators themselves gain deeper insight and understanding of Islam and thus perfecting their own practices” (2003: 175).

This idea has the powerful effect of elevating every Muslim, no matter how learned, to the position of an ambassador of the faith. As a result, when participating in TJ many “ordinary” Muslims now have the opportunity to leave “their life worlds ... which [may] have little to offer marginalized Muslims, and to jump on the train of exciting future perspectives in an empowered, pure, and disciplined *umma* of the globalizing Tablighi Jamaat” (Horstman 2007: 38).

4 The Ritualization of Everyday Life

For TJ, prime importance is placed on the individual's entire being as what constitutes a Muslim first and foremost; the physical, material self of the Muslim is the real site in which faith is constituted and cultivated. For Mahoney (1974), the material being or material self is an environment in its own right with which we become familiar early in life. While it is possible that we may have little control over the contexts in which we find ourselves, we do have control over our own material being, which we can train and discipline in a particular way, should we choose to, to meet specific needs and desires. Similarly, Tablighis find it logical and feasible to reform the individual self — the material self — because as an individual they have jurisdiction, or in

Foucauldian terms, governance over the material me to an extent that they do not have over the wider environment.

In this sense, then, the resolve of TJ is not to engage directly in the remaking of the world through restructuring key social, economic, and political institutions in society but rather to re-imagine individual lives and re-create Muslims in the form of the “true” Muslims of an imagined pristine Islamic period. The re-creation of Muslims is not so much about inculcating belief or persuading Muslims to subject themselves to a transformation. Rather, it is about concentrating on rituals and practices — doing good deeds, repeating certain behaviors, and engaging in ritual actions (Ali 2010: 113). As Ali discusses, for TJ, social change always begins with individuals who “engage in self-reformation and in disseminating the rituals and practices of the movement embodied in the Tablighi path beyond the confinements of religious institutions into the broader community.” This approach is intended to rejuvenate the Muslim population and regenerate their Islamic faith, leading to the creation of a pious community and society governed by Islamic law (Ali 2010: 123).

For committed Tablighis, their daily lives and interactions are regulated by strict guidelines that TJ puts into place in order to keep participants oriented towards Islamic selfhoods. Acts that would be considered mundane by many — for example, drinking water, going to the bathroom, brushing one’s teeth, and how to sleep in bed, to name only a few — are all regulated by the movement by the example of the Prophet and his Companions, and in a sense these acts are ritualized. This serves the purpose of removing those who follow a Tablighi lifestyle from the prevailing secular (or un-Islamic) societies in which they would ordinarily function and helps to create a new subjectivity that reinforces their identity as good Muslims. As Stewart notes, Saba Mahmood’s use of the Aristotelian notion of *habitus* is appropriate here, because with TJ it “represents conscious and purposeful self-transformation by embodying virtuous behaviors in the hopes that they will become internalized” (Stewart 2018: 31). Through constant repetition of specified ways of living one’s life, the expectation is that these behaviors will eventually become effortless.

This process was reflected in an interview with one of my participants.³ We were talking about the significance of Islamic dress to TJ, and the participant said that it was very important for all Muslims to dress in accordance with Islamic standards. The preference is for traditional Islamic clothing such as the *shalwar kameez* (often associated with Pakistan) or a *thoub* (often associated with Arab countries); the pants should stop at the ankles, beards should be a fistful in length, and socks should be leather. My participant claimed that all of

³ Participant 2, Thursday 8 December 2011.

this is done in imitation of the Prophet Muhammad. The movement expects women to follow strict codes of Islamic dress, which means that all parts of the body, including the face, should be covered in loose fitting garments while out in public. When I questioned this emphasis on outward appearance as perhaps being somewhat shallow, my participant retorted, saying that what is important to realize is that “once someone starts dressing as a Muslim, even if their faith is not strong, they will start to behave more like a Muslim. Perhaps they will be in the shop thinking of buying alcohol, but because they are dressed in that way they will stop and not do it.”⁴ The emphasis was on the importance of making efforts in correct practice irrespective of the strength of one’s faith. This is because TJ participants believe in the power of appearance and practice to have a transformative effect on the self; it is a means to effect a new construction of selfhood and a performance of religiously oriented subjectivity.

