Travelers’ Tales in the Tablighi Jama‘at

By BARBARA METCALF

The extensive Islamic missionary movement of Tablighi Jama‘at, which originated in colonial India but is now worldwide, encourages participants to go out on small group tours to invite others, primarily nominal Muslims, to return to faithful adherence to Islamic teachings, above all the canonical prayer. At the conclusion of a tour, participants should report back, orally or in writing, their experiences to the mosque-based group (local, regional, or national) from which they set out. A sample of these reports, called karguzari, are the basis of this article. The reports reflect two discourses: one of jihad, in the sense of the nonmilitant “greater jihad” focused on self-discipline; and one of Sufism, embedded in the efforts of the charismatic group rather than in institutional tasawwuf.

Keywords: Tablighi Jama‘at; Islamic missionaries; karguzari

The colonial period in South Asia witnessed far-reaching changes in religious thought and organization as well as in the domains of life that increasingly came to be signified as “religious.” No change was more momentous than the emergence of politicized religious communities in public life. This was true for all the Indian religious traditions. Two further changes, again ones that ran across religious traditions, were also significant. One represented efforts to measure current behavior and doctrine against textual norms. The effort to line up behavior with what were imagined to be pristine divine teachings was a major theme of what might be called “an improvement ethic” characteristic of socioreligious movements of the last century of colonial rule. Second, again across traditions,

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there was an extension in the range of those deemed authoritative in religious matters to what might be called “lay” participants outside the traditions of learning or birth that had previously determined who could claim to speak and act for fellow adherents. Both of these changes are evident in the Muslim movement popularly known as Tablighi Jamaʿat, the “preaching” or “inviting” society. This movement is notable, however, in that it stands apart from explicit concerns about public life and competition to secure communal interests in the larger society. It is what could be called a movement of encapsulation.

The Tablighi Jamaʿat traces its origins to north India in the 1920s. At that point, even though its rhetoric focused wholly on Muslim failure and the need to draw nominal Muslims to fidelity, it was in fact one of many Muslim movements stimulated to action by aggressive Hindu attempts to “reconvert” what were seen as nominal Muslims to Hinduism. The movement took on new energy after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, most importantly in Mewat, the location of the movement’s origins, where Hindus had engaged in ruthless “ethnic cleansing.” Tablighi Jamaʿat began a worldwide program, particularly from the 1960s, with the spread of immigrant populations to America and Europe and beyond. It now engages non–Indo-Pakistani populations as well.

It is conventional today to point to either of the annual international three-day congregations held in Raiwind in Pakistan or Tungi in Bangladesh and describe the turnout at each—of some 2 million—as the largest annual congregations of Muslims outside those who gather each year to perform the ḥajj at Mecca. Even in India, where there has been a preference for regional meetings rather than a single national meeting, a congregation held in Bhopal in December 2002 apparently drew about a million people.

Those who began this movement were themselves ‘ulama linked to the reformist seminary at Deoband. Typical of the Deobandi ‘ulama, they were also part of Sufi networks, devoted to their sheikhs from whom they received initiation and charismatic blessing, engaged in sufi disciplines and inner purification, cherishing the genealogy of holy men whose links passed back to the Prophet Muhammad himself. The Deobandis emerged in the brutal context of post–1857 Mutiny repression, which fell particularly hard on north Indian Muslims. They turned inward to disseminate what we might call cultural renewal through devotion to correct Islamic interpretation and practice coupled with devotion to the Prophet Muhammad. The key figures in this movement were widening circles of ‘ulama trained in newly formalized madrasas, supported by the outpouring of publications permitted by newly available printing presses—pamphlets, polemical literature, summaries of correct practices, advisory opinions given to individual questioners, biographies, and collections of anecdotes about the holy and learned. Religious leaders, long dependent on patronage of the wealthy and pious endowments, came to depend on popular support.¹

