Islam on the Move

The Tablighi Jama'at in Southeast Asia

Farish A. Noor

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Cover illustration: Tablighis preparing for sleep at the Tablighi Jama'at *Markaz* in Jakarta. Illustration by Farish A. Noor, 2003

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For Amy

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A Note on Proper Names and the Spelling Used in This Book

With the exception of three cases, all names referred to in this book are proper names. But as three of the interviewees insisted on maintaining their anonymity, I have changed their names accordingly.

Throughout the book I have used local spellings whenever I could. This applies to all quotations from interviews as well as local textual sources, which accounts for some of the discrepancies between the spellings in *Bahasa Malaysia* and *Bahasa Indonesia*, which are not entirely similar and/or consistent in some cases.

Glossary

Ahli Kitab: people of the book; refers to Jews, Christians and Muslims who belong to the same Abrahamic tradition

Ansor (Arabic = *ansar*): helpers, volunteers: Muslims who volunteer their time and energy to work in the name of Islam. The term was first applied to those Muslims who volunteered to help the Prophet Muhammad in his work to propagate the teachings of Islam

Akidah: creed

Batin: the inner, esoteric dimension of meaning

Dzikir: remembrance of God; a ritual of uttering the names of God as an act of remembrance

Fakir: beggar, mendicant

Fakir miskin: the poor and destitute

Fardu: religious duty

Fiqh: Islamic jurisprudence

Guru: teacher

Hajj: the pilgrimage to Mecca. *Haji* refers to those who have performed the pilgrimage to Mecca

Halal: that which is sanctioned in Islam

Haram: that which is forbidden in Islam

Hijab: Veil. In the tradition of Islamic mysticism, the *hijab* also refers to the veil between apparent reality and the truth of God

Hukum: judgement. In *Bahasa Malaysia* and *Bahasa Indonesia*, it also means to pronounce judgement on others

Ijtihad: to exercise rational judgement in the process of interpreting religious doctrine and law

Ijma: consensus

Ijtima: gathering. In Tablighi circles, the *Ijtima* refers to the gathering of members of the movement. Some of the grand gatherings of the Tablighis may involve the meeting of tens of thousands of Tablighis at a given location

Imam: leader

Iman: faith

Islam: submission to the will and commandments of God

Jihad: to struggle. Scholars have noted that in Muslim history there has always been a distinction between the greater Jihad (*Jihad Akbar*) – which is the struggle against one's own ego – and the lesser Jihad (*Jihad Asgar*), which is the struggle that takes place in society

Kafir: unbeliever, non-Muslim. Jews and Christians, though regarded as people of the book (*Ahli Kitab*), are nonetheless regarded as unbelievers too

Kalimat Thayyibah: verses from the Quran that specifically refer to the concept of the oneness of God

Kalimat Tasbihat: verses from the Quran that are often recited during *dzikir* practices as a means of remembering the eternal presence of God

Karkun: a term often used in Indonesia and parts of Malaysia to refer to Tablighis who have spent time out on missionary tours (*khuruj*)

Kepiah (Malaysia): a skullcap, normally made of light cotton, that covers the top of the head but leaves the hair on the back of the head exposed. Spelled *kopiah* in Indonesia

Khuruj: the practice of going out into the world for days, weeks or months in order to bring the message of the Tablighi Jama'at to other Muslims. In Indonesia and Malaysia, *khuruj* is also sometimes referred to as *tashkil*

Kopiah (Indonesia): a skullcap, normally made of light cotton, that covers the top of the head but leaves the hair on the back of the head exposed. Spelled *kepiah* in Malaysia.

Ma'aruf: the common good

Madrasah: religious school; a school where religious classes are taught

Markaz: base, station, camp. In *Bahasa Malaysia* and *Bahasa Indonesia*, the word *markaz* is also used to refer to military bases and camps

Maslaha: the public interest

Murid: student

Murshid'ul am: spiritual leader. In Malaysia, the office of *Murshid'ul am* was introduced in the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party in the 1980s

Mushrik: polytheism. A *mushrikin* is one who associates other Gods or deities with Allah.

Muslimin: one who submits to the will and commandments of God

Nafs/nafsu: the desires and impulses of the ego and body that need to be controlled

Pesantren (Indonesia): a religious boarding school where students of religion (*santri*) are taught and allowed to stay as well

Qiyas: analogical reasoning
Santri (Indonesia): a student of religion
Sarong (Malaysia/Indonesia): literally, a cover. A tubular piece of cloth that extends from the waist to the ankles and which is wound around the waist; worn by men and women
Serban: turban. Normally a long piece of cloth wound over the head, covering the hair but exposing the face
Shahadah: the proclamation of belief in Islam. The proclamation of belief in Islam is twofold: to proclaim that there is only one God, Allah; and to believe that Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah
Shariah: Islamic law
Shirik: polytheism
Shura: consultation; to consult together on matters of common interest in order to reach a consensus
Sunnah: examples taken from the practice of the Prophet. The *Sunnah* of the Prophet has been studied in great detail, and scholars have differentiated aspects of the *Sunnah* into three categories: *Surah* (the physical comportment of the Prophet), *Sirah* (close observation of the physical behaviour of the Prophet) and *Sarirah* (observation of the Prophet's style of speech and thought)
Tafsir: exegesis of the Quran
Tashkil (Malaysia/Indonesia): a term that is sometimes used to refer to the practice of *khuruj*, which is to go out into the world to invite other Muslims to join the Tablighi Jama'at. The Arabic meaning of *tashkeel* is 'to form', though in central Asia beggars were known to walk around with a begging bowl called a *tashkeel*
Taqwa: piety
Tawhid: the unity/singularity of God
Ulama (singular: *alim*): a man of knowledge; a scholar of religion
Ustaz: teacher
Zakat: taxes paid according to the terms laid out in Islamic jurisprudence

Introduction

Brother Bismillah and My Introduction to the Tablighi Jama'at

These men have grown beyond their little lives, and now their faith sweeps them forward, toward unknown horizons.[1]
Muhammad Asad

My first encounter with the Tablighi Jama'at took place more than two decades ago, when I was still uncertain of the career path I would take in the years to come.

On the morning of the second-to-last day of the month of Ramadan in 1986, I woke up on the cold, hard floor of the mosque in Dewsbury, England. Recovering from a bout of influenza and being somewhat under the weather as a result of nearly a month of fasting, I was not in the best of spirits. As I turned, I saw beside me a figure who bore an uncanny resemblance to Santa Claus. He was a portly figure, decked out all in red and of ample girth and cheerful countenance, and he smiled upon me. His name – or rather, the name he adopted – was *Brother Bismillah*, and he said to me: 'It is always difficult at the beginning, but don't worry: it gets easier over time.' Brother Bismillah was an English Muslim convert and throughout my stay in Dewsbury was my minder, bringing me bread and *dhal* to eat when the time came to break our fast, and plying me with medicine whenever fever broke out. He told me he had a soft spot for Malaysians as he was married to one, and that his wife and daughters were living in the northern state of Kelantan in Malaysia. Being in a sea of strangers – nearly all of them South Asian Muslims who spoke mostly Hindi or Urdu – his was the only voice that gave comfort to me then. And being the offspring of a single-parent family, his constant reminder that 'you are like a son to me' was balm to my fragile nerves, too.

I was nineteen years old and in Europe for the first time, alone and about to begin my studies. Having left home for the first time, I found myself in an England that was alien and strange to me. Despite having

read copious amounts of literature and having committed to memory the works of Dickens and Conan Doyle, this was an England that was unfamiliar and new. Those were the years when Margaret Thatcher was in power – for such a long period that a friend's daughter was to enquire a decade later whether men were not allowed to be prime minister in Britain – and when the tabloids were busy whipping up popular anxiety about foreigners and migrants who were, it seemed, poised to take over the country. Being a young foreign student then meant that one's social circle was circumscribed by external variables beyond one's control. Walking along the streets in the towns of Brighton and Hove, it was not uncommon to see elderly Britons turning away or even crossing the road so as to avoid contact. It was in such a country and such a setting that I found myself welcome at only one place: the mosque.

However, my own knowledge of Islam then was scant at best. When one day a group of South Asian Muslims invited me to go on a tour of London, Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool and Dewsbury during the month of Ramadan, I willingly accepted. And it was then that I heard the word '*khuruj*' uttered for the first time.

My stint with the Tablighis did not last long: after forty days, college and exams beckoned and I took my leave, though my newfound friends tried their best to dissuade me and keep me in the fold. Weeks passed, then months, and I parted for good. It was a year later that I learned the name of the group that took me on the tour of England: the *Tablighi Jama'at.* My mother, understandably distraught, was happy to learn that I had abandoned my roving ways and that I had returned to my books. Straight A's at school meant that enrolment into university was assured, and I later read philosophy, politics and critical theory. Dickens and Conan Dolye gave way to Orwell, Marx, Fanon, Russell, Wittgenstein, Foucault and Derrida, who assumed their places in my pantheon of heroes. Two decades later I found myself working on the phenomenon of religio-politics in Asia and doing discourse analysis of religious and political movements in the post-colonial world. And among the groups I have been studying is the one that first aroused my interest in the phenomena of itinerant Muslims: the Tablighi Jama'at, which is the subject of this book.

This book sets out to offer something more than simply an account of the arrival, spread and development of the Tablighi Jama'at – arguably the biggest lay Muslim missionary movement in the world – in and across Southeast Asia. It seeks to examine the Tablighi Jama'at closely, and in the process of doing so raise a host of other questions that pertain to any study of Islam and Muslim society in general.

The approach I have taken is one that combines the study of the history of a religiously influenced mass movement with a more analytical and philosophical approach to fundamental questions of identity, subject-positioning and representation. For what I seek to do in this book is not merely to account for the Tablighi's phenomenal success in the region but also to answer questions that are on the one hand far more basic and on the other hand more crucial to our understanding of normative Muslim religious praxis itself: what is the Tablighi Jama'at? How can we speak of there being such a thing as a Tablighi identity and subjectivity? How is the world of this Tablighi subject constructed and what are the ways and means through which such an identity can be perpetuated and reproduced over time and space? Such questions are, admittedly, more philosophical, but they are nonetheless crucial questions that need to be asked, for these are the questions that allow us to make knowledge-claims of a social phenomenon that should not be reduced to a handful of essentialist presuppositions or superficial generalisations.

Such an approach is also necessary as a result of the developments we have seen in the field of Islamic studies over the past decade, where rigorous interrogation of social-religious phenomena has at times been sacrificed for the sake of political expediency and the need to provide quick answers to a Muslim/Islamic question that has been reduced to the level of pathology. The framing of Islam and Muslims as a question that needs to be answered or solved is perhaps the root of the problem itself, for it could be argued that no serious study of any society, political party, mass movement or belief system can be achieved successfully if it has been tainted by prejudice or anxiety.

The Tablighi Jama'at – perhaps because of its global outreach and visibility – has suffered from this. Some of the studies and reports on the subject, particularly by some sections of the media and the security community, have been guilty of exaggeration and hyperbole. Even worse – from an academic perspective – has been the tendency among some reporters and scholars to assume the presence of such a thing as a unified and homogenous Tablighi, held together by a closely knit network of uniform subjectivities that see the world through a singular lens and are guided by a singular purpose. Nuance and variability have been lost in the process of this reductivist analysis, and we are all the poorer for it.

Having said that, one of the aims of this work is to raise the question of what the Tablighi Jama'at is. But the framing of the question will be such as to preclude the possibility of easy or convenient answers, not least for

the reason that the Tablighi Jama'at is a complex phenomenon that deserves a complex accounting of itself.

Chapter one of this book will recount the story of the coming of the Tablighi Jama'at to Southeast Asia, which was certainly not foreordained or predetermined. Notwithstanding the Tablighi's determination to spread its message worldwide by building an expansive network of Tablighi centres (*markaz*), its arrival in Southeast Asia was not without precedent. I shall show that by the time the Tablighi first arrived in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia in the 1950s, the region was already being contested by many transnational Muslim groups that harboured similar global ambitions. It was in this context of a Southeast Asia that was overcrowded by so many Islamist groups, parties and movements that the Tablighi was forced to fend for itself. And as we shall see, its first attempts at embedding itself into the social fabric of the societies it hoped to eventually convert were done via the pre-existing network of Indian Muslims who had already settled in the countries of the region. Over the next six decades, the Tablighi Jama'at had to weather the storms of political upheavals, uprisings and revolts and numerous attempts by other groups to keep it marginalised to a fringe concern. The Tablighi's phenomenal success in and across Southeast Asia is a story of successful networking – akin to the franchise networks set up by multinational companies and conglomerates that had to likewise brave climes that were initially hostile to them. It is a story laced with contingency and variables that could not have been predicted, and the success of the Tablighi was on account of the movement's adaptability to the socio-political realities of the time. Though the movement today has secured for itself a visible and permanent presence across the region, it ought to be remembered – and shall be emphasised in this book – that its spread across Southeast Asia was always a case of chance and fortune – sometimes good, sometimes ill – that has shaped the movement into what it is today.

Chapters two, three and four look at the discourse of the Tablighi Jama'at in order to answer the question of whether there is such a thing as a Tablighi mindset and worldview. I proceed from the premise that this is fundamentally a question that is philosophical – that is, a question of *other minds*. My contention is that studies of religious movements such as the Tablighi tend to assume from the outset a mindset and worldview that is distinct from those of others but do not give a satisfactory account of how such a distinct subjectivity can exist in the first place and upon what grounding such a subjectivity may rest.

Chapter two begins with the problem of accounting for other minds and offers a close reading of the foundational texts of the Tablighi Jama'at that were written by the founder-leaders of the movement such as Maulana Muhammad Zakaria al-Khandalawi. In this chapter I consider how, in the interpretation of Islam as offered by Maulana Zakaria, a set of chosen signifiers in Islam's vocabulary have been deliberately foregrounded and elevated to the status of master signifiers and nodal points that string together the chains of equivalences that mark the contents and parameters of the Tablighis' discourse. I argue that in the process of giving primacy to both the Quran and the recorded life history of the Prophet Muhammad and the first community of Muslims (the *Sahaba*), the founders of the Tablighi Jama'at have constructed an *idealised Prophetic type* that is meant to serve as the model for normative Muslim behaviour among the Tablighis themselves. Following from this analysis of the discourse of the Tablighis, I explain how the worldview of the Tablighi is constructed, how the boundaries between Tablighis and non-Tablighis are set, and how the Prophetic ideal type serves as a means to initiate and repeat the act of mimesis on the part of the Tablighis as they strive to become better Muslims through the process of imitating the Prophet and his companions as best they can.

Chapter three continues in the same vein and looks at another vital part of the Tablighis' literature, namely the portable and easy-to-read pamphlets and booklets that make up the staple reading material for thousands of ordinary Tablighis who are less inclined (or less able) to delve into the foundational texts of the movement. Through a close reading of these pamphlets, I show how the normative universe of the Tablighis is constructed through the medium of vernacular interpretation, intended for praxis. I demonstrate that the pamphlets and booklets of the Tablighis show the many different ways through which the movement roots itself in the local context of the societies in which it has settled. I also look at how these pamphlets serve an additional function as pedagogic instruments for training the Tablighis on how to enter, behave and adapt to the Tablighi world and how to defend the Tablighi Jama'at from the myriad of attacks that it receives from other schools of Muslim thought. As in the case of the foundational texts of the movement, I will show how the portable literature of the Tablighi Jama'at also plays the important role of setting up the discursive parameters of the Tablighi world, and how they also valorise the Prophet and his companions as ideal, model Muslims to be emulated in the present day. The vernacular character of the portable reading material of the Tablighi has, however, one additional advantage

that the foundational texts lack: written in the context of the here and now, they also address issues of immediate concern that affect the community, such as the social problems that they seek to remedy or the ever-present critique that emanates from other Muslims.

Chapter four takes the study from the level of the textual to the personal and looks at the conversion narratives of the Tablighis themselves. A close reading of some of the conversion narratives I have collected in the course of my fieldwork over the years will help us to understand how and why ordinary Muslims choose to abandon their former lives and join the Tablighi movement, and how they account for the changes – sartorial, behavioural and personal – that take place within (and to) themselves. At the core of the argument is the notion that the Tablighi Jama'at is an *active minority group*, working in the broader context of the wider Muslim community that they hope to change through *low-risk activism*. Reading the conversion narratives of the converts themselves may give us some understanding of how the movement works and more importantly what it signifies to those who have chosen to be part of it. This, I hope, will bring us one step closer to answering the question of whether there is a distinct Tablighi subjectivity and whether we can say anything about it.