In another example, at one of my first Thursday evening gatherings at TJ’s mosque in the West Ham area of London, a participant of the movement, who later also became a participant in my research, stopped me to correct me on how I entered the mosque.⁵ He explained that I had rushed in, not paying attention to which foot I had placed forward before the other. I was baffled by this, and he explained that those who participate in TJ always enter the mosque with the right foot first and leave the mosque with the left foot first. He said, “Likewise, when you go to the toilet, you enter with the left foot, and you leave with the right foot.” At a later date this participant explained that this level of detail is important because it prompts Muslims to think about each and every action that they take. Having to consider each step helps Muslims to focus inward on building their faith and in solidifying their identities.⁶

Once I became more familiar with TJ practices, I noticed that almost every action taken by regular Tablighis was regimented, and it soon became easy to distinguish between the regulars of the movement and those who were not. Many of the rules that participants in TJ follow are clearly detailed in the literature of the movement, and it is claimed that they are directly based on examples of the Prophet Muhammad and the first three generations of Muslims. Some of the rules outlined in literature that TJ participants read (Miah 2001: 69–74; Ilyas 1967: 47–50; Kandhlawi 2007) include always eating with the right hand and always from the corner of the dish — never from the center — and to lick one’s fingers to remove all food from them. When it comes to drinking water, one should do so while sitting down and holding the glass in the right

4 Participant 2, Thursday 8 December 2011.

5 Participant 3, Thursday 26 November 2009.

6 Participant 3, Thursday 15 March 2012.

hand; the water should be taken down in three gulps. Bedtime is another instance regulated by rules; Tablighis are instructed to dust the bed three times before lying down to sleep, and for sleeping, Tablighis should lie on their right side, with the right hand under the right cheek and recite: “Oh Allah, in your name I live and die.”

In order to encourage correct practice and behavior, TJ leaders have devised a system of points and rewards, which all of my participants cited as being of the utmost importance to them. Some even carried around small notebooks to keep a tally of their points.⁷ One participant told me that depending on which action one follows, one is rewarded a certain number of points. If a person cleans his plate and licks his fingers, he is awarded “x” number of points. If he sleeps on his right side and dusts his bed he is awarded a different number of points. At the end of a Muslim’s life, “Allah will tally up the points and decide on who can enter the hereafter.”⁸ In this way, emulating the pious ancestors is not just a way of life while on earth but also a way of ensuring one’s entry into heaven. During the month of Ramadan there are extra incentives to engage in the work of the movement, and this is encouraged through the accruing of extra points. One Tablighi elder I interviewed stated that “when a person performs something which is *fard* [religiously obligatory] during Ramadan, it is multiplied by 70, but when he goes out in the path of Allah in Ramadan, all this is multiplied by thousands.”⁹ As a result, many Tablighis take the month of Ramadan off from work to focus solely on Tablighi activities. The same elder stated that “going out in the path of Allah is much more than virtue. We want to make an effort and a struggle in the path of Allah so that we achieve paradise. And because of this struggle our *ahirat* [afterlife] will be made better.”¹⁰ These standardized, everyday interactions serve to create a bond between practicing Tablighis, because irrespective of one’s background, all are united in a common system of praxis.

5 *Khuruj*

Within TJ there is a general tendency to argue that ordinary Muslims have neglected their faith and that religious scholars have fallen into inertia. TJ

7 This point came up in almost all interviews with TJ adherents conducted between 2009 to 2014.

8 Participant 4, Thursday 22 October 2009.

9 Participant 5, Thursday 20 October 2011.

10 Participant 5, Thursday 20 October 2011.

requires that ordinary believers constitute a preaching group and travel for a stipulated number of days so as to transform their practice and remind others of religious obligations. TJ shuns materialism and sectarianism. It takes on the duty of preaching, which has traditionally fallen to the *ulama*, being the ultimate duty of every Muslim, male and female, who by teaching others may gain a deeper knowledge of the fundamentals of Islam (Wario 2012: 238). Travel is the most effective tool of personal reform according to the ideology of TJ. TJ's discourse is based on the notion that the call to others to join the movement will first begin with purifying oneself. In other words, the Tablighi ideal is based on the premise that one cannot change or convert the world without converting oneself (Chakrabarti 2010: 601). This conversion takes place through a process of religious journeying referred to by the followers as going on *jamaat* or *khuruj*.

In order to ensure the best outcome, these travels are organized according to strict discipline and planning. In interviews with Tablighi participants, I was informed that the movement offers a number of options to those who wish to donate time to the movement and makes joining in these activities as flexible as possible in terms of time commitment.¹¹ While TJ is famous for its three-day preaching tours, which regular Tablighis are encouraged to do once a month, interviewees said that the preference for new recruits is to donate a period of forty days. This is known as a *chilla*, and the most committed members are expected to perform one *chilla* every year. According to one participant, the reason new recruits are encouraged to do this instead of the three days is that new recruits should be “seen like the old batteries you used to get. The first time you charge them you need to charge them for a long time and after that it is ok to use shorter top-up charges.”¹² The participant expressed the idea that an extended period of time spent on missionary activities would serve to reorient a participant more efficiently and allow them to experience the transformative nature of TJ's work. After this experience, the participant would be more likely to continue in the activities of the movement. Other options for regular members include what is known as a “grand *chilla*,” which consists of three consecutive *chillas* (equating to 120 days), usually in another country, or, for the most devoted Tablighi, a year-long tour. This usually consists of travelling by foot from mosque to mosque in a given country, calling other Muslims to the work of the Jamaat (Hasani 1982: 772).