The Deobandis were only one of several Sunni Muslim reformist groups that had emerged at the turn of the century. One, popularly called “Barelvi,” while also giving a new popular role to the holy and learned ‘ulama, were more Catholic in their acceptance of customary practices associated with veneration of satiyūids,
holy men, saints, and the Prophet (Sanyal 1996). Another, the Ahl-i Hadith, in contrast, was like the Arabian Wahhabis (who traced their origin to an iconoclastic late-eighteenth-century reform movement and who found renewed vigor in internal competition within Arabia in the 1920s). They broke with the use of the historic schools of legal interpretation (for the Deobandis and Barelvīs and other north Indians, the Hanafī school) in favor of direct recourse to the Qur’an and the prophetic hadith. They opposed Sufi customs, and they discouraged pilgrimage to the Prophet’s grave in Madina. Theirs was a minority position. These orientations are salient today, describing not only jurisprudential positions but also categorizing mosques, voluntary organizations, and, in some contexts, political parties as well.

The Tabligh movement stands in dramatic contrast to...the Afghan Taliban, which sought to use state institutions to achieve morality rather than depend on invitation and persuasion directed toward individuals.

As they emerged in the late nineteenth century, these competing groups debated to some extent with reformist Hindus, such as the Arya Samajis, who were increasingly concerned to “reconvert,” as they saw it, non-Hindus within India, and with Christian missionaries. But even in those contexts, the primary audience was other Muslims. In other words, a reason to debate Arya Samajis or Christians was less to influence them than to show oneself as the spokesman or defender of “Islam” in public life to one’s fellow Muslims. This was a new understanding of Islam, as a corporate identity in competition with others, and it created a new role for both religious and political leaders.

A scion of several generations of ‘ulama associated with Deoband, Maulana Muhammad Ilyas (d. 1944) is taken to be the founder of Tablighi Jama’at (Sikand 2002). The context for his program was the period of intense Hindu-Muslim tension that followed the dashed expectations of the First World War and the Khilafat movement when north India in particular was rent by riots and particularly intense missionary activities by the Arya Samajis. His response was not to move into new arenas that were emerging for the ‘ulama, like politics, but to intensify the original Deobandi program of inner-looking grassroots reform of individual lives as a solution to the same problem of defending Islam.
Maulana Ilyas argued that what had been seen as the responsibility (farzu’l kifaya) of the ulama, namely, teaching fidelity to correct behavior, was in fact the obligation of all Muslims (farzu’l‘ain), a radical example of the move to “lay” leadership. The key to his program was to get Muslims to move out of their normal, everyday enmeshments and pressures to go out in small groups to call other Muslims to this correct practice. He felt that schools were not the way to reach people. Lived experience was. The combination of the group interactions while on a mission coupled with the powerful impact on the teacher himself or herself of teaching others was the key to his program (Metcalf 1994).

Here is a description of the current center of Tabligh work in Pakistan in a recent autobiography of a person who began his involvement in Tablighi Jama’at in the 1940s:

Almighty Allah is most merciful. A great task of revival of the ummah is going on at Raiwind, where there is a totally different atmosphere. People remain busy with Taleem [teaching], Zikr [repetition of sacred phrases], Tilawat [Qur’anic recitation] and briefing for the Tabligh missions. They are helpful and loving, leading simple austere lives, only concerned with Akhirat [the world to come] and aloof from petty selfish concerns. . . . They arrange ijtimas [convocations], go out to different countries for a year or seven months and remain busy in the local mosques inviting people to participate in the missionary work among Muslims, who have become Muslims in name only and abandoned all religious practices. I went frequently on Fridays to Raiwind and attended the briefing and du’a by Haji Abdul Wahab. Maulana Ihsan led the Friday prayers. I would enjoy the company of Masihuz Zaman Sahib and Bhai Matloob and also visit the enclosure for foreigners from Arab countries, Europe, Africa and Far East. . . . Jamaats would go on foot to the remotest areas of Pakistan and suffer hardships to win the pleasure of Allah subhanahu Taala. . . . A majority of our people do not understand the meaning of Kalama [the attestation of faith]; prayers do not regulate our lives; and we fail to discharge our duties. Our rich do not pay zakat [obligatory alms] and accumulate wealth in safe deposits. [Others emphasize] education, . . . industrial development, . . . economic prosperity. These are really offshoots; the root lies in our spiritual and moral development. Without faith and submission to the will of Allah we cannot succeed. Tabligh is a world reform movement. . . . It is mass moral education for drawing people closer and reforming their habits. . . . We have been warned. . . . Our faith is not complete unless we take up the task of da’wah [mission, “inviting”] in right earnest. (Inam-ul-Haq 1999a)