The internal constitution of the Tablighi Jama'at is the focus of Chapter five, where I turn to the rites and rituals of mutuality and association that make up the rule-governed world of the Tablighis themselves. I shall explore the world of the Tablighis and look at how this apparently relaxed and fluid social network is nonetheless founded on conventional rules and norms that have held it together over time and space. I also examine how the Tablighi character and mindset is determined through a process of learning, abiding by and internalising a gamut of norms of behaviour that identify them as the community that they are, distinct from other Muslims. Related to this is the question of how the Tablighi Jama'at has managed to maintain its sense of cohesion and identity over almost a century while so many other Muslim movements, parties and schools of thought have been blighted by the bane of internal discontent and schism among their ranks.

The final chapter concludes the book by locating the Tablighi Jama'at in the context of the countries and societies they find themselves in and looks at how the Tablighi Jama'at is seen in the eyes of others – by Islamist political parties, the respective religious authorities of the countries they reside in, and increasingly the security community that has grown more wary of all forms of Muslim internationalism in the wake of 11 September 2001 and the declaration of the so-called 'global war on terror'. Does the

Tablighi pose a threat to the modern postcolonial state? And if so, how and why? Is it indeed, as some of its critics claim, a conduit for other, less benign forces on the lookout for transnational networks and communicative infrastructures to hijack for more militant and violent ends? Or is it truly a world-renouncing movement that secretly undermines the political power of Muslims and seeks to disempower them in the long run, as others contend? And how does the Tablighi locate itself in the wider constellation of politics – both Islamist and secular – today? Does it in any way undermine the logic of the state, governmentality and the nation-building process? By raising these questions, I aim to position the Tablighi Jama'at better and produce a more nuanced and multi-perspective view of the object of enquiry. It goes some way towards advancing my argument that identities and subject-positions are relative, and that to know what the Tablighi is entails also knowing what it represents in the eyes of others, including its detractors.

Work on this book began when I was based at the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) in Berlin, Germany. It was at the ZMO that I, along with my friend and fellow roving researcher Dietrich Reetz, began my study of transnational Muslim networks of education and missionary activism; and it was Dietrich who was my constant companion and sparring partner in the numerous discussions we had on the subject of this book. My thanks also go to Ulrike Freitag, director of the ZMO, who was supportive of my work and kind enough to allow this itinerant academic to wander off for long sojourns in and across Asia. Thanks are also due to my academic colleagues who were kind enough to bear with me during those seven years in Germany, and with whom many discussions on the Tablighi were held. I would particularly like to thank Gudrun Kraemer, Angelika Neuwirth, Anna Wuerth, Georges Khalil, Christian Troll, Dieter Senghass, Alexander Hosrtmann, Claudia Derichs, Britta Frede, Ingrid Wessel and Ahmed Chanfi for their help in fine-tuning the focus and contents of this work.

The International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) in Leiden was another sounding board where many of the ideas and arguments in this book were first aired. In particular I would like to thank Martin van Bruinessen and Muhammad Khalid Masud, whose work on Islam in Indonesia and the Tablighi Jama'at I truly admire and whose advice on how to proceed was most welcomed. Thanks are also due to Peter van der Veer, Annelies Moors, Laila al-Zwaini, Ameer Mohammad and Yoginder Sikand, who were travelling companions along the way. In France, I would like to thank Christele Dedebant, Olivier Roy, Eric

Germain, Romain Bertrand, Jocelyne Dakhlia, Jean-Loup Amselle, Hamit Bozarslan and Andree Feillard. Thanks are particularly due to Eric Germain, whose own work on other Muslim diasporas worldwide reminded me constantly that there is never a singular Muslim world to speak of, but rather several.

From Europe, I moved to the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) of Singapore, where the bulk of the work that went into this book was done. Above all, I would like to thank my friend and colleague Joseph Liow, not only for being instrumental in getting me to Singapore – and thus closer to my field of research – but also for supporting me during the long months of fieldwork between 2008 and 2011. Thanks are also due to Barry Desker, dean of RSIS, and the friends and colleagues I worked with in Singapore, who were among the first to look at the results of my research and to offer much-valued advice and criticism: Iqbal Singh Sevea, Ron Mathews, Kevin Tan, Greg Fealy, Michael Feener and Nawab Muhammad. The fine-tuning of this work was done while teaching courses on the history of Southeast Asia and Discourse Analysis at RSIS, and it is to the credit of my students that so many of their comments and queries helped to hone my own arguments, and were instrumental in shaping it further. In particular I would like to thank Akanksha Metha, Oleg Korovin, Frederik Adri Wanto, Tuty Frecon and Salim Nasr.

Fieldwork for this book was conducted across southern Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and much of Indonesia in particular. During the course of this field research, my constant travelling companion and friend on the road was Mohamad Toha Rudin of the Universitas Muhamadiyah Surakarta (UMS), Indonesia. If this was a Quixotic venture, then it could be said that we both took turns to play the part of the mule. It was with Toha that I crossed all of Java all the way to Madura, and later further afield to West Papua, thus traversing two-thirds of Indonesia. For his friendship and infinite patience, I can only offer my thanks. Thanks are also due to my academic friends and colleagues in Indonesia who were supportive of the work: Bambang Setiaji, rector of Universitas Muhamadiyah Surakarta, Amin Abdullah, rector of UIN Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta, Shafei Anwar, Syafiq Hasyim, Yusron Razak, Imron Rosjadi and in particular Moch Nur Ichwan, whose love of hermeneutics matches my own devotion to discourse analysis.

And last but not least, thanks are due to the leaders and members of the Tablighi Jama'at themselves whom I met and worked with in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore, without whose consent and assistance

none of this would have been possible. They are too numerous to mention, and their hospitality and co-operation was exemplary throughout. Over the course of the last five years, they have been my hosts, kindly furnishing me with information, checking my data, taking me on their various excursions and – it goes without saying – attempting to convert me in the process. My stay in the various *markazes* and *pesantrens* under their control was an interesting one in many ways, not least for the fact that all of my fieldwork was done in the midst of a homo-social environment where no woman's face or voice was ever seen or heard. Living as we do in a globalised world where time and space have become conflated through the mass media and instantaneous communication, it was a surreal experience for me to live in another, parallel world that abided by its own temporal and spatial logic. Such a world would not have been known to me without the welcome I was shown by the Tablighis themselves. For all their help, patience, care and above all their toleration of having a chain smoker in their midst, I offer my most sincere and profound gratitude.

Farish A. Noor, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU)

Singapore, March 2012

I At Home Across the Sea

The Arrival of the Tablighi Jama'at and Its Spread Across Southeast Asia

Men make history, and the leading members of the revolutionary generation realised that they were doing so, but they could never have known the history they were making … What in retrospect has the look of a foreordained unfolding of God's will was in reality an improvisational affair in which sheer chance, pure luck – both good and bad – and specific decisions made in the crucible of political crises determined the outcome … If hindsight enhances our appreciation for the solidity and stability of the (historical) legacy, it also blinds us to the stunning improbability of the achievement itself.[1]
Joseph J. Ellis

Muslims have feet, and tend to move about like everybody else.

The history of Islam and Muslim society can be read as a history of movement, for without such movement Islam would not be the global religion that it is today. For centuries, Muslims have travelled across the world for the sake of commerce, politics, diplomacy, warfare and to spread Islam as well. The Muslims that I am concerned with in this book are the members of the Tablighi Jama'at, a global movement of itinerant lay Muslim missionaries that has been described by scholars like Masud, Metcalf, Sikand and Reetz[2] as a global pietist movement for faith renewal among Muslims, and which may well be one of the biggest missionary movements of any religion in the world today.

The origins of the Tablighi Jama'at go back to Mewat, North India and the Deobandi tradition that originated from the Dar'ul Uloom *madrasah* in Deoband, Uttar Pradesh. The Deobandi movement was started by Muhammad Qassim Nanotawi and Maulana Rashid Ahmad Gangohi in 1867. Like the Deobandis, the Tablighis were conservative fundamentalists who were inspired by the reformists of the Salafi movement from the Arab lands. However, unlike the Deobandis who were educationists, the Tablighis were mainly lay missionaries who sought to

transform Muslim society and bring Muslims back to the path of true Islam.

The Tablighi movement was formed around 1926-27 by Muhammad Ilyas Kandhalawi (1885-1944), whose family was closely linked to the Deobandi leadership and its sister school, the Mazahiru'l-Ulum in Saharanpur. Ilyas was known for both his knowledge of Islam and his Sufi inclinations, and his work was later continued by his successors, Yusuf Kandhalawi (1917-1965) and Muhammad Zakaria Kandhalawi (1898-1982).

The slogan that Ilyas coined – *Oh Muslims! Become Muslims* – sums up the aims of the movement. Without over-particularising the Tablighi Jama'at, it can be said that the movement is somewhat special in the sense that unlike many other missionary movements the world over, it seeks to convert not those outside the faith community but rather those *within*. It aims to make fellow Muslims become better, pious Muslims according to the Tablighi's own standards of proper Muslim religious praxis. As a conservative literalist-fundamentalist neo-Salafi movement with a strong purist bent, the Tablighi is also unique in its ambiguous relationship with Islamic mysticism (*tasawwuf*) and Sufi practices, which would otherwise be deemed deviant or contrary to Islamic teachings by other more conservative neo-fundamentalist pietist movements.

One factor that partly accounts for the Tablighi's conservative stand on Islamic orthodoxy is its origins in South Asia and the historical context against which it emerged as a movement to save Indian Muslims from the missionary efforts of both Christian missionaries from the West and Hindu revivalists in India. The 1920s were a period of intense political mobilisation across the Indian subcontinent that witnessed the emergence of the first nationalist anti-colonial movements in British India, some of which (like the Indian Muslim League) were organised along religious communitarian-sectarian lines. Indian Hindu groups such as the Arya Samaj[3] were also actively mobilising at the time, and the Tablighi Jama'at was formed at a time of intense rivalry between Muslims and Hindus in India.

Unwilling and unable to resort to more militant methods in defence of their faith, the Tablighi Jama'at rejected the use of violence and opted to remain apolitical. Unlike the Deobandis, the members of the movement avoided direct confrontation with Hindu or Christian groups. Metcalf (2002) notes that the Tablighi Jama'at could be compared to the Western Alcoholics Anonymous movement that started around the same time: both organisations sought to reform their followers from within and sought to improve their moral qualities while regulating their public

behaviour.[4] Rejecting politics (*fikrah siasah*), militant jihadism (*fikrah jihadiyyah*) and any kind of secret, subversive activity (*tanzhim sirri*), the movement emphasised its peaceful (*sukun*) and gradualist approach instead. Members of the movement were expected to take part in communal activities and join in their lay missionary labour of *Dakwat-u Tablighi* (*Dawt'o' Tableegh*) – that is, to follow in the footsteps of the Prophet to go out and spread the message of Islam. They were expected to spend one night a week, one weekend a month, forty days a year and 120 days at least once in their lives with the members of the movement.[5] This was seen as part of their *dakwah* work for the sake of Islam. Thus, from the outset, the Tablighis have been defined by one constant factor: *movement* and their itinerant wanderings around the world to convert their fellow Muslims.

That Muslims have travelled for the sake of Islam is neither new nor unique to religion. Movement for missionary purposes is something we have seen in other faith communities, and the role that Christian missionaries have played in the propagation of their faith is well documented by now. Movement has also been a constant feature among Hindus and Buddhists, for whom travel was an integral part of their self-identity. The renunciation of one's familial ties and bonds to the world has been an integral part of Hinduism, as Radhakrishnan has noted;[6] and Hinduism and Buddhism spread well beyond the frontiers of South Asia and across Central Asia, East Asia and Southeast Asia as a result of the willingness on the part of Hindus and Buddhists to abandon the comfort of kith and kin for the sake of missionary work.

Some historians, however, have argued that the age of unlimited travel was brought to a temporary halt as a result of the encounter with colonial power, and that travel across the length and breadth of Asia was ultimately reduced to a policed affair as a result of the new regimes of power and knowledge that were introduced during the colonial era. This in turn brought with it not only the modern tools of the map and colonial census but also the means by which these tools could be forcibly used and impressed upon the colonised subjects.[7] This was certainly the case in Southeast Asia, where the British, Dutch, French and Spanish colonial authorities grew increasingly anxious about the relatively free movement of their colonised subjects and the movement of their Muslim subjects in particular. With the opening of the Suez Canal, movement from Southeast Asia to the Arab lands intensified in volume and regularity, bringing the Muslim world closer together and raising the spectre of pan-Islamic political consciousness across the Empire. It was within the policed confines

of these imperial dominions that the Tablighi initially operated, and by the time they arrived in Southeast Asia they discovered that the region was one that was thoroughly mapped out by other diasporas as well.

A network among many: Locating the Tablighi Jama'at in an overcrowded Southeast Asia

As Reetz (2006) has shown, India has been the wellspring of a number of Muslim groups whose expansion exceeded the frontiers of India proper: the Deobandis, Tablighis and Ahmadis (both Qadiani and Lahori) have all become major players on the global stage of Muslim politics and society, and other Indian-originated movements such as the Barelvis and Ahl-e Hadith are now visibly present in neighbouring countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh, though not nearly as widespread as the former groups.

By the time that the first Tablighi delegation arrived at the ports of Penang, Singapore and Medan in Sumatra in 1952, almost all of mainland and maritime Southeast Asia had already been visited and settled by numerous other transnational groups that preceded them. A cursory survey of the social landscape of Southeast Asia between the 1850s and the 1950s would show that the region was home to a wide variety of communities made up of indigenous natives as well as migrants who hailed from China, India, the Arab lands and beyond.

In the British Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States that made up the territory of British Malaya, Hadrami Arabs had arrived and were settled in commercial centres such as Singapore and Penang. In Singapore in particular, the Hadramis eventually rose up the social ladder and came to be seen as the foremost representatives and patrons of Islamic culture and education in the colony.[8] Through bodies such as the Al-Wehdah al-Arabiah bi Singhafura (the Singapore Arab Association) and the Al-Irsyad movement in the Dutch East Indies, the Hadrami Arabs were able to secure respectability and political representation in the wider Muslim community.[9] Not only was Singapore the home of the Hadrami Arabs, it was also the home of another transnational community that had travelled far across the world to settle in Asia: the Baghdadi Jews.[10] Manasseh Meyer's founding of the Singapore Zionist Movement in 1922 signalled the fact that by the 1920s the Jews of Singapore were comfortable enough to be able to lend their support to Theodor Herzl's Zionist movement which was calling for the creation of the state of Israel thousands of miles away.

Apart from Arabs and Jews as well as the Chinese and Europeans, Southeast Asia has been the first port of call for many different South Asian communities ranging from the Chettiars of South India to the Ahmadis of North India. Some of these communities, such as the Chettiars and the Dawoodi Bohras,[11] were identified primarily by the economic roles they played in the colonies of Southeast Asia. Others, such as the Ahmadis, had come with the stated ambition of spreading their brand of Islam – which was, from the outset, deemed controversial by other Muslims.

The Ahmadis first came to British Malaya in 1906, and almost all of them were members of the Indian diaspora who had migrated to British Malaya to seek out new career opportunities as functionaries in the colonial civil service and security forces, or to establish their own commercial enterprises in the Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca and Singapore.[12] In the wake of the Indian Muslim Sepoy mutiny in Singapore (in 1915), conditions for travel and settlement for Indian Muslims in the colony had become more difficult, and many of the Indian Muslims who arrived in Malaya were treated with some degree of suspicion. In British Malaya, most of the Ahmadis who came and settled in the colony were of the Qadiani branch. In 1939 the Qadianis also reached the British colony of Sabah (North Borneo) from Madras and settled there as merchants, marrying into local families and setting up the first Qadiani missions. Efforts by the Qadianis to spread their teachers and gain followers were fruitless, and up to Malaya's independence in 1957, the Qadianis were largely regarded as outsiders who were alien both in terms of their origins as well as their beliefs.[13]

The Lahori Ahmadis, on the other hand, were prominent in the Dutch East Indies, and the community has been influential in Indonesia since the 1920s, having played an important role in the development of political Islam in the country. Though relatively small in number, the Lahori Ahmadi community managed to establish important relationships with key Indonesian Islamist leaders and politicians, including Haji Oemar Said Tjokroaminoto (1882-1934), Sukarno, Muhammad Hatta and Muhammad Natsir. Ahmadi members have played a leading role in the anti-colonial struggle, the process of nation-building and national politics in the country.