11 Almost all participants interviewed between 2009 to 2014 commented on the high level of flexibility in TJ's missionary tours, although this did not translate to flexibility when on tour.

12 Participant 6, Thursday 22 October 2009.

One of the things that stands out about *khuruj* from the perspective of my interviewees is that this is a period in which they all claim to have pondered the purpose of earthly life. My interviewees reiterate that life in this world “is short and that our goal is to prepare for the life hereafter.”¹³ The drive for salvation runs strong throughout TJ as a movement, and participants in TJ not only want to “save” themselves but also their fellow Muslims. The goal is to ensure that “we are able to enter the gardens of paradise and not be burned in the fires of hell.”¹⁴ As such, *khuruj* is a chance for all sojourners to rectify any aspects of their own lives that they believe may be hampering them from achieving salvation, as well as to bring salvation to others. As Ali notes, by doing away with the luxuries of life and “sleeping on hardened floor instead of mattresses, doing own cooking, washing own clothes, and overcoming the reliance of material resources, Tablighis are able to gain self-abnegation, modesty and a new outlook on life which sets them apart from ordinary Muslims” (2003: 177).

Theoretically, any Sunni Muslim can take part in *khuruj*, and no previous experience is necessary. Indeed, TJ often targets Muslims who have never participated in its activities before and encourages them to start off by joining a travelling group. The travelling preaching groups have a hierarchical structure, though each position is filled through consensus among the group. Often an experienced Tablighi is elected to act as *amir* (leader), and those with knowledge of the local language or terrain may be elected to fill various other positions and undertake tasks, such as identifying Muslim households in the locality. The preaching groups vary in size and consist of anywhere between three and fifteen members, and each member is expected to finance his or her own travel costs, and all stay together, often cooking, eating, and sleeping in local Tablighi mosques along the way. After completing *khuruj*, there are those who do not engage with the programs of TJ any more, while others choose to engage with TJ when their time allows, and still others become committed members, donating the required time each month to the activities of the movement. The more one participates in *khuruj*, the more opportunities open up for leadership roles within the organization. As such it should be noted that, as with any large organization, TJ has dedicated core members and, at its periphery, those who engage as and when they want.

While traveling, TJ men are expected to acquire a strong set of domestic skills. Most of them learn for the first time how to wash clothes, cook, and

13 This phrase cannot be attributed to a single participant, but rather was echoed by many of those I spoke to. The phrase was also reiterated by TJ leaders in Thursday evening talks from 2009 through to 2018.

14 Participant 8, Thursday 22 October 2009.

clean (Wario 2012: 246). Hands-on experiences with managing “kitchen affairs” inculcate in Tablighi men a greater perception of the challenges of everyday livelihood strategies at home. For this reason, these men are seen to be more sympathetic, less demanding, and gentler towards the challenges of carrying out domestic chores by women at home. Tablighi women have to learn to lead the household in the absence of their husbands, a kind of reverse household headship that could not be imagined in patriarchal societies (Wario 2012: 247). While I was not able to speak with any female participants in TJ, male participants commented that they felt more appreciative of their wives and often changed their behaviors once they got home, for example, sometimes helping with chores around the house or spending more time playing with their children. One participant, who said that his wife attends Tablighi preaching circles for women, would often allow his wife to attend while he prepared the evening meal, recognizing that their relationship was more equal and driven by a joint desire to re-orient their own lives as well as the lives of fellow Muslims.¹⁵ This participant also said that this would play in his family’s favor on the day of judgment.

Engaging in *khuruj* and implementing rituals into everyday life allows committed members of TJ to develop what they believe to be a close and lived relationship with Allah, and this makes the faithful person’s daily experience full of joy. In the context of TJ, the relationship between a Tablighi and Allah is closely entwined and should be regarded as similar to a social relationship in the secular world (Ali 2010: 110). TJ has something to offer: it provides Muslims with an identity, a sense of purpose, and a meaning in life. It forges communities in which Muslims experience self-satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment (127).

Travelling away from one’s locale to spread the word of God and to develop one’s own sense of spirituality is also seen as important in other proselytizing movements, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, whose members are popularly known as Mormons. One important distinction, however, is that TJ is for the most part an intra-Islamic movement focusing on correcting lapsed Muslims rather than knocking on doors in an indiscriminate way. For Mormons, the period spent on mission is an important rite of passage, a time when young Mormons can dedicate themselves to a total commitment to preaching the Gospel and “gain a degree of status within the Mormon world that may last a life time” (Davies 2000: 175). The word “mantle” is often used to refer to a “special religious state” that Mormon missionaries are in — a sense of being “spiritually guided or empowered by God, or able to provide words

¹⁵ Participant 7, Thursday 16 June 2016.

of encouragement that seem to possess a depth over and above that which a nineteen-year old might expect to command" (175). This is remarkably similar to the Tablighi experience of mission, a process from which Tablighi men often claim to have returned changed. Numerous studies show that those who take part in missionary activities, irrespective of their faith background, emerge from that experience with reconfigured notions of their own selfhoods (Ali 2010; Janson 2014; Metcalf 2000; Pepper 2014; Pieri 2014; Wario 2012).