Several themes are clear in this brief, insider’s overview of the movement. A central theme is the absolute focus on individual moral behavior in contrast to social and economic programs. Indeed, a major complaint of opponents is precisely this failure to engage with what are seen as pressing social, economic, and political needs of the day. In this regard, the Tabligh movement stands in dramatic contrast to the ideology of a second Deobandi-related movement, in this case one that called itself Deobandi (as Tablighis do not), namely, the Afghan Taliban, which sought to use state institutions to achieve morality rather than depend on invitation and persuasion directed toward individuals (Metcalf 2002b). A second theme of the Tablighis is the priority of teaching other Muslims on the grounds that however many Muslims there may be in name, almost none are properly Muslim. It is up to a
faithful few, like the first lonely Muslims of Mecca, to achieve a veritable revolution in mass behavior. Finally, the call to Tabligh is one of high seriousness. Tabligh may be inward looking in the sense of not having a political program. But it insists that the individual must be effective in the world. It is not enough to study, pray, and engage in Sufi disciplines oneself. The obligation to mission is not negotiable: on fulfilling it hinges nothing less than one’s own ultimate fate at the Day of Judgment.

Tabligh [insist] that preaching must be done face to face, that intellectuality and argument are irrelevant to influencing lives, and that what counts is a meeting of hearts.

All of these themes are evident in firsthand accounts of Tabligh tours, examples of which I briefly describe in the remainder of this article. The writing up or oral recounting of one’s experiences as part of a preaching tour is part of the discipline of participation in Tabligh activities and would serve, through recollection and self-examination, as part of the self-fashioning and self-education the movement ideally fosters. Accounts of tours are known by a term that is not indicative of a genre but of what it is that they communicate, namely, kaarguzaari. Kaar is simply “work,” “action,” “profession,” or “matter.” A person who is kaarguzaar is someone skilled or expeditious or accomplished in his or her work. Kaarguzaari denotes the discharge of one’s duty or business, or “good service” (Platts [1884] 1977, 799). Hence, “Eek tablighi jama’at kii kaarguzaari” might be simply translated as “the service of a tablighi jama’at.”

There is no formal bureaucratic structure to this highly decentralized, voluntary movement; there are no offices and no archives; and even if there were, they presumably would not be open to outsiders. Hence the accounts, which I feel fortunate to have seen at all, are simply a chance collection. According to a full-time Tabligh worker who resides in Raiwind, accounts once read are not kept.3 In contrast, Yoginder Sikand, author of a well-researched history of Tablighi Jama’at, was assured that accounts are kept in the Delhi headquarters, although he was not able to see them.4

Some accounts have recently been posted on the Web. At one point, al-Madina included a link called variously “Kar Guzari” or “karguzari,” in one frame further specified as “true stories in the path of Allah” (www.al-madina.com, links: karguzari; elderspeech; Dawalinks; 1999, 2000, 2001).5 Three printed sources, to which I will now turn, include an account of a mission conducted immediately after
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partition (Anonymous n.d.), accounts that appear in a collection of letters sent to the center in New Delhi in the 1960s (Muhammad Sani Hasani n.d.), and finally, an account of a four-month tour undertaken to China in the 1980s by a group from Maharashtra (Muhammad Hanif 1997).