The first contact between the Lahori Ahmadis and the Dutch East Indies took place in 1920-21 when the Lahori preacher Khawaja Kamaluddin was sent to the colony as its first emissary. Although he stayed in Indonesia for only a few weeks, Khawaja Kamaluddin managed to make contact with Tjokroaminoto, founder of the Sarekat Islam Indonesia and

one of the most influential Islamist thinkers in the country then.[14] In 1924 the Lahori Anjuman sent two emissaries to China – Maulana Ahmad and Mirza Wali Ahmad Baig. The two emissaries were supposed to travel to China by sea in order to ascertain the state of Muslims in China and make their report as soon as they returned. But while in transit in Singapore, they received news from Indonesian Islamists that the Dutch had stepped up their missionary campaign in Java. Maulana Ahmad and Mirza Wali Ahmad Baig sent a telegram to Lahore to ask permission to make a detour to Java to investigate. Permission was granted and they made their way to Jogjakarta, Central Java.

Upon their arrival in Jogjakarta, the Ahmadi emissaries were given a warm welcome by the leaders and members of the modernist-reformist Muhamadiyah movement that had been formed by Kyai Ahmad Dahlan. At the Muhamadiyah conference of 1924, both of them were invited to speak. Soon after, Kyai Ahmad Dahlan sent his son, Jumhan, who was already a rising leader of the Muhamadiyah, along with six other young Muhamadiyah members to Lahore to study at the Lahori Anjuman. Moved by Mirza Wali Ahmad's appeals for Muslim unity and development, Muhamadiyah members formed the Muslim Broederschap movement in Jogjakarta (in 1926) to mobilise the younger Islamist intellectuals and activists in the region.[15]

But in 1927, the Indian Salafi *ulama* Maulana Abdul Alim as-Sadiqi arrived in Java and immediately began attacking Mirza Wali Ahmad and the Ahmadis (Qadianis *and* Lahoris) *in toto*, accusing them of heresy and of being too Westernised.[16] Though this crisis was contained, it set a precedent for the attacks on the Indonesian Lahori Ahmadis that were to follow: members of the Muhamadiyah who were sympathetic to the Lahoris were given the choice of remaining in the Muhamadiyah or leaving the movement to form one of their own. Forced to leave their movement, Muhammad Husni, Raden Ngabei Djoyosugito, Muhammad Irsyad, Muhammad Sabit, R. Soedewo Kertoadinegoro, Idris Latjuba, Hardjosubroto, K.H. Sya'rani, K.H. Abdurrahman, Muhammad Kusban, Sutantyo, R. Supratolo and a few others decided to form their own movement, the Gerakan Ahmadiyah Indonesia-Centrum Lahore (GAI), on 10 December 1928. The movement was officially registered the following year, on 28 September 1929. Despite the growing isolation they experienced, the Lahori Ahmadis of Indonesia persevered in the coming decades leading to Indonesia's eventual independence. When the former Dutch colony declared its independence on 17 August 1945, the GAI supported it completely.

It was against this context of a region that had been well mapped out and settled by a host of migrant communities that the Tablighi Jama'at first arrived in 1952, on a boat that brought the first Tablighis to Penang, Medan and then Singapore. Unlike the Ahmadis who had come to spread Islam to everyone, the Tablighis' mission was more specific: they had come to make Muslims better Muslims, according to their Tablighi standards.

Landfall and homecoming: The Tablighi arrive in Southeast Asia

> *As time went by, our need to fight for the ideal increased to an unquestioning possession, riding with spur and rein over our doubts. Willy-nilly it became a faith.*[17]
> T.E. Lawrence

The Tablighi Jama'at have always been a restless lot, and the movement is known for its mobility. Even before India gained her independence the Tablighi had already begun to send out feelers across the globe: in 1946 they sent their first delegations to England and the Arabian *Hijaz*, in 1947 to Bengal and Calcutta; and by the early 1950s the first delegations were sent eastwards to Burma, British Malaya and Indonesia.[18] Razak notes that the first Tablighi delegation to Southeast Asia was sent by boat in 1952, and it was led by a certain Maulana Haji Miaji Isa.[19]

Maulana Miaji Isa's delegation first headed to Penang before they proceeded further South down the Straits of Malacca and settled at Medan, Eastern Sumatra and later in Singapore. In Medan the Tablighi delegation chose to base themselves at the Al-Hidayah mosque on Jalan Gajah (in 1952); while in Penang (1952) and Singapore (1952) they found support and shelter among the Indian Muslim communities that were already rooted in the Straits Settlements as British colonial subjects and whose members resided in their respective Indian quarters.

Here it is important to note the continuities in the arrival and dispersal of the Tablighi across Southeast Asia. Like successive generations of Indians who came before them, they followed the same maritime routes and settled in places where there were already Indian communities present. Historians including Levi, Sastri and Coedes have noted that as far back as the seventh century, Hindus and Buddhists from the Indian subcontinent and Sri Lanka have travelled to Sumatra, Java and the Malay Peninsula as merchants, priests and scholars and were thus responsible for what has

been described by Coedes as the first wave of 'Indianisation' in Southeast Asia.[20] It is equally important to note that the arrival of Islam from the thirteenth century onwards followed the same trajectory and itinerary of the earlier generations of Hindu-Buddhist missionaries and merchants from India as well.[21]

South Asians – whether Hindus, Buddhists or Muslims – were therefore no strangers to Southeast Asia, and the extent of interaction between the two regions can be gauged by the volume of trade that was conducted across the Indian Ocean and the development of a common hybrid culture that was shared across the maritime divide. During the Hindu-Buddhist era, thousands of Buddhist monks were trained in the Sri Lankan capital of Anuradhapura, where they were housed in monasteries and colleges before being sent to Java to preach their creed. Centuries later, thousands of Muslim scholars crossed the Indian Ocean to study at the most renowned centres of Muslim learning in India. The Indian Muslim merchants and traders settled in the same commercial centres that had attracted the earlier generation of Muslim preachers who had brought Islam to Southeast Asia. Not surprisingly, they were mostly concentrated in the coastal zones of the Southeast Asian colonies, such as Arakan, Tenesserim and the Burmese delta (centred on Rangoon) in British Burma; Penang, Malacca and Singapore in British Malaya and in the port cities of Banda Aceh, Medan, Palebang in Sumatra as well as Batavia (Jakarta), Demak, Pekalongan, Cirebon, Indramayu, Semarang and Surabaya in Java in the Dutch East Indies.

By the end of the nineteenth century the Indian Muslim community was largely allied to the interests of the nascent nationalist movements of Indonesia and Malaya. Many Indian Muslim merchants lent their support to the first nationalist initiatives which included the first native Indonesian economic co-operative venture, the Sarekat Islam movement. Indian Muslim leaders were also prominent in the first wave of Muslim intellectual renewal and political mobilisation, lending their support to the Kaum Muda (Younger Generation) intellectuals who were calling for the revival of Islam and the rise of nationalism against the Dutch colonialists as well. For their part in the nationalist struggle, the Indian Muslims of Indonesia were rewarded by the new Republican government of Sukarno with Indonesian citizenship and thus became fully fledged Indonesian citizens by 1945.

Thus it came to pass that by the time Maulana Miaji Isa led the first Tablighi delegation to Penang and later Medan and Singapore, the Tablighis had arrived in a region where Indian Muslims were well embedded in the local social fabric and, in the case of Indonesia (which finally gained independence in 1949), were also citizens of the region.

Maulana Miaji Isa and his fellow Tablighis found that they were warmly received among the Indian Muslims of Penang, Medan and Singapore. Medan's Al-Hidayah mosque became their first *markaz* (base) in Sumatra, and from Medan and Penang messages were relayed back to the Markaz Nizamuddin in Delhi, informing the *emir* (head) of the movement that the time was right to send more delegations to Southeast Asia to spread the movement's message. Between 1952 to 1954, several more delegations were sent to and fro, and in 1955 a more ambitious plan was laid out for the spread of the Tablighi Jama'at across Java.[22] This time, however, the Tablighi took to the skies instead, arriving by plane.

Touchdown in Jakarta: The arrival and spread of the Tablighi Jama'at across Java

Sometime in February 1955, a group of eight men landed at the Kamayoran International Airport[23] of Jakarta. The men attracted the attention of the immigration officials and the people at the airport due to their appearance, which was in stark contrast to most of the other passengers at the terminal: they wore long flowing white shirts that reached down to their knees, under which hung baggy trousers that stopped above their ankles. None of the men spoke *Bahasa Indonesia* and only their leader spoke a few words of English. They were of Pathan origin and they had flown to Jakarta all the way from India.[24] Their knowledge of Indonesia was scant, and they were unaware of the fact that the country they had arrived in was in fact undergoing a tumultuous process of change, with revolts breaking out in the outer island provinces of Sumatra and Sulawesi.[25]

As soon as they had cleared immigration, they walked out of the airport but had no idea where to go next. The leader of the group then hailed a taxi. The taxi driver asked them where they wanted to go, but they had no address to give to the driver. Finally the leader of the group resolved the matter by asking the taxi driver to take them to the house of the first Indian Muslim he knew, and off they went. (Just how eight Tablighis could cram themselves into a single taxi remains a mystery though.)

Not long after, the group was deposited in front of a house that stood on Jalan Industri. The house belonged to a certain Haji Zaristan Khan, who was then an Indonesian citizen of Indian origin and who had, in the course of his life, been an agriculturalist, a merchant and a dairy farmer. Haji Zaristan had been given Indonesian citizenship for his part in the Indonesian nationalist struggle against the Dutch, and like many other Indonesians of Indian origin, now considered himself an Indonesian citizen.

Haji Zaristan was confounded by the sight of eight beturbaned Pathans at his doorstep. As none of them could speak *Bahasa Indonesia*, he conversed with them in Urdu and asked them who they were and why they had come to see him. The leader of the group told him they had come all the way from India to spread the teachings of the Tablighi Jama'at. Not knowing any better and having no other choice but to offer the uninvited visitors his own hospitality, Haji Zaristan opened his doors and bade them welcome.

Unable to decide on the best course of action, Haji Zaristan called for a meeting of all the Indian Muslim families of Jakarta at his own house on Jalan Industri. Two days later, a large group of Indian Muslims (all of them Indonesian citizens) gathered at the home. The leader of the Tablighi delegation explained to the elders of the community their intention and what they hoped to achieve during their trip to Jakarta. After due consultation among themselves, Haji Zaristan offered the Tablighis the advice of the community: they should pack up their things and move to the Masjid Bandengan which was located in Kampung Pandan, in Jakarta Utara. The Tablighis agreed to this proposal and on their third day moved to the Bandengan mosque of North Jakarta. This then became the first Tablighi *markaz* in Jakarta and all of Java, and in the years to come it would be referred to as the Masjid Pakistan (Pakistan mosque) of Bandengan. And that is how the Tablighi Jama'at made its entry into Java, in 1955.[26]

The Tablighis who had settled at the Bandengan mosque of North Jakarta in 1955 realised that they had arrived in a country where the sociopolitical landscape was already a heavily contested one, with many different actors and interests competing for the attention and support of the Javanese Muslim population. The choice of the dilapidated Bandengan mosque was indicative of the extent to which the landscape of Java was already overcrowded, and the Tablighi was not going to find it easy to find new converts and adherents to their cause. In the words of Ustaz H. Attaullah, who would later become one of the preachers of the Tablighi Jama'at in Central and Eastern Java:

> In those days (the first decade after the arrival of the Tablighi in 1955), it was extremely difficult for us to spread our teachings to the Javanese. Tried as we did, we were not permitted to enter into many of the mosques of Java. The mosques of Java were already dominated by the main Islamist groups of Indonesia, and we knew that it was almost impossible to gain a foothold in the mosques that were controlled by the *Nahdatul Ulama, Muhamadiyah*, Ahmadis, Pancasila Front and

> others. So we had to make do with the few mosques that were under nobody's control, and they were always the smallest, dirtiest and most isolated mosques in the most disreputable areas.[27]

This lack of access also accounts for why the Tablighis were forced to move again, this time to the Masjid Jami' Kampung Jeruk[28] in uptown Jakarta in 1957. The area around the Masjid Kampung Jeruk had been the first port of call of many other itinerant and migrant communities in the past, and the cosmopolitan character of the area was reflected in the colourful residents of the district. Ustaz H. Attaullah described the state of the Masjid Jami' and its environs in 1957 thus:

> (In 1957,) the area around Masjid Kampung Jeruk was a stinking mess. It was the red-light district and all the houses were really brothels, so the area had a very bad reputation. The men who went there were mostly poor, seedy characters and you could tell that this was not a place you bring your family to. There was garbage everywhere, dogs were roaming the streets and at night nobody would go out alone in the alleys because that was the area where the *preman* (gangsters) were hanging around. The mosque was filthy and since it was a mainly Chinese area, nobody was ever in the mosque. None of the major Islamist groups wanted it, so we moved in and made it the base of our group then.[29]

The arrival of the Tablighi at this most unlikely of locations meant that they attracted the attention of the local community and the authorities. Soon after the Tablighis had settled at the Masjid Jami' Kampung Jeruk, the local police were alerted to their presence and they came under constant watch.[30]

During the first two years after the arrival of the Tablighi in 1955, the small delegation tried its best to spread the teachings of the Tablighi Jama'at among the small following of Indian Muslims in the North Jakarta district. Cautious forays were made by the members of the delegation or through the local contacts they had established to some of the important cities of Western Java. Between 1955 to 1957, representatives were sent out to Tangerang, Bogor, Cianjur, Cimahi, Bandung, Tasik Malaya and Cirebon[31] but all met with little success.

The Tablighis were forced to work with and through the network of Indian and Arab traders and merchants who had settled in Western Java and who were by then already Indonesian citizens who spoke *Bahasa Indonesia*. Despite the hospitality they received from the Indian Muslim com-

munity in Java, they won few converts to their cause in the first decade after their arrival as many of the Indian Muslims who resided in Java considered themselves Indonesian citizens and were actively involved in local Indonesian politics, with a substantial number of them being members of either the Nahdatul Ulama or Muhamadiyah. Furthermore it has to be emphasised again that the network of Indian Muslims in Java was not a singular diaspora network but rather *several* networks that overlapped. The Tablighis could not, for instance, rely on the support of the minority of Shia Muslims of Indian origin. Nor could they expect any support from the Lahori or Qadiani Ahmadi communities, or the Dawoodi Bohras. As such, the pool of support that they could draw from came mainly from the Sunni Indian Muslim community.

The other factor that greatly inhibited the expansion of the Tablighi network as it spread from Jakarta was the *foreignness* of the movement and how it was perceived as something alien to Indonesian Islam. The first Tablighis who came from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh spoke no Javanese or *Bahasa Indonesia* and had no local family links whatsoever. Their mode of dress and daily rituals were seen as exotic and unfamiliar to many Indonesians, who referred to them summarily as 'Indian Muslims'. It would take more than a decade before the process of settlement, adaptation and cultural negotiation would yield tangible results; and between 1955 to the late 1970s, most of the Tablighi centres in Jakarta and across Western Java were *ad hoc* arrangements where the Tablighis would constantly be on the move and forced to settle from one mosque to another. In the city of Bandung, for instance, the Tablighis would only secure for themselves a permanent base by the 1980s, after they came under the leadership of a local *emir*, Ustaz A. Muzzakir, who was himself Javanese by birth.[32]

The Tablighis based in Jakarta were luckier when they sent out feelers to the Indian Muslim communities who resided in Central and Eastern Java. Around August 1955 their tentative probing was rewarded when they received a positive reply from a certain Kyai Mohammad Tofail, who was then a prominent leader of the Indian and Pakistani Muslim community in Surakarta.

Go east, Tablighi: The Tablighi Jama'at's expansion to Central Java, 1957-1970s

As early as August 1955, the members of the first Tablighi delegation were already sending out despatches across all of Java, calling upon the help of Indian Muslims who had settled there. One of these despatches was sent to the Central Javanese city of Surakarta and was received by Kyai Mo-

hammad Tofail, a merchant of note whose family had contributed significantly to the wealth and status of the Indian merchant community of the city. Kyai Mohammad was also doubly respected in his role as publisher of both religious and non-religious books in Solo.[33]

With the founding of Surakarta as a royal city and home of the *K*araton Surakarta Hadiningrat in the mid-eighteenth century, the fortunes of Surakarta (Solo) had risen considerably thanks to the influx of migrants from the countryside and the booming *batik* industry. Significantly, Solo is the home of important merchant communities of Arab, Chinese and Indian origin. The Indian Muslim community in Solo was dominated by Punjabis and Pathans, and were overwhelmingly Sunni Muslims.