6 Conclusions

Tablighi Jamaat seeks to achieve the return of all Muslims to a more orthodox understanding of Islam, as interpreted by the movement, and seemingly based on the examples of the Prophet Muhammad and early generations of Muslims. Tablighis view the formative period of Islam as a golden age, one that is to be emulated and one that can show the path to salvation. In this sense, TJ as a movement argues that anything other than striving to lead a pious and observant Islamic life is akin to the ignorance that was present in the pre-Islamic era, known as *jahilyyah*. TJ leaders argue that what most people call modern societies and modern subjectivities are, in fact, not modern but rather trapped in the same pattern of degeneracy that existed prior to the revelation of Islam. TJ leaders believe that the movement empowers those who participate in its activities to develop genuinely modern subjectivities in the form of correctly oriented Muslim selfhoods. As a result, TJ has a focus on individual self-transformation, and this allows participants to construct new and Tablighi-approved subjectivities and to keep refreshing and reinvigorating these Muslim selfhoods as they progress through the ranks of the movement.

For participants in TJ, Muslim selfhoods are about leaving behind traditional forms of Islam associated with various cultures and instead reorienting one's life to a correct understanding of Islam as interpreted by the organization. This reorientation is shaped through active participation in the everyday rituals of TJ and through missionary activity. After the completion of missionary service, there are no outward manifestations of the "returned missionary"; it is an invisible social status even among other Tablighis. However, it does serve to provide a common cultural currency. Accordingly, Tablighis see their participation in missionary activities as deeper than a cultural currency; instead, they understand it as the core of shaping the very notion of their selfhoods.

TJ's ideal form of Muslim selfhood is "an external manifestation of a renewed internal consciousness of religious realities, such as God, the life hereafter, and the importance of religious virtues" (Dickson 2009: 109). This internal

consciousness often includes a profound rearrangement of life priorities for those who start to become more regular participants in the activities of TJ, resulting in more time spent at the mosque, increased observance of religious obligations such as praying, fasting, and doing good deeds, and importantly, developing a ritualized performance of living out everyday life. For regular participants in TJ, another expectation is that they willingly give up time in order to go out and preach a “correct” version of Islam to other Muslims. It is clear that participation in the activities of TJ has a profound impact on shaping the subjectivities of those who become committed to the everyday rituals of the movement, and especially those who regularly go on *khuruj*. TJ leaders ensure that the power of being involved with TJ can be immense, and this is something that Jan Ali captured in his field work with TJ in Australia.

In Australia I have seen, for example, a lot of drug addicts and gangsters becoming involved in the religion because of the Tablighi Jamaat. They left the bad things and they don't do bad things ... they pray. The Tablighi Jamaat has provided the environment for the people to have more self-respect, something that's not found in wider Australia. There are a lot of misbehaving teenagers and dysfunctional and dismantled families ... Tablighi Jamaat has a lot of good affect on them.

TJ adherent quoted in ALI 2006: 208

It is also apparent that adhering to the daily rituals of the movement seems to give participants in TJ a greater sense of agency (Pieri 2015), allowing individuals to break from the currents of a predominantly secular society and to strive for a different purpose, a purpose that is more important: personal salvation. For TJ, it is important to re-orient the individual toward a correct understanding and practice of Islam, and as such the movement tends to eschew any involvement with politics in the hard sense. As Ilyas put it: “while positing a ... break with [the] secular and mundane, [it] generated a new overriding social definitions of Muslim *ummah* and bound Tablighis with new ties of fellowships as well as ideas of a new type of morality based on inner conscience” (Ali 2003: 178).

For participants in TJ, the formation of modern Muslim selfhood is of vital importance, because they believe that an identity centered on an authentic form of Islam serves to bolster them in a fast-changing world. The movement aims to provide a space in which its participants can develop their identities as Muslims as well as receive encouragement to help other Muslims develop Muslim selfhoods too. TJ's missionary activities impact the lives of those being proselytized, but perhaps more importantly, the missionary develops a

transformation of the self while on a mission. As argued throughout this article, the missionary tours in which Tablighis participate function as modes of self-conversion as much as shaping the selfhoods of others. To put it differently, it is the agent of change (i.e., the individual) who is also frequently the main beneficiary of the missionary tour (Chakrabarti 2010: 603).

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