From Delhi to East Punjab, 1950

The earliest account I have seen (Anonymous n.d.) has presumably been preserved and informally reprinted because it is such a powerful and dramatic account of Tabligh at a time of considerable danger and difficulty. It is readily available, whether as a copy available for a few pennies, lithographed on eight folded sheets with no publication information, at an outdoor book table, as I first found it, or reprinted in more conventional pamphlet format. In 1947, the account argues, many Muslims in India apostatized to save their lives. The amir in Delhi asked Tablighis at the center in New Delhi to be willing to give their lives to bring them back to the fold of Islam. Two jama’ats set out, seen off with tears and prayers. Their extraordinary account is organized in terms of a dynamic: four successive severe tests, each met with divine aid, each followed by new resolve and ultimately success.

Other Muslims were apparently often too fearful for their own safety to offer help, but gradually the jama’ats dispersed and began to find their way to the former Muslims. A group was set on by police, beaten to unconsciousness, and jailed with no provision made for food and drink. They were forced to undertake the latrine detail for the prison. After three days, help from beyond, as they understood it, arrived in an unlikely form. A Hindu officer was jolted into memories of earlier years in Multan. Thus, he was not only a Hindu but a refugee from what had become Pakistan and, hence, a person who might have been expected to be particularly hostile toward any Muslims, let alone Muslims on a proselytizing mission. The officer, however, is reported to have said to the prisoners, “When our children had any difficulty, we would take them to Muslims who were like you. We called them ‘Tablighi Jamat people’ and you seem to be some of them. . . . They were very good people and I loved them.” This was the jama’ats’ first experience of “help from beyond.” The subsequent weeks in jail brought improved conditions and, in fact, afforded an opportunity to engage in Tabligh toward some 250 Muslim prisoners.

The second test came when refugee Sikhs arrived on the scene. They, in contrast to the Hindu officer, came “with guns and rifles ready to kill.” The Tablighis besought them for permission to pray. Their cries and prayers for help were answered, although not before “the floor was red with blood.” The guns of the Sikhs had simply jammed. The Tablighis, of course, saw this again as divine aid. The Sikhs on their part were reportedly so frightened by this event that in the end they brought a doctor who nursed the Tablighis’ wounds. One Sikh, they continued, even tried to learn their teaching and helped guide them on the next stage of their journey.
Again the Tablighis set out, and again they were imprisoned, this time when they settled at a mosque being used by the government for border control. They were put into an old haveli where the well still reeked from the bodies of Muslims killed during partition. Their captors provided them with neither food nor water. A week later, the police returned, expecting to find them dead. Finding them instead alive, they ordered the Tablighis to the mountains, where yet again the Tablighis were arrested. They were beaten, robbed, and thrown into the Ganges in flood. Divine aid this time came in the form of the roots of a tree, which saved them.

Finally a huge wave came, washing them up on shore. This was truly divine aid since had they continued down the river, the local people, as they later learned, would have followed police orders to let them drown. The final miracle was that one person still had his clothes in a bag around his waist. His turban and kurta, torn into pieces, sufficed to cover everyone’s private parts. Again a non-Muslim, a Sikh police inspector, was forced to recognize the extraordinary power, zabardast taqaat, of those on such a mission. This exemplary tale illustrates in extreme form the seriousness and importance Tablighis give to their work, coupled with the divine blessing they confidently expect for doing it. Moreover, in particularly dramatic form, it conveys the sense that the larger world is one antagonistic to the faith of true Muslims.

Letters from Europe and America to the Center, 1960s

A chapter of the biography of Maulana Muhammad Yusuf (d. 1965), the second overall amir of Tablíghi Jama’at at the center at Nizamu’d-din, New Delhi, is composed of accounts of the experience of the first generations of Tablighis who spread beyond the subcontinent, primarily to places (including, in fact, Japan) where migration and work took subcontinental Muslims beginning in the 1960s. The chapter includes extracts from letters written to “Hazratji” Maulana Yusuf. Again, the difficulty of the enterprise is underlined, not now because of physical danger but because of the moral danger posed by what are caricatured as the values of America and Europe. These values are recognized as profoundly alluring. In Maulana Yusuf’s own words,