Solo's resident Indian Muslim community had grown in numbers and were an influential economic group. Among the mosques that were built and frequented by the Indian Muslims of Solo was the Masjid An-Nimah Tanjung Anom located in Jalan Solo Baru, Sarengan, Surakarta, Central Java. Built in the year 1946, the Masjid An-Nimah's founder was Ustaz Ismail Khan, who was a merchant of the Khoja community based near Chennai, India. Funds for the mosque were collected mainly from the Punjabi and Pathan Muslim community members, and the entire mosque was built without any additional financial help from other sources. By the mid-1950s, the fortunes of Solo had waxed and waned according to the political upheavals of the country. The Tanjung Anom area slowly declined in prestige, and in time was seen as a 'blacklisted' area known for its brothels and drug dens.

It was during this bleak period that the Tablighi Jama'at had arrived in Jakarta, and was sending out appeals for help to the Indian Muslims across Java. Kyai Mohammad Tofail replied to this appeal positively and expressed his interest to learn more about the Tablighi and to invite them to Surakarta to preach. It is not known how and when the initial contact between Kyai Mohammad and the Tablighis in Jakarta took place, or when Kyai Mohammad himself had converted to the Tablighi Jama'at.[34] What is certain is that by the end of 1955 the Tablighis were already on their way to Surakarta.

It was Kyai Mohammad Tofail who became the first *emir* of the Tablighi Jama'at in Surakarta (in 1955), after which he delegated the task of propagating the ideas of the Tablighi to other members who had just converted to the movement. Later in the same year the Tablighi had despatched delegations to Bangil and Surabaya, and Surakarta (Solo) became the main centre from which the ideas of the Tablighi spread across the rest of Central and East Java. The main focus of the Solonese Ta-

blighis' attention, however, were the towns and cities of Central Java; and between 1955 to 1959 delegations were sent all across Central Java to places like Jogjakarta, Magelang, Wonogiri, Sragen, Semarang, Kudus, Pekalongan, Purwokerto, Sukaraja, Kebumen and Kendal. In that same year (1955), Kyai Mohammad Tofail declared that the Masjid An-Nimah would be the main centre of the Tablighi in Solo and for the rest of Central Java as well.[35]

While Kyai Mohammad served as the main *emir* of the Tablighi for Central Java, the running of the mosque was left to a committee that decided that the mosque should be run on a rotating leadership basis, with three rotating *emir* and a consultative (*Shura*) committee. Kyai Tofail later led many delegations and *tashkil/khuruj* across Java and the rest of Indonesia as well as further abroad to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. He died while taking part in the Grand *Ijtima* (gathering) of the Tablighi in Pakistan and was buried in Raiwind where the gathering was held. Following the death of Kyai Mohammad Tofail and Ustaz Ismail Khan, the post of *emir* for the Tablighi Jama'at in Solo and Central Java was passed on to the son-in-law of Ustaz Ismail, Ustaz Muhammad Jamil, who was also of Khoja background and whose family roots also go back to India.

The Tablighi had found a hospitable environment where it could thrive in earnest when it founded its base in Surakarta. Over the next few decades, the Tablighi would continue to expand its network of members and converts in Surakarta and across Central Java with relative ease, despite the political upheavals that were taking place across Indonesia. While mainstream Islamist movements like the Muhamadiyah and Nahdatul Ulama were visibly present in Solo, so was the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and a host of left-leaning secular parties and mass organisations. It was against this complex patchwork of different political and religious orientations that the Tablighi Jama'at found a niche for itself.

Surakarta did, however, suffer the consequences of the political turbulence that rocked Indonesia in the mid-1960s. The 1965 failed putsch against the Sukarno government paved the way for the elimination of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and led to nationwide pogroms and harassment of the Indonesian Chinese population, who were summarily denounced as being 'communists' and agents of China. The Indian Muslims, however, were spared this harassment.

By the 1970s, the members of the Solonese Tablighi community decided that there was an urgent need to revive the mosque and its activities, as the Tablighi's influence was being met with competition from other religious leaders and congregations. The Masjid An-Nimah was known

to be the centre of the Tablighi Jama'at in Solo, but other Muslim clerics had begun to come to the mosque to preach their own teachings as well. Between the late 1970s to 1982, among the more famous Muslim scholars who came to the Masjid An-Nimah Tanjung Anom were Ustaz Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and Ustaz Abdullah Sungkar, both of whom were regarded as hard-line conservatives affiliated to the remnants of the once active Darul Islam movement.[36] Due to the growing suspicion of Islamist movements and underground Muslim organisations that was the norm during the time of the New Order government of Suharto (1970-1998), the activities of the Tablighis at the Masjid An-Nimah were often under scrutiny.

The spread of the Tablighi across Central Java was a textbook example of how the Tablighi operate elsewhere in Indonesia and the rest of the world. Kyai Mohammad sent many a delegation to all of the major towns and cities on a regular basis, and reports would flow back to the Tablighi elders in Solo recounting the receptivity or hostility of the respective communities there. Kyai Mohammad and the leaders of the Tablighi would then allocate more resources (in this case, manpower) to those locations that proved the most hospitable to their advances, and in time would seek a suitable location (a mosque or *pesantren*/*madrasah*) where they would settle and turn into one of their *markazes*. Having established a foothold in such a location, it would then serve as another transit point for itinerant Tablighis as well as a centre to send out other missionary delegations further afield.[37]

Naturally, the Tablighis of Solo were keen to bring their message to the city of Jogjakarta, another royal city of considerable wealth and commercial significance that was also known as a centre of *batik* trade. Kyai Mohammad sent the first Tablighi delegations to Jogjakarta by the late 1950s, but they were not as successful as they had hoped. One factor that stood in their way was the presence of a number of important mainstream Islamist organisations and movements that already commanded the support and loyalty of thousands of Jojakartans, chief of which was the Muhamadiyah. Another factor that initially inhibited the progress of the Tablighis in Jogja was the fact that among the Indian Muslim community there was a small but significant number of Indian Muslims who were of the Lahori Ahmadi community, who had played a vital role in the development of political Islam across all of Java in the 1920s. The Tablighis consequently found themselves cast in the role of interlopers who were treading on contested ground.

Despite their failure to secure a stronger base in Jogjakarta than they had hoped for, the Tablighis did not give up in their efforts to spread

their network across Central Java. By 1990 the Tablighis were successful in securing a permanent base for themselves in the town of Purwokerto,[38] which was an important transit point on the major East-West artery road that connected Western and Central Java. The Purwokerto *markaz* is placed in the third rank of the trans-Java and trans-Indonesian Tablighi Jama'at network system and is, as such, a vital transit point for members of the Tablighi in the western half of Central Java. It is from Purwokerto that delegations are then subsequently divided and then parcelled out as smaller groups to carry on their *dakwah* work in the smaller districts and regions such as Ciamis (in West Java), Slawi, Banyumas, Cilacap, Banjarnegara and Purbalingga.[39]

This three-tired network has developed to become an efficient system for the mobilisation and movement of the Tablighis all across Java, Indonesia and overseas, making it one of the most integrated logistical networks of itinerant Indonesian Muslims in the country today. During the course of my fieldwork I observed the workings of this network at all levels, which rivals that of the other mainstream Islamist movements and political parties.

Having visited many of the major Tablighi centres in Java, I observed the movement of thousands of Tablighis across the island in the course of my field research. During my stay at the Markaz Besar at Masjid Kampung Jeruk in Jakarta (2001), for instance, I observed the arrival and dispersal of dozens of delegations that had returned from other parts of Indonesia and abroad as they were preparing to take to the road again and return to their respective villages and hometowns for the celebration of *Eid'ul Fitri*. During my stay there, a total of twenty-four delegations were sent home on the first day, and twenty more were sent on the second. These were members of the Tablighi who had come from Western, Central and Eastern Java and who were then packed into smaller groups that were despatched home by bus and train. During my stay at the *markaz* of Masjid Tanjung Anom in Surakarta (2008), I encountered a delegation that had come from Egypt, made up of twelve Arabs of different nationalities who had first landed in Jakarta and who were then despatched to Solo in the company of local minders. At the same *markaz* in Solo, another delegation of forty local members were being readied for their trip to India. They were first to be sent to Jakarta while their Indian tourist visas were processed. Then they would first fly to Dhaka, Bangladesh by Bhima Airlines (which I was told offered cheaper tickets), and then from Dhaka make their way to New Delhi where they would stay at the Markaz Nizamuddin before going on a forty-day tour of Northern India. It was through such an integrated

network that the Tablighi were able to spread their influence even further east, as they made their way into East Java, bastion of the traditionalist-Javanese Muslim movement, the Nahdatul Ulama (NU).

Go further east, Tablighi: The Tablighi Jama'at's expansion to East Java, 1990 to the present

The Tablighi Jama'at was already consolidated in Central Java by the 1960s and have been sending out delegations to East Java since then. Most of these delegations, however, met with little success due to strong active resistance from the members of the Nahdatul Ulama (NU) who did not welcome them in what they perceived to be their home ground. By the late 1960s, several Tablighi delegations had been despatched to Magetan, Madiun, Jombang, Ponorogo, Worokerto, Malang and Surabaya. None of them managed to gain a permanent foothold in any of these towns and cities.[40]

The reception given to the Tablighi was even hostile at times, leading to incidents where the members of the movement found themselves on the wrong side of the law. In 1990 the Tablighi sent a delegation to East Java from their base in Masjid An-Nimah. This delegation was led by Ustaz Muhammad Ramzan. The delegation was a small one made up of eight Tablighis from India and Pakistan and was led by Ustaz Muhammad Ramzan himself, who was the only Indonesian citizen among them. In East Java the group met with stiff resistance from the local branches of the NU, which did not allow them to use their mosques for their preaching or for spending the night.[41] Nonetheless they managed to travel to Magetan and then Madium, and from there they travelled all the way to Surabaya and finally ended up in Kudus.

Things got worse in Kudus when the Tablighi delegation was arrested by the local police and were sent to Jakarta on the grounds that their activities were deemed suspect. Ustaz Muhammad Ramzan was allowed to go free when he showed the police officers his Indonesian identity papers and his badge of merit for being a veteran of the Indonesian war of independence. The rest of the delegation, however, were detained at the Cangkerang deportation centre near Jakarta, awaiting deportation to their respective home countries. Ustaz Muhammad Ramzan notified his fellow Tablighis in Solo as well as the main Tablighi *markaz* in Kebun Jeruk Jakarta, and attempts were made to have the Indian and Pakistani Tablighis released. However, they were informed later that the Indian and Pakistani Tablighis preferred to be left in the detention centre in

Cangkerang so that they could carry out their *dakwah* work among the detainees there.[42]

Faced with this cool welcome from the East Javanese, the Tablighi was forced to address a local factor that had hitherto not presented itself as a problem: ethnicity and racial difference. As I have shown earlier, during the initial stages of the arrival of the Tablighi Jama'at in Java it had managed to root itself successfully and rapidly by working through the Indian Muslim migrant network. It found that it could quickly and easily find its own niche among the members of the Indian Muslim community who had settled in the ports and cities of the northern Javanese coast, and even in inland commercial centres like Surakarta where the Indian Muslims were prominent members of the local business community.

But the East Javanese were less inclined to accept the Tablighi delegations when they were led by Indian Muslims. Furthermore, East Java's reputation as the bastion of the Nahdatul Ulama meant that the NU was not about to give up cherished ground even to local Islamist competitors like the Muhamadiyah. Undeterred by these local factors, the Tablighi pursued its plans for expansion without respite. By the 1960s, tentative probing efforts were made by several delegations that were sent to Surabaya from the Tablighi *markaz* in Surakarta.

The port city of Surabaya ranks as one of the most important cities of Java and is the fourth-largest city in all of Indonesia. Historically, Surabaya also ranks highly as one of the most cosmopolitan centres of Java, where large numbers of Indians, Arabs and Chinese merchants had settled, giving the city a cosmopolitan feel to it. The Indian and Arab Muslim merchant community was traditionally settled in the Qubah district (otherwise known as Kampung Arab) in the northern quarter of the city, close to the Masjid Sunan Ampel that houses the grave (*makam*) of Sunan Ampel, one of the nine saints of Java who was credited with bringing Islam to the island. The Tablighis felt that Surabaya would be the city where they would be most welcomed and where they should establish their base for all their activities in East Java. What they had not accounted for, however, was the fact that the Indian and Arab community there was already deeply rooted in local Indonesian politics. They underestimated the extent to which the Indian Muslim community was divided along cleavages of ethnic and religious-doctrinal differences.

The complex character of the Indian and Arab communities of Surabaya is reflected in the number of mosques and *madrasahs* that exist in the Kampung Arab area. When the Tablighi sent their first delegations to Surabaya, they discovered that not only were the Indian Muslims di-

vided along ethnic and religious lines but that each community had its own religious and community centre. The Indian Sunni Muslims were mostly from Gujarat and had settled in the city as traders who dominated the textile trade as well as the trade in gold and silver. They were settled in the Chinese and Indian area around Jalan Panggung and their mosque was the Masjid Serang.[43] Today, the Masjid Serang is dominated by Arabs who are likewise Sunni, of the Shafie school of thought. Apart from the Gujarati Muslims, there were also a considerable number of Indian Muslims who came from Sindh and a smaller number of South Asians of Tamil origin, the latter of which seemed to be equally divided between Hindus and Muslims.

The Tablighis also did not account for the fact that there was a large and visible representation of Shia Muslims in Surabaya, most of whom were also Indian Muslims who came from Northern India originally. The Shia Muslim community had its own mosque, which was the Masjid al-Fatami.[44] Needless to say, the Tablighis were not at all welcomed at the Fatimi mosque and made no attempts to seek new converts among the Shias. Apart from the Surabaya Shia community, there were also the Ahmadis who settled close to the Kampung Arab area but who also had their own mosque that was called the Masjid an-Nur.[45] And to complicate things further, Surabaya was also one of the centres for the minority Bohra community which had settled mainly on the island of Bali to the east of Java. The Bohra leader, Taher Hussein,[46] described the situation that faced the Tablighi in the 1970s:

> When they (the Tablighi) first came here, they had no place to go to. Every mosque was taken and even when they tried to sleep in the main mosque of the city they were asked to leave by the authorities. You see, Surabaya has always been a centre for us (Indian Muslims) but we have been living here for more than a hundred years; so it is not that easy to just walk in and make yourself at home. We (the Bohras) had our own mosque, the Sunnis had their mosques, the Shias had their mosques. But all the places were taken up, so where could the Tablighis go?[47]

Faced with the same question, the Tablighis were forced to hop from one mosque to another in search of refuge. As it became clear that none of the Indian or Arab-controlled mosques would open their doors to the Tablighi Jama'at, they were forced to set up temporary bases in the smaller mosques that were found in the residential neighbourhoods of the big city.[48] Adapting to the realities on the ground, the Tablighi also altered

its tactics and began to send delegations that were led by local native Indonesians to Surabaya instead, hoping that this would make it easier for them to gain a foothold in the city. Success finally came in 1984 when a delegation was sent to Surabaya that was led by Ustaz Haji Muhammad Amin Sayid, who was from Sulawesi and of Bugis ethnic background. This small delegation of five members toured the mosques of the residential areas and finally managed to gain the consent of the residents of the Pekan Barat district, who allowed them to settle at the Masjid Nur Hidayat on Jalan Ikan Gurame 4/5 in Pekan Barat. Though the mosque itself was little more than a linked house that was located in the middle of a lower-middle-class residential area, it did at least offer the Tablighi a base for their activities.[49]

In 1985 the Masjid Nur Hidayat on Jalan Ikan Gurame 4/5 was declared the *markaz* of the Tablighi in Surabaya and Ustaz Haji Muhammad was made the first *emir* of the Tablighi for Surabaya. All delegations to East Java were henceforth despatched to this *markaz*, which served as the transit point for other delegations en route to Madura and further east, right up to Madura and Bali, and beyond.