For those going to do the work of preaching religion in the materialist-worshipping countries of Europe and America, there is need of those men of God who have purpose and conviction; who, when they see the glittering and alluring life and society of those countries, will not let their mouths water, but instead, at the sight of life contrary to Islam and practices contrary to those brought by the Prophet, on whom God’s blessing and peace, will rather, weep. (Muhammad Sani Hasani n.d., 517)

A line of poetry opens the chapter: “O believer, come! Let us show you/A visit of the Divine, within the house of idols” (ibid., 516).
The letters again confirm the priority to be given to lapsed Muslims, not to the non-Muslim population. Yet the letters also express high hopes for what a mere handful, if truly faithful like the Prophet’s embattled followers in Mecca, can accomplish. Indeed, as a 1961 letter writes, the improvement once Tabligh is launched is virtually “without effort” (Muhammad Sani Hasani n.d., 524). Others look ahead to a larger dream:

May Allah make us the means and cause of turning this capital of infidelity and ingratitude [London] into a center of peace and faith. (Ibid., 521)

Presumably, a time would come when Muslims would not only seek out fellow Muslims.

For the most part, however, at this point the letters reflect more the dangers posed by non-Muslims than the opportunity for converting them. This marks a change from the early days of the movement, which had emphasized internal Muslim failures. Either Muslims were neglectful of their religious life completely or they followed deviations in the form of false customs described not as Hindu or Western but as the influence of Sufism or of Shi‘ism. At this point, however, Tablighis in America and Europe devoted considerable energy to setting true Islam against a world of “materialism, self-absorption, and lack of modesty, kindness, and courtesy” (Muhammad Sani Hasani 1967, 516). A Pakistani in New York wrote back to the Center that “people stay out half the night. They work all day, then amuse themselves, men and women, wasting what they earn and oblivious of the End” (ibid., 534). A Tablighi in Detroit wrote that adolescents (sayana qaum) there were “worse than animals” (ibid., 543).

From Maligaon to China, 1986

In the mid-1980s a jama‘at set out from Maligaon, a town in the state of Maharashtra of late known as one of severe communal tensions, for China. The detailed, book-length account of this four-month jama‘at to China is compelling because of the close view it provides of the daily activities on tour. A particularly important dimension of this tour is that it describes interactions between peoples who shared no common language (aside from a precious scattering of contacts who knew some Arabic). The account thus provides a striking example of Tabligh insistence that preaching must be done face to face, that intellectuality and argument are irrelevant to influencing lives, and that what counts is a meeting of hearts.

The account also serves to nuance the meaning of Tabligh apoliticism. As the accounts already cited have made clear, Tabligh draws two boundaries, one between Muslims and an alien cultural world of non-Muslims and a second between the faithful and the vast majority of Muslims who, however pious they may think themselves, are Muslims only in name. Certainly the latter demarcation is important in this account. The Maharashtrians encountered what were to them
shocking local practices, for example, several that reflect on ritual cleanliness. They found the Chinese Muslims using toilets with no modesty or concern for the direction of the qibla direction of Mecca; they also used toilet paper; they ate with the left hand or even with chopsticks; they were wholly oblivious of the Prophetic practice of using the miswak twig for teeth cleaning. The Tablighis found what seemed to them to be women dressed like men. Men and women, moreover, mixed freely in public life. Muslims allowed photography. They wasted their time in “boxing.” These failures, as they were seen, were interestingly attributed to the Chinese Muslims’ being “in the grip of the West” (Muhammad Hanif 1997, 38).

But however much they had gone astray, the Chinese Muslims were also seen as victims in a way that could only intensify opposition to the Chinese state, a critique perhaps easier for Muslim Indians than for Pakistanis, for example, given the alliances of their respective states. Muhammad Hanif (1997) attributed the failure of local imams to cooperate with the Tablighis to their fear of Chinese government reprisals. He recounted stories of outright persecution on the part of the state and dedicated his book “to the oppressed Chinese Muslims.”