Cognisant of the need for a secure base for their religious and educational activities, and sensitive to the fact that they had to adjust to local ethnic sensibilities so as to embed themselves more deeply, the Tablighi sought to find themselves a bigger centre in East Java where they could carry out their activities with little hindrance. They got their big break in 1984, when they managed to win the support of the local community in the village of Temboro near the town of Magetan that straddles the border between Central and Easten Java. It was in Temboro that the Tablighi were most successful and finally able to gain control not only of a *madrasah* but also the entire town, and in so doing managed to build the kampung Madinah they had longed for.

A home to call their own: The Markaz Besar of Temboro and the building of the Kampung Madinah

Magetan has always been one of the transit points along the route taken by the Tablighi delegations as they moved from Surakarta into East Java. It lies along the Surakarta-Madiun-Surabaya main road and as such was well served by public transport. Magetan was also the home of a number of Indian Muslims who had settled there before Indonesia's independence. But located as it was deep in the East Javanese countryside, the tone and tenor of Islam in Magetan and its environs remained deep-

ly rooted in Javanese culture, language and customs; and the Tablighis were often seen as strangers and interlopers. In the words of Ustaz A. Fazaldin[50] of Magetan:

> Even in the 1950s there were not so many of us (Indian Muslims) here in East Java, except for Surabaya where there were plenty of Arabs and Indians. Here in Magetan there were less than twenty families and most of us were traders who came from Punjab or Northern Pakistan. We 'melted' (*lebur*) among the Javanese and by the time of my children's generation, we had mixed families or had adopted Javanese children like I did. So when the Tablighi came to us in the 1970s and 1980s, they could not find any Indian Muslim contacts like they did in Jakarta or Surakarta. Here, we had all become natives.[51]

A stone's throw away from Magetan is the little village of Temboro, a small agricultural hamlet where the local economy is focused primarily on farming (rice and sugar cane), with a largely agrarian rural community. It was at Temboro that an important *pesantren* had been set up by a local religious scholar with the support of the Nahdatul Ulama. The Pondok Pesantren al-Fatah was set up in 1958 by Kyai Mahmud Siddique, son of the famous Javanese scholar Kyai Ahmad Siddique. Originally a *pesantren* with a strong leaning towards the Sufi teachings of the Naqshabandiyya and Qadriyya Tareqats, the *pesantren* had attracted a following thanks to the reputation of both Kyai Ahmad Siddique and Kyai Mahmud (who was an alumni of the Tebuyuron pesantren).[52]

The Tablighis paid many a visit to the Pesantren al-Fatah as they made their trips towards Surabaya and the other towns and cities of East Java. In 1984 a delegation was sent specifically to the *pesantren* that was led by Ustaz Prof. Abdusobur Khan, who had come all the way from Pakistan and who had been despatched to Surakarta from Jakarta. His mission was to win the support of Kyai Uzairon, the son of Kyai Mahmud Siddique who was then the head of the *pesantren* at Temboro. In the course of their meeting together, Ustaz Abdusubor managed to win the heart of Kyai Uzairon, who subsequently converted to the Tablighi Jama'at and became one of them.[53]

Shortly after his conversion in 1984, Kyai Uzairon was made the *emir* of the Tablighi-controlled Pesantren al-Fatah, becoming one of the first Javanese Emirs of the Tablighi in East Java. Between 1984 and 1989, Kyai Uzairon and his father Kyai Mahmud made several trips to the Markaz Nizamuddin in New Delhi where they met with other Tablighi leaders

and members, and plans were made to send Tablighi delegations from Temboro to South Asia. Between 1989 and 1993, several batches of *santris* (students) from the Pesantren al-Fatah were sent to study at Tablighi *madrasahs* in India (in Delhi and Lucknow) as well as Pakistan (in Karachi and Lahore). Today, there are more than one hundred of these students who make up the Temboro alumni of students who have studied at Tablighi-run *madrasahs* in India and Pakistan, and many of them have returned to Temboro to teach there.

The *pesantren* and *markaz* in Temboro is the biggest Tablighi Jama'at educational centre in all of Java. Covering an area of about four square kilometres, it is a vast complex made up of the original Pesantren al-Fatah as well as four mosques and a large Tablighi congregation centre that houses offices, dormitories, kitchens and supply stores for the Tablighi. It is at Temboro that the major gatherings (*Ijtima*) of the Tablighi are regularly held, as the complex is large enough to accommodate a huge congregation of several thousand Tablighis. On a regular day, the *pesantren* alone can accommodate around 600 teachers and more than 7,000 students, many of whom come from Indonesia but also neighbouring countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, Thailand and beyond.[54] It can be justifiably described as the Tablighi Jama'at's most significant gain in all of Java since it first arrived in 1955.

Having gained control of the *pesantren*, the Tablighis also managed to convert a majority of the inhabitants of Temboro as part of their effort to create a commune that would support the work of the movement – the Kampung Madinah of their dreams. Today, the community in Temboro is almost entirely Tablighi, and the visitor to Temboro will be struck by the appearance of the members of the community: all the men are dressed in the simple manner of the Tablighis and the few women to be seen outdoors are uniformly dressed in black *burqas*. Consequently, Temboro is perhaps one of the few towns in all of Java where the Tablighis no longer feel alien but rather at home.

Today Java, tomorrow the archipelago: The Tablighi Jama'at spreads out

From Java, the Tablighi Jama'at slowly but surely spread out across all of Indonesia. Since its arrival in Medan in 1952 and in Jakarta in 1955, the movement has been building its network of interlinked *markazes* and *pesantrens* across much of Sumatra and Java. In the 1970s the Tablighi made its first attempt to enter Madura, but to no avail. Despite the fact that there were Arabs and Indian Muslims on the island, the Madurese were not receptive

to the missionary efforts of the first South Asian Tablighi – Maulana Yusuf Multan – who went there alone in 1975 and who toured the entire island *on foot*.[55] As was the case for the Tablighis in East Java, Maulana Yusuf Multan was shunned by the Madurese on account of his *foreignness*.

It was only in 1993 that the Tablighi finally gained a foothold in Madura, after sending successive delegations made up of local, native Tablighis instead of Indian Muslims. The Tablighi's first *markaz* in Madura was at the Masjid Gunung Mada, Sampang (in 1993) and the second *markaz* was founded at the Masjid Talang in Sumenep. By the time the Tablighis found themselves in Madura, they had already wised up to the realities of Indonesian Muslim politics: as in the case of Temboro, the Tablighis could only root themselves after they had successfully won over the support of the local Madurese as well as the Indian and Arabs of Madura[56] and worked out a close working relationship with the Nahdatul Ulama (NU) that was based there.[57] One factor that accounted for this successful accommodation was the fact that the Tablighis who arrived in 1992 were themselves of East Javanese origin and were therefore familiar with the cultural norms of Madurese society. Aware of the vast potential of manpower and resources that the NU had at its disposal in Madura, the Tablighis who arrived in 1992-93 did not make the error of presenting themselves as puritanical reformers who had come to 'rescue' the Madurese from the ways of traditional Madurese Islam.

From Java and Madura, the Tablighi network spread out across all of Indonesia, covering Sulawesi, Bali, Lombok, Nusa Tenggara and the Moluccas. The Tablighi's first base in Makassar, South Sulawesi was the Masjid Mamajangraya located at no. 72 Jalan Veteran I in downtown Makassar. Owing to the fact that the Masjid Mamajangraya was and remains a public mosque, it was difficult for the members of the Tablighi to turn it into one of their own bases to host their fellow Tablighis who were touring Sulawesi on *khuruj*. Later in the 1990s, efforts were made by the local Tablighi to acquire their own plot of land and to transfer their activities to their own purpose-built mosque. The second (and now permanent) base of the Tablighi in Makassar is the Markaz Besar Tablighi on Jalan Kerung-Kerung, in central Makassar town.[58]

Finally, in 1988 the Tablighi managed to send its first delegation to the outer island province of West Papua, *by boat*. This delegation first stopped at Ternate to do missionary work for two months before arriving in Jayapura in mid-1988, and they stayed in Papua for a total of four months, touring all the major settlements of Papua by boat and air. It was led by a certain Dr. Nur, a Javanese member of the Tablighi who was also a lung

specialist with his own clinic in Jakarta. I have noted elsewhere that in the outer island provinces of Indonesia such as West Papua the Tablighi is presently confined to the Javanese, Madurese, Bugis and Ambonese who had settled in the province as a result of the transmigration (*transmigrasi*) programme that was initiated during the Suharto era.[59] There is nothing to suggest, however, that the Tablighi will relent in its *dakwah* work, and there will certainly be more cases of conversion among the native ethnic groups of Papua in the future.

Today, the Tablighi Jama'at is thoroughly embedded across the socio-religious landscape of Indonesia, from Banda Aceh to Jayapura, West Papua. It can be said that the movement has managed to build a pan-Indonesian communicative and logistical network that in many ways mirrors the institutions of the Indonesian state as well. The dispersal of the Tablighis across Indonesia interestingly mirrors the expansive structure of Indonesia's governmental institutions. The way in which the Tablighi's organisational structure operates at a number of levels – national, regional, provincial, city and town-based, down to the village level – mimics other pan-Indonesian institutions, including the Indonesian armed forces.[60] That the Tablighi Jama'at in Indonesia has devoloped such an organisational structure is perhaps unsurprising, considering that it had to survive and develop in the context of a state that has been described by some scholars as a 'transitional, hybrid regime of civil-military co-existence'.[61]

But the Tablighi Jama'at certainly did not come all the way from India with the intention of spreading its message to Indonesian Muslims alone. From the moment of its first landfall in Penang in 1952, the movement had regarded Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore as fertile ground for its religious work as well.

In Singapore, the Tablighis quickly embedded themselves among the Indian Muslims of the colony and established a presence in several of the mosques where Indian Muslims congregated regularly. In the 1950s, Singapore's Muslim population was a minority set against a larger non-Muslim community that was ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse; and yet there remained a number of prominent mosques and *madrasahs* that were well known across the rest of the archipelago. Maintaining a low profile throughout, the Tablighis were able to congregate in mosques like the Masjid Angullia that remains their main *markaz* to this day. But their big break came decades later when they were able to bring into their ranks several influential Singaporean Muslims like Sidek Saniff, who later served as the Parliamentary Secretary for Trade and Industry and Minister of State for the Environment.[62]

In Penang, the Tablighis who were part of Maulana Miaji Isa's first delegation found that the commercial ports of Southeast Asia were fertile ground for them. In Georgetown they were hosted by the Indian Muslim community and based themselves at the mosques that were run by Malayan Indian Muslims. From Penang the Tablighis later moved south, heading to the city of Kuala Lumpur that would later be the capital of the Federation of Malaya after the country became independent in 1957.

Kuala Lumpur was by then a cosmopolitan city where ethnic and religious differences were neatly demarcated geographically. During the colonial era the British colonial authorities used tools such as the colonial census to identify areas that would be reserved for the different ethnic groups that had come under colonial rule. Several Malay 'reserve land' areas had been set aside for the exclusive use of the Malays, such as Kampung Baru and Kampung Datuk Keramat. In downtown Kuala Lumpur, the Chinatown and 'Little India' quarters were created to house the members of the Chinese and Indian ethnic groups respectively while keeping the communities apart. Ironically, the legacy of colonial divide-and-rule served the interests of the Tablighis well, for it meant that in almost all the major cities dotted along the West coast of the Malayan Peninsula (Georgetown, Ipoh, Taiping, Malacca and Kuala Lumpur), there were separate ethnic enclaves where there were likely to be higher concentrations of Malayan Muslims of Indian origin.

The first Tablighis who came to Malaya and Singapore were thus able to insinuate themselves in and among the Indian Muslim community without drawing too much attention to themselves. In Kuala Lumpur, the Tablighis found themselves based at the Masjid India (India Mosque) in downtown 'Little India' in an area that was close to the Brickfields quarter whose residents were predominantly of South Asian origin. The Masjid India of Kuala Lumpur became the main *markaz* of the Tablighis in West Malaya, and it was from Kuala Lumpur that the Tablighis sent out their delegations to the other states of the Malayan (later, Malaysian) Federation from the early 1960s onwards.

Due to the relative invisibility of the Tablighi, living and working as they did among the Indian Muslims of Malaysia, they managed to stay off the radar screens of scholars and the state security apparatus alike. In Malaysia, the Tablighi Jama'at was seen as an urban phenomenon up to the 1980s and was thought to be confined to the Indian Muslim community. Many of the early studies of the Tablighi in Malaysia mistakenly identified it as part of the global resurgence of political Islam that was sweeping the globe at the time. Scholars like Nagata (1984) and Muzaffar

(1986, 1987) noted that the movement had grown particularly strong and visible in the urban areas of the west coast of Malaysia and had attracted a significant following among the urban poor and male blue-collar workers of the cities.[63] The unstated assumption then was that the Tablighi Jama'at was a primarily urban-based movement that was operating via networks of guilds, business networks and urban-based missionary activity.

While it is true that the Tablighi Jama'at was active in the urban areas and was indeed trying to reach out to a range of liminal underprivileged groups, it ought to be noted that the Tablighis were active in Malaysia since the early 1950s and were engaged in a long, drawn-out process of network building across the country. In both Malaysia and Indonesia, the movement was seen as quietist and passive in nature and was conspicuously absent from the political scene.[64] In the Malaysian case, the Tablighi Jama'at was tolerated by the government in the 1970s and 1980s, for it was seen as a social reform movement that could be used to help rehabilitate drug addicts and wayward youths. In the case of Indonesia, the Tablighis were accepted by the Suharto regime for the simple reason that they were seen as apolitical and non-violent.[65] That the Tablighis were careful not to tread upon the sensitive toes of Malaysian and Indonesian political and military elites is again not surprising, considering its long history of low-risk activism, avoiding direct political confrontation. The same was the case with the Tablighi Jama'at in Pakistan, which was smart enough not to confront the generals in power from the reign of General Ayub Khan all the way to General Zia 'ul Haq.

By the 1970s the Tablighi Jama'at was already making its way across the Malaysian Peninsula and taking the first steps towards the states along the east coast and the north. The Tablighi's arrival in the northern state of Kelantan was aided and abetted by the Indian Muslim diaspora network across Malaysia. It was through the Indian Muslim network that the Tablighi gained its first converts (and future leaders) who would bring the message of the Tablighi way up north into what has been regarded as the Malay rural heartland that extends all the way to the southern Thai provinces of Patani, Jala, Satun and Narathiwat.

The northern Malaysian states of Kelantan and Trengganu and the southern Thai provinces of Patani, Jala, Satun and Narathiwat remain among the most underdeveloped and ethnically homogenous in the region. Until today, Kelantan and Trengganu have remained predominantly Malay states where Malays make up more than 95% of the local population. Historically, these states have developed in relative isolation from the rest of the Malaysian Peninsula and the Thai mainland. The northern

states of Malaysia and the southern provinces of Thailand share common links in terms of a shared culture, language and history, as well as long-established lines of communication between each other and with the rest of the region and the world by extension.[66]

Complicating matters further was the fact that the states of Kelantan and Trengganu had also been the battleground for the two biggest Malay-Muslim political parties in Malaysia. Due to the near-homogenous nature of its population that was made up almost entirely of Kelantanese Malay-Muslims, the state of Kelantan was regarded as an important vote bank by both the ethno-nationalist United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS).[67] Both UMNO and PAS attempted to make gains in the state of Kelantan by exploiting the common fears and anxieties of the Kelantan Malays, who felt increasingly insecure about the fate of the Malays and Islam in postcolonial Malaysia. Adding to the rivalry between UMNO and PAS was the arrival on the scene of new Islamist actors and agents such as the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM, est. 1971) led by the charismatic young student-activist leader Anwar Ibrahim, and the Darul Arqam traditionalist-revivalist movement (est. 1968).

The Tablighi thus found itself caught up in the complex politics of Kelantan, a state that had seldom enjoyed a cordial relationship with the federal government based in Kuala Lumpur. In places like Kelantan, Trengganu (and the southern Thai provinces of Patani, Jala, Satun and Narathiwat), there were small pockets of South Asian Muslim migrants who had lived there for almost a century. Most of them were traders engaged in the trade of gold, spices and cloth; and in places like Kelantan they had risen to prominence thanks to their charity work and their patronage of mosques and religious schools. It was Maulana Khurasan, along with other Northern Indian Muslims like Muneer Zaman Khan, who collected funds for the construction of the original Pakistan Mosque of Kota Bharu. While the Tablighis made their way to Trengganu thanks to the efforts of their first Malay-Muslim convert, Ustaz Haji Musa,[68] the movement spread to Kelantan (and later across north Malaysia and southern Thailand) by working via this Indian Muslim network.

The Tablighi's first contact with Kelantan was occasioned by the conversion of the Kelantanese-Indian Muslim doctor Murshid Ali Khan and his brothers Jamal Ali and Kasseem Ali.[69] (Dr. Murshid Ali's own conversion story will be discussed in greater detail in chapter four.) Though the three of them were by then third-generation Malaysian Muslims who had never been to India and who had no knowledge of the Tablighi Jama'at

prior to their conversion, it was through the common bonds of culture and ethnic identity that the Tablighi managed to convince them to come to Kuala Lumpur where they first made contact. Having persuaded Dr. Murshid Ali and his brothers to join the Tablighi and to go on a *khuruj* across northern India, the brothers returned to Malaysia and in September 1974 set up the first Tablighi *markaz* at Masjid Lundang, Kota Bharu. The Khan brothers then gathered their own band of converts and went on their first *khuruj* across Kelantan, on foot. Dr. Murshid's brother Kasseem Ali was with them, and also taking part in that first *khuruj* was Ustaz Salleh Penanti, a Kelantanese Malay who was with them in Nizamuddin, India.

The Khan brothers' *khuruj* took them all the way to Penang, where they connected with members of the Tablighi who had already been based there since 1952. In 1977 they made their first trip to Patani in southern Thailand and in the same year opened the first Tablighi *markaz* in the border town of Golok, at the Masjid Muhamadiyah. From Golok, they proceeded north to Jala and Narathiwat and connected with Tablighis who had already settled there and who were responsible for the founding of the *markaz* in Jala and Narathiwat, and further up north to the Markaz Besar Masjid Aslam in Bangkok.[70] All of this was facilitated by the presence of a network of Indian Muslim migrants who had settled in Malaysia and Thailand as Malaysian and Thai citizens.[71]

The spread of the Tablighi Jama'at across northern Malaysia and into southern Thailand demonstrates the power of ethno-religious solidarity and close communal bonds that transcend sectarian political loyalties to states and citizenship. As the Khan brothers took the message of the Tablighi across the Thai-Malaysian border to places like Golok, Jala and Patani, they were less concerned about the realities of politics and more interested in fostering the bonds of common Muslim brotherhood. It is hardly surprising to note that by the time the Khan brothers had established the first Tablighi *markaz* in Golok and were working their way further north to Jala and Patani, they came into contact with fellow (Indian and Malay) Tablighis who had established the Tablighi Jama'at network in Bangkok and who were themselves heading south to bring the message of the Tablighi there as well.

Thus it was thanks to the missionary efforts of Indian and Malay-Muslim Tablighis that the Tablighi Jama'at managed to build an expansive network of *markazes* and religious schools across all of northern Malaysia and southern Thailand, at a time when ethnic-religious conflict between the predominantly Buddhist Thai state and the Muslim minorities

in southern Thailand was at its peak. The building of this network was no easy task then, for the security situation across the four Muslim provinces of Thailand had deteriorated significantly and the Thai military and police were suspicious of all forms of Muslim mobilisation among the Muslims in the south.[72]

Kampung Madinah, again: The Tablighi's centres in Jala and Sri Petaling

The development of the Tablighi Jama'at network across southern Thailand and the Malaysian Peninsula parallels the development of the network in Indonesia. As in the case of the Tablighi's spread across Java, Sumatra and the rest of the Indonesian archipelago, the movement had managed to spread itself across Malaysia and Thailand by first working through the pre-existing network of Indian Muslims who had settled in the two countries and who had become Malaysian and Thai citizens. Having gained the support of Indian Muslims there, the Tablighi then began to actively convert Malaysian and Thai Muslims to their cause; they then began to seek more hospitable environs where they could expand and develop their other activities. It has to be noted that such a tactic is neither new nor unique to the Tablighis of Malaysia and Thailand, for the traditionalist-revivalist Darul Arqam movement of Malaysia had done precisely the same and has managed to build many exclusive communes like their base, the Madinah Al Arqam Saiyyidina Abu Bakar As-Siddiq at Sungai Pencala, all over Malaysia and Thailand too.

Eventually, however, the Tablighis in both countries sought to secure for themselves a base that they could call their own, and for the Tablighis in southern Thailand the big break came in 1990 when they secured for themselves a large plot of land in the small town of Jala which would later serve as the foundation for the Markaz Besar Tablighi Masjid al-Nur.

The architect responsible for the design of the mosque was a certain Haji Abdul Mukif, who was of Bangladeshi nationality and was regarded as one of the best engineers of Bangladesh – a fact that was constantly repeated to me by the members of the Tablighi whom I met and interviewed during my stay there.[73] Prior to the establishment of the Masjid al-Nur, the Tablighis were concentrated in the other smaller mosques that are found in the town such as the Masjid Kabul (with the exception of the Masjid Tengah, which had been built with funding from the Thai government).

During my visit to the Markaz Besar Jala in 2008, I was informed by one of the (then) resident leaders, Ustaz Kamaruddin Fatani, that the entire complex had been built by the Tablighis themselves, relying on Tablighi

funds and voluntary work.[74] It was also pointed out that much of the material used for the construction of the mosque was donated by individuals or companies owned by individuals who were members of the Tablighi. The (then) head of the security section of the *markaz*, Cikgu Rushdi, demonstrated this fact by giving me a tour of the basement, roof and stairwells of the mosque, where it was clear that construction had been carried out in stages and that different materials were used at different stages of the mosque's construction.[75] The inconsistent colour, form and shape of the bricks and concrete in the stairwells suggested that different types of material were used of varying quality given by different donors. Interestingly, while the Masjid al-Nur was being built in Jala, ethno-nationalist Hindutva parties in India like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) were calling on the Hindus of India to donate bricks in order the build the controversial Ram temple upon the site of the destroyed Babri mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh.[76] Both projects were collective in nature, calling on individual Muslims and Hindus to make their own sacrifices for the sake of a common collective good and reinforcing the notion of a shared imaginary religious identity.

As in the case of the Tablighis' Markaz Besar Pesantren al-Fatah in Temboro, East Java, the Markaz Besar Masjid al-Nur of Jala was more than a *markaz* for the Tablighis: it served as an educational centre, a transport hub for their *khuruj* network across Thailand and Malaysia, and also a venue for the massive gatherings (*Ijtimas*) that are regularly held among the Tablighis in Thailand.[77] As in the case of the Markaz Besar of Temboro, the Tablighis' aim in Jala was not merely to build a base for themselves but also to claim control over the surrounding community and to eventually convert the people of Jala to their cause. They hoped thereby to recreate a model Muslim community based on the Prophetic model of the Prophet and the first community of Muslims, the *Sahaba*.

The same modalities were and are at work among the Tablighis of Malaysia. From 1952 the Tablighis had been actively building their network of *markazes* and religious schools across the Malaysian Peninsula, and as we have seen earlier, this network was all but completed by the late 1970s. However, there remained the need to build a permanent base that was big enough to accommodate the bigger congregations that would gather during the annual gatherings, and that opening came around 1995 when the Tablighis managed to found their Madrasah Miftahul Ulum at the Markaz Besar Tablighi Sri Petaling in Selangor.

Interestingly, in the case of Malaysia the expansion of the Tablighi Jama'at has also contributed to the growing influence of the Deobandi

school of thought. This should not come as a surprise considering the fact that the Tablighi's founders Muhammad Ilyas (1885-1944) and Muhammad Zakaria (1898-1982) were themselves products of the Dar'ul Uloom in Deoband. Reetz notes that in Malaysia the development of Deobandi religious schools has taken place *within* the framework of the Tablighi infrastructure[78] and that Tablighis and Deobandis have actively collaborated in the effort to expand their *dakwah* activities while also creating a network of supportive educational institutions. Reetz explains the appeal of Deobandi schools to Tablighis as lying in the former's strong emphasis on the study of *Hadith*, 'which gives the graduates a degree of certainty to be training in the correct interpretation of classical sources' which both Tablighis and Deobandis regard as the basis of 'true Islam'.[79] Thus the Madrasah Miftahul Ulum at the Markaz Besar Sri Petaling has been run by a succession of Deobandi-educated Tablighi scholars who studied in India.[80] The courses at the Sri Petaling *madrasah* follow the same system as that of Deoband's, save for the fact that its legal orientation is towards the Shafie (rather than the Hanafi) school of Islamic jurisprudence.

Sri Petaling serves as the ideal model of the Muslim community for the Tablighis in Malaysia, just as the Markaz Besar of Jala serves for the Tablighis of Thailand. As with the students at the Dar'ul Uloom in Deoband (both Indian and foreign), the students at the Sri Petaling *madrasah* are expected to take part in the forty-day *khuruj* during their end-of-the-year break. The Malaysian state and religious authorities seem to have been lenient in their dealings with the Tablighi-Deobandi *madrasahs* and have allowed them to operate, though the schools do not offer any diplomas or certificates that are officially recognised by the Malaysian government or state religious authorities. Despite this lack of official state recognition, the Tablighi-Deobandi *madrasah* of Sri Petaling has established working links with other religious schools in Selangor, Johor, Trengganu, Kelantan and Kedah.[81]

A similar situation prevails in the East Javanese Tablighi centre at Temboro, where the former NU *pesantren* has now been converted into a Tablighi-Deobandi teaching centre with a similarly strong emphasis on *Hadith* and *Hafiz* courses. As in the case of Malaysia, the Tablighi-Deobandi educational centres in Indonesia (such as the *madrasah* at the *markaz* of Temboro) are not officially recognised by the Indonesian government's Ministry of Education or Ministry of Religious Affairs. The certificate offered from these institutions would therefore not be enough to land a graduate a job even in a low-level state religious primary school. It is interesting to note, however, that although there are some Deobandi

schools in Indonesia that were set up by the Tablighi Jama'at – the *markaz* of Temboro being perhaps the most noteworthy example – by and large the Deobandi presence across the rest of Indonesia is less compared to Malaysia. The Temboro school has, however, managed to build a network of twenty-two other schools across Java and the outer island provinces.[82]

Unity in dispersion: The Tablighi Jama'at network at a glance

In this chapter I have attempted to account for the arrival and spread of the Tablighi Jama'at in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. Today, the movement has spread itself across all of Southeast Asia, extending itself all the way to countries like the Philippines, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The Tablighi today have their own network of *markaz* in every major city across the region and certainly in the capitals of all the ASEAN countries. In Vietnam, there is the Markaz Masjid an-Nur of Hanoi and the Markaz Masjid Mutawalli in Saigon; in Thailand, they have the Markaz Masjid Aslam in Bangkok; in Singapore, there is the Markaz Masjid Angullia on Serangoon Road in the 'Little India' quarter; and in the Philippines, the Golden Mosque in downtown Manila serves as their base.

As Reetz has noted in his study of the Tablighi in Europe today, the organisation of the movement is fairly uniform across the globe. Organised according to a descending hierarchy that starts at the level of the global directorate, the Tablighi's chain of command moves progressively downward to the regional, national and finally local level.[83] In Europe, today the Tablighi Jama'at is organised along the lines of national chapters, under which there are local city and district chapters as well. Southeast Asia has likewise been all but mapped out by the Tablighis, and all that remains is for me to point out the commonalities that prevail in the Tablighis' mode of dispersal, which has been remarkably uniform since its arrival in the region in 1952.

From ethnic solidarity to Muslim brotherhood: It has been pointed out that when the Tablighi Jama'at first arrived in Southeast Asia, it found itself in a region where there was already a plethora of Muslim groups and organisations and where the socio-political landscape of the countries they visited was somewhat overcrowded. The Tablighi made up for its relative newness and foreignness by falling back on bonds of ethnic kinship and fellow-feeling, working its way through the pre-existing Indian Muslim diaspora network that was present in places like Penang, Medan,

Singapore and Jakarta. As we have seen earlier, when the Tablighis first arrived in Jakarta with no friends or contacts of any kind, their immediate response was to seek out a fellow Indian Muslim whose hospitality they could avail themselves of. Only after they had secured enough support from the Indian Muslims of Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand did the Tablighis actively move out of their comfort zone and began to probe deeper into the interior heartland of the respective societies. This emphasises the point that its activism has always been of the *low-profile, low-risk* variety. By the 1970s, however, the face of the Tablighi Jama'at began to change as more and more local native Muslims rallied to their cause, and today it can be said that the Tablighi Jama'at in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand wears the local face of native/*pribumi* Islam. The Tablighi, in short, has gone native by now.

Building the ideal society from the bottom up: The Tablighi can be compared to some multinational conglomerates that choose to develop from the bottom up and begin from the relatively lower level of the local franchise. Unlike some other elitist or cadre-based Islamist movements, it sought to convert ordinary Muslims rather than elites in order to maintain its low profile and to avoid attracting too much attention (and suspicion) to itself and its activities. It is interesting to note – as we shall see later in the following chapters – that although the Tablighi today has managed to bag the odd 'celebrity Muslim' or two in its ranks, its mode of conversion remains the same: its focus is on ordinary Muslims, often of humble means and social background, and its success lies in the fact that it has been able to root itself in the local communities it has reached out to. In this respect, its development has been bottom-up rather than top-down.

Never stirring the hornets' nest: The Tablighi's apolitical and quietist nature means that it has managed to stay clear of political controversies and conflicts in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.[84] As I have shown earlier, the Tablighi have managed to embed themselves into the social fabric of Indonesian society during the time of the Sukarno and Suharto eras when Islamist movements were regarded with much suspicion by the military elite in power. Nonetheless, it is important to note that during the Suharto period in particular (1968-98), the Tablighi scrupulously avoided any form of confrontation with the military and its intelligence network. Even more remarkable has been the Tablighi's success in the war-torn provinces of southern Thailand, where a state of insurgency prevailed for much of the 1970s and 1980s. Though the Tablighi

Jama'at has come under more pressure from Thai authorities in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks on America and the Bali bombings of 2002, it remains active on a local level, albeit as quiet as a mouse.

Movement and piety: The Tabligh's aim of reconstituting the ideal Muslim society

And did those feet in ancient times
walk upon England's mountains' green;
And was the holy lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen;
I will not cease the mental fight
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
'Til we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.
William Blake, *Jerusalem* (1808)

Nostalgia for purity lost leads, among other things, to the wish to reconstitute the past in the present. Blake's paean to an idealised Jerusalem – a heaven on earth standing starkly before the might of the industrial age – is the song of a romantic hero who steadfastly refuses to compromise with the demands of the present while harking back to an ideal past that can still be projected into the future. Unfortunately, transcendental utopian blueprints may look good at a glance, but they are rather complicated things to build, as the Tablighi discovered for themselves when they attempted to build the monumental Abbey Hills *markaz* in East London.[85]

In this chapter I have looked at how the Tablighi Jama'at has sought to (re)build such an ideal world through their networks and their communes in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. As I have noted above, the easiest way to do this has been to take over pre-existing religious institutions and structures and to convert them to new uses; though the Tablighis are not the only ones who have taken over mosques and religious schools across Southeast Asia. Throughout the twentieth century other Muslim groups such as the Ahmadis (both Qadianis and Lahoris) have likewise been engaged in a long, drawn-out campaign to take over key religious institutions across the Dutch East Indies, British Burma, British Malaya and the Straits Settlements. Furthermore the strategy of taking over mosques and *madrasahs* remains the norm to this day, one example being the tactic used by anti-Ahmadi groups in Indonesia (in 2011) who have deliberately

moved into Ahmadi-controlled mosques and religious centres with the intention of occupying those spaces and denying them to the Ahmadis.[86]

What is clear in the case of the Tablighis is that they have aimed to alter the subjectivities of those whom they have converted, and also to alter the social terrain they inhabit. If *movement* happens to be one of the defining features of the Tablighi Jama'at, then it can be said that its other defining feature is *change*. But change to what?

It will be noted that throughout this chapter I have talked about the Tablighi Jama'at as one of several transnational Muslim networks that exist in the world today, but I have nonetheless presented a picture of the movement as being something that is distinct and can be written about and studied. How can I make such claims? And upon what premises are my claims of knowledge about the Tablighi based? In the following chapters I would like to pursue this question further as I look into the discursive domain of the Tablighi Jama'at in order to ground my claims about this movement upon some understanding of what may constitute a Tablighi subjectivity. Having described how they *came*, we need to now describe what they *are*.