In Conclusion

The stories Tablighis tell about themselves can only be understood in the light of the stories they tell about the Prophet Muhammad, the Companions of the Prophet, and those who have followed them. The stories assert that the high standard set in the hadith is gone and that it is again the time of jahiliyya, a time of ignorance classically understood as the pre-Muhammad age in Arabia. In this, Tabligh thinking espouses the same interpretation of the current day as do many twentieth-century Islamist thinkers, notably the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb (1906-66), who place jahiliyya not in the distant past but in the present.7 There is, thus, a particular urgency to Muslims seeking to follow prophetic example today.

The locus classicus for interpreting the early years of Tabligh work in India in a context of jahiliyya was written by Maulana Abu'l-ala Maududi (1903-79). Maududi would later become a critic of Tablighi Jama'at because, like Qutb, he favored political Islam. Indeed, he would emerge as one of the premier Islamist thinkers of the century. Nonetheless, in 1939 he was filled with admiration when he saw Tablighi activities firsthand in Mewat, the area southwest of Delhi where the movement first flourished. His story, published in a leading Urdu journal, told of the unlettered but sturdy Mewatis as the mirror of the Arab Bedouins of the pre-Islamic jahiliyya whose lives were transformed through Islam. Maududi's description of the Mewatis, with their Hindu names, their ignorance of prayer (so that they would gape at someone praying and worry that he had a stomachache), their idols and tufts of hair, has been absorbed into Tabligh legend. “It seemed as if that very spirit, with which at the beginning of Islam the Arab Bedouin rose up for the tabligh of the straight path, now had been born in these people.” If this were the time of jahiliyya, there had to be Bedouins (Abu'l-ala Maududi [1939] 1979, 25).
If Tablighi ideology, despite its fundamentally different program, shares certain assumptions and symbols with political Islam, it also draws on a second language, evident in the accounts as in much Tabligh language. This is a Sufi idiom. Tablighis believe themselves able to receive, through divine blessings granted on account of their work, the high spiritual state and charisma accorded to Sufis. The Sufis gain their blessings through lives devoted to disciplines, meditation, and moral purification coupled with the powerful charisma of succession transmitted through the elder to whom they pledge allegiance. These states can now to be gained by participation in the charismatic community of the jama’at. Thus, the participant gains through his experiential states in this life the assurance that what he is doing is receiving divine blessing.

[S]ome Tablighis, in fact, will emphasize Muslim failure to live morally as a cause of recent Muslim suffering today.

Muhammad Hanif (1997), for example, used such terms as lutf (joy, grace), kaif (exhilaration), and sukun-i qalb (peace of heart) to describe the spiritual experience of his jama’at. The 1950 account spoke of being granted the light of insight (nur-i bastirat) and of the gnosis (ma’arifat) and revelations (inkishaaft) accorded those who participated. Story after story, like those described above, illustrate how a jama’at becomes a vehicle for what are essentially the karamat, or miracles, gained in classic Sufi accounts by a particular holy man who enjoys God’s favor.

The second, and more formative, discourse is the one alluded to above in relation to jahiliyya, the essentially military vocabulary that this “greater jihad” shares with the “lesser jihad” of warfare against the kuffaar. Both, for starts, are jihad, quoting a tradition invoked by one of the leading Deobandi intellectuals, Hazrat Maulana Mufti Muhammad Shafii’ that “the meaning of jihad is those who remove obstacles to religion; one is with the kuffaar and one with the self and Satan” (Anonymous n.d., 5). The shared idiom of jihad gives shape to the jama’at, which, like a political undertaking, is led by an amir (including an amir of each group going out) and guided by consultation (shura). Tablighi preaching tours are described as gasht/jaula, patrols, and khuruj, sorties. Anyone who is “lucky” enough, as described in a 1960s letter (Muhammad Sani Hasanii n.d., 538), to die in the course of a Tabligh tour is a shahid as much as someone is who dies in a militant jihad. Tablighis’ efforts, like those of an armed mujahid, are understood to be fi sabili’llah, in the path of God. There is also the assertion that as in the lesser jihad,
the participant will receive exponentially increased reward for all acts performed in the course of Tabligh so that the canonical prayer during a tour merits the equivalent of twenty lakh prayers of one at home; one rupee spent in the work of jihad is worth a karoor of rupees, and so forth (Anonymous n.d., 2-3). In both forms of jihad, the believer is enjoined to effective action in a world that needs to be changed. The 1950 account opens with a couplet that begins “from actions [which includes calling others to those actions] life is made” (Anonymous n.d., 1).