II Learning to Be

The Foundational Literature of the Tablighi Jama'at and Its Role in Defining the Movement

> *Though it is generally believed that there is a great diversity of opinions in the volumes and the varieties of controversies the world is distracted with, yet the most I can find that the contending learned men of different parties do, in their arguings one with another, is, that they speak different languages.*[1]
> John Locke

In writing on and about the Tablighi Jama'at, I am already assuming that there is a *thing* to be studied, and that the signifier *Tablighi Jama'at* signifies a thing that is distinct and identifiable.

Scholars of the Tablighi are, of course, cognisant of the fact that they are discussing a mass movement that is made up of many individual subjectivities, and no scholar seriously believes that even the most detailed study of such a movement can account for the millions of subjectivities that make up the rank and file of such a complex entity. No matter how deep we delve into the micro-histories and micro-biographies of such a movement, we cannot hope to account for it in all its totality. Nor should we assume that any claims of knowledge we make of such movements can ever be exhaustive or final.

Nonetheless we are left with the challenge of describing what this mass movement is, and to forward certain opinions and observations about its character, worldview, long-term ambitions and so on. When dealing with such composite entities like mass movements and political parties, scholars are undoubtedly aware of the pitfalls of overgeneralisation and the trap of assuming some sort of homogeneous mindset that is uniform among all the members of such groups. Even at the height of the Cold War and the 'red scare', it is doubtful that even the most ardent opponents of the Soviets believed that all communists thought alike; so why should it be any different when we study religiously inspired movements?

Furthermore, as we shall see in the following chapters, it should be noted that the Tablighi Jama'at has not only come under the scrutiny of scholars and academics but also other Muslim schools of thought who have held certain notions, and even apprehensions, about them. In those cases where the Tablighi has come under the microscope of other Muslims who may harbour misgivings about them, there is likewise the assumption that there is such a thing as the Tablighi Jama'at, and that it has an identity that sets it apart from other Muslim groups. It can be added that this view is often accompanied by the belief that the Tablighis see the world in a way that is different from that of other Muslims.

Granting the nature of the Tablighi as a mass movement that is made up of millions of human subjectivities, the scholar still has to account for the mindset of the members of the organisation that s/he studies, and give some explanation of how an organisation can get its members to share the same assumptions about the world they live in – by persuasion, indoctrination or even force. Here is where a study of the discursive component of such organisations becomes crucial, though it can sometimes present the scholar with a set of other problems. When attempting to study a movement like the Tablighi Jama'at, we are confronted by the need to account for the worldview of its members.

This has been one of the problems that has beset philosophy from the beginning and is sometimes referred to in contemporary epistemology as the *problem of other minds*. The gist of the problem is simple enough: how can we make truthful and verifiable/falsifiable knowledge-claims about the thoughts, beliefs or states of minds other than ours. To push the question one step further, one can ask how we can even know that other minds exist. Its roots can be traced back to the sceptical method of the philosophers of old, all the way to Descartes. How does one penetrate the private world of another, and by doing so understand the other and get in the position of being able to make truthful knowledge-claims about the other? For our purposes here, we can restate the problem thus: how do we get into the life-world of the Tablighi Jama'at and make truthful knowledge-claims about the movements and its members – without, that is, merely offering subjective accounts of the movement from the perspective of the external observer-scholar who may be trapped in her/his own solipsistic perspectivism and who continually projects her/his own subjective impressions on the object of enquiry?

Before proceeding any further, allow me to state what I think is the nature of the conundrum.

When trying to account for the identity of the Tablighi Jama'at and what makes it different from other Muslim schools of thought, I am not suggesting that the *meaning* of the Tablighi – what it is and what the term signifies – is a matter of subjective belief that is locked away in the private subconscious of the individual members of the movement. To go down that path would lead us to what is sometimes referred to as a private language argument, where the meaning of the signifier 'Tablighi Jama'at' is defined privately by the individual members themselves. This would be an erroneous assumption, for the meaning and identity of any group or movement is not a matter of private deliberation by the members of the group, any more than the meaning of socialism is privately defined by the individual members of a socialist party.

I would argue instead that the meaning of the signifier 'Tablighi Jama'at' is defined by and within the context of the collective activity of the members of the movement themselves, and is developed through the medium of the movement's discourse. Understanding what the Tablighi is therefore requires some understanding of how this collective group identity has been created discursively; and this in turn requires some understanding of the key signifiers of that discourse and the rules that govern the use of such signifiers within its discursive economy.

W.V.O. Quine's account (1960) of understanding the different language of another community through what he termed *radical translation* – i.e. the translation of the language of the other via sentence-for-sentence (as opposed to word-for-word) translation – as a means of getting into the life-world of the other (and by doing so proving that there are other minds) serves as our starting point.[2] Through the abstract model he presented, Quine was trying to address the problem of making truthful knowledge-claims about the other, but the question remains as relevant when it comes to making truthful knowledge-claims about actual mass movements and organisations that seem to have a worldview and life-world of their own. Quine's argument was that one can never reach a determinate translation of any language, but that through what he regarded as 'observable sentences' – that is, sentences that occasion some form of consensus among the speakers of the foreign language – we can gain entry into the language of the other. We may never be able to fully comprehend the entirety of the other's language, but we can nonetheless understand particular sentences. And if we begin from the (admittedly atomistic) level of the 'observable' propositions that generate consensus among them, we may begin to understand how the language of the other works and,

by extension, what they *mean*. This, he argued, was one way to get to the truth of other minds, and for us to begin to make claims of knowledge about others around us.

I raise this question at this stage of my enquiry only to note that any study of the Tablighi Jama'at has to take into account the fact that whatever claims we make of the movement are epistemic ones as well. Understanding the Tablighi should not be confined simply to observations of or about the movement, but should also include claims about what it is. However, to make any claims about what the Tablighi *is* is to suggest some knowledge of not only the external phenomena of the movement but also how it is internally constituted and what the Tablighi Jama'at means for its members as well. This necessarily leads us to the question of the mindset of the Tablighis themselves. Such an accounting is a daunting prospect indeed, and so my approach will take small, tentative steps in that direction.

Like Quine, I propose to understand the Tablighi by trying to understand parts of its language. I begin by looking at the foundational texts of the movement itself, and in so doing hope to understand how – via the medium of discourse – the Tablighis see and present themselves to their fellow Tablighis and to the world around them. At this stage, however, I need to emphasise that this investigation is not intended to provide us with an exhaustive result, for it would be naïve to suppose that we can understand and account for the Tablighi Jama'at simply by looking into their foundational texts, any more than we can understand how Christians think simply by studying the New Testament.

The discursive economy of the Tablighi Jama'at: The foundational texts of the Tablighi and the quest for Islamic authenticity

> *It is never too late to revive your origins. It is their destiny: since they were not the first to be in on history, they will be the first to immortalize everything by reconstitution.*
> Jean Baudrillard, *America*

The existence of the Tablighi Jama'at is predicated on the claim that it has a mission to fulfil, and it is this sense of purpose that animates the Tablighi while also defining it.

However, as has been stated earlier, the Tablighi happens to be one of many Muslim movements and sects that exist in the world today and as

such it has to operate on the discursive terrain of Muslim religious praxis that is, like the discursive terrain of other belief systems and faith communities, a keenly contested one. The Tablighis have never re-invented the wheel any more than they have re-invented Islam, and to their credit they have never made claims to that effect. But they are, and have always been, aware of the fact that they occupy a subject-position that is contested by others and that their continued existence in the world requires the creation of a space – both discursive and physical – that they can claim as their own to simply exist.

Even if there is such a thing as a discourse that is particular to the Tablighi Jama'at, it would nonetheless be a discourse that rests on the broader context of Islamic discourse and praxis. Since the passing of the Prophet, countless Muslim schools of thought have emerged and there have been innumerable attempts by them to lay claim to this discourse. In this respect the Tablighi Jama'at is neither new nor unique, and is merely doing what the myriads of other Muslim schools of thought have been doing for ages, which is to lay territorial claims upon the field of Muslim religious discourse and praxis, and to present itself as the sole agent to define the parameters, form and content of that discourse.

The Tablighi Jama'at is a fundamentalist-literalist movement that seeks to restore to Muslim society a sense of the pristine perfection of Islam at its foundational moment, when Islam was directly transmitted to the first community of believers by the Prophet himself. This does not mean that Islam and the Prophet are one and the same, and the Tablighis have certainly never claimed that as one of their core beliefs. Rather, the Tablighis take the view that the decline of Islam and Muslim religiosity began with the demise of the Prophet and the subsequent loss of the Prophetic ideal type, for the Prophet was not merely the one who transmitted Islam but also demonstrated the ideal modes of Islamic normativity and the ideal way of Muslim life.

Here is where we encounter the first problem that the Tablighi attempts to remedy: the need to recover the ideal model of Muslim normativity in the absence of the Prophetic ideal type. This problem has been noted by Bobby Sayyid (1997) in the following terms:

The death of the Prophet shifted the unifying principle of the *Ummah* from the Prophet to his message. Thus the law took the place of the absent lawgiver. However the need for the law also give rise to the need for the interpreters of the law, for the law cannot speak. In other words the community (*Ummah*) needs those who can reconstruct what the absent lawgiver would have done if he had been confronted with this or that situ-

ation ... It is only with the absence of the Prophet that Islam comes to be the nodal point of the Muslim community.[3]

Sayyid (1997) notes that the attempt to reconstruct 'the absent lawgiver' as the centre of Muslim discourse and religious life has been one of the perennial projects of Muslims for centuries, and in his work he looks at how the institution of the Caliphate has come to be seen as the new focal point for a community of believers in search of a new lawgiver, or at least a new interpreter of holy law. In the case of the Tablighi Jama'at, however, the quest to restore a semblance of the Prophetic function – in terms of the Prophet's role as the living embodiment of religious law and praxis – has instead taken a rather different turn, and this is evident as we survey the corpus of Tablighi literature and its discourse.

Unlike other (political and institutionalised) expressions of Islam, the Tablighi as a movement seeks to restore that lost moment of pristine Islam by reactivating the memory of the Prophet through the discursive device of an idealised Prophetic model-type instead. Despite its vast transnational network, the Tablighi retains a minimal attachment to institutions, which reflects its disdain for material/physical expressions of piety. The core of the movement's work lies in its missionary practices that focus primarily on the teaching of proper Muslim conduct in emulation of the life of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions (*Sahaba*). This was formerly laid out by the movement's founders, and happens to make up the bulk of the contents of the Tablighis' foundational texts.

In the context of the Tablighi in Southeast Asia, the primary texts of the Tablighi curriculum (*Tablighi Nisaab*[4]) that contain the teachings of the founders of the movement have been translated in full by local members of the movement in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and other countries. These include the works of the Tablighis' founder-leaders Maulana Muhammad Ilyas Kandhalawi, Maulana Yusuf Kandhalawi and Maulana Muhammad Zakaria Kandhalawi such as the *Himpunan Fadhilah Amal*, *Hadits Pilihan: Dalil-Dali Enam Sifat Para Sahabat*, *Kehidupan Para Sahabat* and the *Fadhilah Sedekah*.[5]

Among these, I have chosen to start with the *Himpunan Fadhilah Amal*, as it is one of the most often referred to by the leaders and teachers of the Tablighis in the course of their sermons and learning (*tarbiyyah*) sessions that I witnessed during the course of my fieldwork in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. Here I would like to highlight an observation that was made in the course of my field research in the region. For reasons that are not entirely clear, the works by Maulana Muhammad Zakaria Kandhalawi seem to be read and discussed more than the works of the other found-

ers of the Tablighi. That Maulana Zakaria's works are the most visible is significant, for as Masud (2000) has noted, Maulana Zakaria had shifted the focus of the Tablighis to Sufism to some extent, giving more focus to the individual rather than the communal efforts of the movement.

The *Himpunan Fadhilah Amal* of Maulana Zakariya al-Khandalawi has been translated in full by the members of the Tablighi themselves, namely Ustaz Abdurrahman Ahmad, Ustaz Ali Mahfudzi and Ustaz Harun Ar-Rasyid.[6] It is a hefty volume, and an expensive one by the standards of the ordinary Malaysian, Indonesian or Thai member of the Tablighi – and as such it was not surprising that few copies of it were found among the possessions of the Tablighis themselves. (More often than not, bulky tomes like these would be kept in the *markaz* of the Tablighis and used for teaching purposes rather than carried by the Tablighis on their excursions into the outside world.)

The *Himpunan Fadhilah Amal* (Abdurrahman, Mahfudzi and Ar-Rasyid eds. 2003) is a compilation of seven works by Maulana Muhammad Zakariya, namely the *Kitab Fadhilah al-Quran,* the *Kitab Fadhilah Shalat,* the *Kitab Fadhilah Dzikir,* the *Kitab Fadhilah Tabligh,* the *Kitab Kisah-kisah Sahabat,* the *Kitab Keruntuhan Umat Islam dan Cara Mengatasinya* and the *Kitab Fadhilah Ramadhan*. Before proceeding further, I would like to offer a brief overview of the texts in the compendium and their contents.

The compilation begins with the *Kitab Fadhilah al-Quran*, which brings together forty narrated traditions and sayings of the Prophet (*empat puluh Hadits*) alluding to the primacy of the Quran as the sacred foundational text of Islam. The book begins by outlining the *adab* (norms) of reading the Quran, emphasising the distinction between physical/bodily norms (*adab lahiriyah*) and the internal discipline and concentration (*adab batiniyah*) that has to accompany the act.[7] There then follows the forty *Hadith* that are recounted in full, with their sources cited and commentaries that are offered after each.[8] In the closing section (*Tatimmah*) of the *Kitab Fadhilah al-Quran*, more exegeses are offered, elaborating upon the meaning of the *Hadith* that were quoted earlier.[9] That the compilation begins with the *Kitab Fadhilah al-Quran* underscores the point that for the Tablighis, it is the Quran that serves as the basis of all Muslim religious knowledge as well as the final point of reference and arbitration.

Having established the primacy of the Quran as the foundational text of Islam, the next book is the *Kitab Fadhilah Shalat,* which explains the necessity of prayer and worship. The book is divided into three chapters, with the first stressing the importance of prayer as one of the pil-

lars of Muslim faith.[10] Understandably, the chapter lays great emphasis on the importance of prayer and even greater emphasis on the sin and dangers of neglecting it.[11] It is, however, in the second chapter that the Tablighis' concerns are most emphasised, for it is here that the *Kitab Fadhilah Shalat* talks about the importance of communal prayer (*Shalat Berjama'ah*), and the dangers that arise when Muslims neglect their obligation to congregate together in the *Jama'ah*.[12] Here it is stated that the *Jama'ah* prayer is a central tenet of Muslim social life, and that it is the one practice that connects Muslims today – wherever they may be – to the foundational Muslim community made up of the *Sahaba* (companions) of the Prophet. Citing numerous *Hadiths*, the chapter explains that to remain in the state of *Jama'ah* is one of the ways in which Muslims can re-enact that founding moment of Islam itself, and by doing so reconnect with the original, founding community of Muslims at the time of the Prophet.[13] By placing such emphasis on the communal *Jama'ah*, the Tablighi is certainly not inventing or introducing a new feature to Muslim orthodoxy and praxis but rather cantilevering the scales in favour of one norm against another – which, of course, also happens to favour the norms of religious devotion that are common practise among the Tablighis themselves.

The tilting of interpretation continues in the two following books, the *Kitab Fadhilah Dzikir* and the *Kitab Fadhilah Tabligh,* where the foregrounding of the Tablighi and its practices grows more evident.