Among the karguzari on the Web site noted above are travels for preaching tours all over the earth—to Turkey, Palestine, Denmark, Singapore, the Solomon Islands, Bangladesh, Central Asia, Brazil. But also listed as karguzari, discharging a duty, is a karguzari of the armed fighting in Chechnya dated April 2000. The posting describes it as “jihad for the sake of Allah”; it is “an obligatory worship of Allah that we are performing.” “The Russian bear,” as it is called, is an immoral regime. The account calls attention to attacks on civilian targets carried out by Putin “trying to tarnish the image of the Mujahideen in Chechnya.” “We have no quarrel with the innocent Russian people,” the account continues, “our argument is with the Russian government and army, not the women, children and elderly citizens of Russia.”

Some observers assume that participation in the peaceful jihad of Tablighi Jama‘at is a first stage toward militant jihad or at least toward more active political forms of organization. That assumption, like the more extreme assumption that the Tablighi Jihad serves as a cover for terrorists, remains to be demonstrated. It is, however, clear that for millions of participants, the injunction to disseminating individual moral reform is the movement’s only mission. If pressed to talk about political issues, some Tablighis, in fact, will emphasize Muslim failure to live morally as a cause of recent Muslim suffering today, particularly in the swathe of land that swings from Chechnya through Kashmir, to Afghanistan, Iraq, Bosnia, and—most important—Palestine, in contrast to those more public figures who explicitly condemn Christian, Zionist, and other oppression. One of the foundational texts of the movement, from 1945, uses in its English translation “Muslim Degeneracy” to target its primary concern.

Yet for all this crucial difference, as the accounts show, Tablighis share fundamental attitudes with the militants, not least their belief that Islam must be defended. They also are shaped by a commitment to individual action as effective in shaping the larger world, and they share the conviction that that the faithful few, who act “in the way of Allah,” can achieve far-reaching transformations. They also cultivate a cultural encapsulation that divides them starkly from a larger, evil, and threatening world.

Notes

1. For the early history of Deoband, and brief discussion of other movements of the time, see Metcalf (2002a, 2002b).

2. This book serves as an excellent source for the movement, and its extensive bibliography offers a guide to further resources concerning the movement. See also Masud (2000).
5. There is no official Web site of the organization. www.al-madina.com, however, reproduces such material as the texts meant to guide participants’ actions, sometimes known as “The Tabligh Curriculum” or “The Blessings/Virtues of Actions.” See, however, Note 7, below.
6. The book-length form of this account reflects perhaps both the fact that the author is someone with many varied previous books to his credit as well as the need for such a pioneer effort to be well documented.
9. See, for example, B. Raman, “Moscow’s Muddled Objectives,” available 4 January 2003 at www.atimes.com. Questions have also been raised in the United States since the “American Taliban,” John Walker Lindh, and members of two alleged “sleeper cells” arrested near Buffalo, New York, and Portland, Oregon, in 2002 all were understood to have interacted with or participated in tablighi activities.
10. For the peaceful Inam-ul-Haq, whose evocation of the loving, simple, austere, generous lives at Raiwind I quoted early in the article and whose own commitment was to “the greater jihad,” in poems published shortly before his recent death, that line increasingly became “the West.” He wrote movingly in “August 1998” of arrogant Americans seeking to frighten and subdue the weak, “whose hostility is dangerous but friendship fatal.” In “The Second Coming,” he identified Jews as the driving force behind Christians and looked forward to their slaughter at the Last Day: “And there will be an end to villainy/The righteous alone will inherit/The Kingdom of the earth” (Inam-ul-Haq 1999b, 21-22, 96).

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