The third book, the *Kitab Fadhilah Dzikir,* emphasises the importance of *dzikir* as a ritual practice that is part of Muslim lived religious life. As in the case of the previous books, the exhortation to the virtues of *dzikir* is preceded by copious references to both the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet and the testimonies of his companions.[14] That the practice of *dzikir* had to be justified and defended thus would be of no surprise to Muslim scholars, for the practice has at times been regarded as teetering on the threshold between orthodoxy and unorthodoxy. *Dzikir* per se cannot be controversial, as the Quran mentions it more than prayer, but over the centuries it had fallen into disrepute because of the way it was done by some Muslim sects and the magical powers attributed to it, until it was redeemed by the likes of Muhammad al-Sulami (d.1021) and al-Ghazali (d.1111).[15] In the *Kitab Fadhilah Dzikir*, the practice of communal *dzikir* is said to calm the heart and soothe the nerves,[16] prepare one for the afterlife,[17] awaken the 'sleeping heart'[18] and bestow unlimited benefits upon those who practice it with total dedication and piety.[19] The Tablighis do not deny that *dzikir* is something that has been keenly taken

up by various Sufi *tariqas*, and in several instances references are made to this connection, emphasising the similarities between the Tablighis and the *tariqas* as well.[20] But, like al-Ghazali, they present it as a practice that is still within the fold of Islamic orthodoxy. The following two chapters dwell on the various *kalimah* that are regarded as the most appropriate and valued in *dzikir*, and elaborate upon the difference between the *Kalimat Thayyibah*[21] and the *Kalimat Tasbihat*.[22] Though the Tablighis have never denied the importance of *dzikir* in their ritual practice and accept the fact that *dzikir* likewise plays a pivotal role in the daily rituals of those who belong to the Sufi *tariqas*, the overall emphasis on the particular character of the Tablighi Jama'at is developed even more in the following book, the *Kitab Fadhilah Tabligh.*

The *Kitab Fadhilah Tabligh* is the fourth book in the compendium of the writings of Zakariya al-Khandalawi and outlines the importance of the Tablighis' work in doing good and forbidding whatever is evil. Typically, the first chapter of the book once again returns to the Quran and cites numerous *ayats* from the Quran that encourage the practice of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*.[23] The Quranic citations are further complemented by a selection of *Hadith* that likewise encourage Muslims to go out into the world to do what is good and call others to do the same.[24] Having established the historical precedents and Quranic justification for such social work in the name of Islam, the following chapters delve into the reasons why Muslims are encouraged to go out into society to uphold the good. The main arguments in support of this call are that it brings Muslims closer together and thus strengthens the bonds of Muslim society;[25] that through the process of trying to improve society also improves the Muslim within;[26] that it strengthens the faith of the individual and renders him more sincere (*ikhlas*) in his devotion and duties;[27] and that it ultimately contributes to the glorification and ennoblement of Islam and the Muslim *Ummah*.[28] The reader, however, is still left with the question of who are the Muslims to be followed should one choose to embark upon such a mission in society? That question is answered presently in the following chapter (chapter seven), which discusses the importance of seeking the community of the pious (*para shalihin*), and those whose lives resemble that of the Prophet and his companions most closely.[29] It is here that the characteristics of the ideal pious community are spelled out, and not surprisingly, the features of such a community resemble that of the Tablighis in many respects – for they are the ones who have sacrificed all that they once possessed for the sake of their pious work and who follow in the footsteps of the Prophet.[30]

There is clearly a progression and development of themes from the first to the fourth books in the compilation. The first and second books firmly embed the Tablighis and their practices in Quranic scripture and Muslim orthodoxy, while the third and fourth outline the duties and rituals of the Tablighis as they embark on the process of self-purification and the moral cleansing of society – ending with the call upon the individual Muslim to leave his worldly attachments behind him and to seek the company of the pious and the righteous. It is in the fifth book, the *Kitab Kisah-kisah Sahabat,* that this idealised community is described in detail, and it is none other than the founding Muslim community from the first instance of Islam's genesis in the world.

The *Kitab Kisah-kisah Sahabat* happens to be the longest book in the compilation of Zakariya al-Khandalawi's writings. In the introduction to the book, the Maulana notes that it was written when he was ill and convalescing at home.[31] An illness had overcome him suddenly, and he took it upon himself to write what would later come to be regarded as one of the classic works of Tablighi literature, the *Book of the Prophet's Companions*, running for more than two hundred pages. The outline of the book is simple enough. Its chapters examine the Prophet's life and the lives of his companions; their ascetic way of life and the many benefits of asceticism; self-discipline; the values of brotherhood and solidarity among the community; the ephemeral nature of the world and its attractions; the virtues of sacrifice, heroism and honesty; and of course the exemplary lives of the first Muslims, beginning with the Prophet himself.

Naturally, in the elaboration of these themes, it is the Prophet Muhammad who comes first in the list of model Muslims to be emulated. The author vividly recounts the many episodes of the Prophet's life when he embodied the values the author commends, drawing from personal accounts passed on by the first companions of Muhammad. In the book, the image of the Prophet that one gets is that of a pious ascetic whose love of God overwhelms all his other material concerns. In the story of the Prophet's voyage to Thaif, the Prophet is commended for his willingness to sacrifice his physical comforts and security.[32] The Prophet slept on a simple mat[33] and rejected the offer of a mountain of gold,[34] owning nothing save the cloth on his back despite his greatness as the Prophet of Mankind.[35] This is a theme that is also found in the writings of the Benedictines who maintained that Jesus did not own the clothes he wore. So great was the Prophet's disdain for wealth and his fear of being corrupted by it that he was unable to sleep after eating a date that he thought may have been meant for others instead.[36]

The companions of the Prophet are presented as model Muslims who emulated the Prophet in every way they could. The Caliph Umar was said to have come late to the mosque one day because he was unable to leave his house on account of the fact that his robe was being washed and it was the only item of clothing he owned.[37] Umar is presented as the most righteous of Caliphs, and the author notes that since his passing, not a single Muslim leader has been able to match his reputation for honesty and piety.[38] There is also the story of the Caliph Abu Bakar, whose moral scruples were so great that he could not rest after doubting whether his prayer and *dzikir* were performed correctly.[39] And there are also other stories of the other companions of the Prophet such as Bilal – one of the first to convert to Islam – who was chastised by the Prophet in his dream for not visiting the Prophet's grave in Medina after the Prophet's passing, for Bilal was bent on continuing his work for the community instead.[40] This was a lesson of particular importance to the Tablighis, for whom the veneration of elders and the pilgrimage to the graves of pious Muslims is also an important ritual.[41] Interspersed among the stories are also accounts of the miraculous proofs of Islam and God's will and power, as is recounted in the story of Anas Ibn Nadhar, who was able to smell the perfumed scent of heaven while still alive.[42]

Time and again, the *Book of the Prophet's Companions* returns to the same theme, which is that of the riches of poverty and the poverty of riches. Stressing that in the eyes of God, material wealth is of no value, Maulana Zakaria argues that the poor are highly valued in the estimation of God.[43] Earlier I noted the numerous accounts of the Prophet's poverty, and throughout the book there are further accounts of the wilful abandonment of wealth on the part of the companions such as Abu Bakar,[44] Abu Thalhah,[45] Umar,[46] Ja'far[47] and Abdullah ibn Amr.[48] Sacrifice here goes beyond the simple sacrifice of time (*Tafrigh-e Waqt*) and takes on the form of physical self-sacrifice and the will to martyrdom, as recounted in the stories of Saidina Ali,[49] Hanzhalah,[50] Amr ibn Jamuh,[51] Mush'ab ibn Umair,[52] Wahab ibn Qobus[53] and others.

The *Book of the Prophet's Companions* is, of course, a work of reconstructed history. As in the case of the *Kitab Fadhilah al-Quran*, the *Kitab Fadhilah Shala*, the *Kitab Fadhilah Dzikir* and the *Kitab Fadhilah Tabligh*, it happens to be one of the foundational texts of the Tablighi Jama'at. But as a work of history, it also serves the discursive function of backdating the movement to the original moment of Islam's arrival and by doing so lays claim to the past as a justification for Tablighi practices in both the present and the future. As I noted above, the depiction of the Prophet and

his companions is naturally a subjective one that portrays the Prophet as a man of great piety, humility, kindness and un-worldliness. (This compares to the portrayal of the Prophet Muhammad as a warrior or ruler, for instance, that is often found in the histories written by more politically inclined Islamists.) Later we shall look at how this framing of the Prophet and his companions serves as a discursive device in the construction of the Tablighi worldview, but for now I shall merely note that in the context of the Tablighi Jama'at's universe, the *Kitab Kisah-kisah Sahabat* is a work that presents the Tablighis with their ideal model Muslim to be emulated. Interestingly, the work also touches upon the lives of the first exemplary Muslim women – Fatimah, Aisyah, Zainab, etc. – who are likewise praised for their piety and self-sacrifice.[54]

The sixth book in the compilation is the *Kitab Keruntuhan Umat Islam dan Cara Mengatasinya*, which discusses the state of the Muslim *Ummah* (which is presented as weak, disunited, lost and aimless as a result of the worldliness of Muslims) and how the apparent flaws and shortcomings of the *Ummah* are to be corrected through *dakwah* work within the community. Time and again, Maulana Zakaria berates his fellow Muslims for straying off the proper path that had been set by the Prophet and his companions, and insists that there is no other model for Muslims to emulate today than the model that was set by the first community of Muslims in Mecca and Medina.[55] And the final text in the compilation is the *Kitab Fadhilah Ramadhan,* a work that lauds the virtues of fasting and the holy month of Ramadhan.

From text to discourse: The discursive construction of the Tablighi worldview with the Prophet and his companions as the model Muslim community

As I have tried to argue above, the foundational texts of the Tablighi Jama'at play a crucial role in the discursive formation of the movement's worldview; and it happens to be a worldview that privileges the Prophet and his companions as the ideal prototypes for the Muslims living in the present. Here I would like to explore the contours of this worldview and understand its internal discursive dynamics and how they provide the specific *nodal points* – to employ the term used by Laclau and Mouffe[56] – and boundaries that suture the discourse together.

Working on the basis of the Prophetic *Hadith* that states that whosoever follows the practice and lifestyle of the Prophet will come closer to

loving the Prophet and understanding the meaning of his prophetic message, the Tablighis have applied this principle in a literal sense in their own daily praxis of Islamic worship and lifestyle. The Tablighis' special emphasis lies in the cultivation of good manners and proper conduct, taking the spiritual goals of Islam one step further in the direction of transforming the conduct and character of the believer as well (Reetz 2003).

It is this goal of creating the proper Muslim (*ihsan*) who not only believes in God and the prophetic message of Muhammad but also internalises the values and norms of Islam on the level of lived religiosity and daily praxis that differentiates the Tablighis from other Muslims whose faith they may regard as being incomplete.[57] Thus the Tablighis have also introduced the distinction between the ordinary believer/s (*mu'min*) and those who have chosen to live out a life of Islamic piety through their pious actions and proper conduct (*ihsan* sing., *muhsin* pl.). This is, in fact, one of the first internal discursive frontiers that is introduced by the Tablighis in the construction of their own specific discursive economy and is vital to the Tablighi's own construction of identity and difference.

The distinction between ordinary, nominal Muslims and the Tablighis who are cast as the true, pious Muslims who follow in the path of the Prophet and his companions is a crucial one, for it helps us to understand the depth of the Tablighis' convictions and explains how and why the Tablighi Jama'at can be seen and described as a missionary movement that seeks to convert other Muslims to their fold. For the Tablighis regard ordinary Muslims as those who merely perform and repeat the rites and rituals of Islam at a superficial level, without a deeper belief in what they do or an understanding of the rites and rituals they perform.

These key texts authored by the pioneering founders of the Tablighi Jama'at serve as the foundation to their interpretation of Islam. It is in these texts that we find the key ideas and principles that mark out the movement and which gives the movement its coherence in vision and praxis of Islam as well. At the heart of this corpus of textual sources is the Tablighi notion of the six fundamental principles – laid down since the time of the movement's founder, Maulana Ilyas – that outline the proper mode of religious conduct for all the members of the movement. As Yusron (2008) has noted, the fundamental principles, norms and values of the Tablighi Jama'at are distilled from the Quran and the *hadith*, and as such cannot be described as being unorthodox in nature.[58] In summary, the six principles of the true *Sahabat* (companions) of the Prophet are:

1 The sincere and committed declaration of Muslim faith (*kalimah tayyibah*) which has to be profoundly understood, internalised and practiced by the believing Muslim;[59]
2 The performance of prayer that is profoundly understood and performed with full concentration and humility (*salat ma'al-khusu' wa'l khudu*);
3 The practice of *dzikir* that is for knowledge and dissemination (*'ilm ma'a dzikir*);
4 Fraternity and respect among and for all Muslims (*ikram al-Muslimin*);
5 Singularity of purpose and intentionality in devotion (*tashih al-niyyah*);
6 The willingness and determination to perform missionary work in the company of fellow Muslims (*da'wah wa al-tabligh*).

Razak (2008) notes that the sincere and profound recitation of the declaration of faith, for the Tablighis, can only be realised through a deeper understanding of the full meaning of the declaration that *'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the Prophet of God.'* As Razak argues, in the exegesis and elaboration of the founder-leaders of the Tablighi, the declaration of faith leads to the conclusion that there can only be one faith – Islam – and that other faiths are untrue.[60]

Furthermore, the declaration that Muhammad is the Prophet of the one and only God also entails that Muhammad is by extension the only model for Muslims to emulate, and that to veer from the path of Muhammad and to fail to live by the Prophet's standards or the norms set by the early Muslim companions is to veer from the true path of Islam itself. Understood in its most conservative sense, this interpretation of the declaration of faith necessarily entails that Islam is the only true religion and that to even entertain the possibility of there being other truths apart from Islam would be an error. There is, consequently, no such thing as religious pluralism from the Tablighi's point of view – though it ought to be noted that this stand against pluralism is certainly not unique to the Tablighi Jama'at, as it happens to accord with the position taken by many other conservative groups and has been articulated even by those who oppose the Tablighi, such as the radical Indonesian cleric Abu Bakar Ba'asyir.[61]

The Tablighis' position also implies that any act that compromises or digresses from the exemplary model set by the Prophet is also an act of un-faith, for it delivers the Muslim away from the true path of Islam that

has been set according to the *Sunnah* of the Prophet and his companions.[62] The discursive effect of this interpretation is to situate the Prophet at the centre of the Tablighi's discourse, rendering the Prophetic model as the nodal point that effectively binds together the entire chain of equivalences that makes up the discourse of the Tablighi as a whole.

For the Tablighi, the exemplary model for Muslims to emulate and mirror has already been set and perfected in the form of the Prophet – as we have seen earlier in our reading of Mualana Zakaria's *Kitab Kisah-kisah Sahabat*. Indeed, the Prophet is the *primary* model for all Muslims to follow. The imitation of the Prophet was in turn first done by his companions, who enacted the first moment of mimesis of the ideal Prophetic type. The goal of the Tablighi is to create the conditions and opportunities in which ordinary Muslims today may be able to re-enact this mimesis, and this accounts for why so much of Tablighi writing tries to permanently fix the meaning of the signifier in such a manner that no alternative interpretations are possible.

What qualifies the Tablighi Jama'at as a *missionary* movement that seeks to *convert* other Muslims is its deeply held belief that they are the true, authentic Muslims and that other Muslims are only so on a nominal level. Proceeding from the premise of *Tauhid* as understood by the Tablighis and the uniqueness of the final Prophet means that there is *only one way* that a Muslim can become a Muslim in any meaningful sense – that is, by emulating the Prophet. Unless and until Muslims recite the *kalimah* with the same deeply felt intensity of the Tablighis and accept the responsibilities that this act entails, they are at best nominal Muslims who have yet to become true Muslims in a complete sense. Hence the Tablighis do indeed see themselves as part of a missionary movement that has to convert other Muslims to their interpretation of true Islam, for a merely nominal attachment to the religion (without the internalisation of the obligations that follow) does not make one a *complete* Muslim.

The emphasis given to the process of personal transformation of the ordinary Muslim into a better, more focused and complete Muslim places the individual Muslim at the centre of his/her own process of transformation. As agency and will are placed entirely in the hands of the individual convert himself, the responsibility for success or failure is squarely on the shoulders of the individual. In this respect the Tablighi takes the individual as its starting point, making this a missionary movement that, despite its collective basis and appearance, nonetheless appeals to the individual and privileges the individual as the primary actor in the process of his/her own salvation.

The relationship between the individual member and the exemplary Prophet is also a direct and personal one: the Tablighi's insistence on following the traditions of the Prophet (in all aspects, *Surah, Sirah* and *Sarirah*) is universally applied to all members and thus has an equalising effect upon the entire movement. All Tablighis are encouraged to emulate the Prophet in every aspect of his life through the process of approximated mimesis. Among the pedagogic functions of Maulana Zakaria's *Kitab Kisah-kisah Sahabat* is to show that this was the case at the founding moment of Islam, and that the attempt to mimic the ideal Prophetic type had already begun during the time of the Prophet's companions. This introduces a horizontal interface between all members who are equalised and placed on the same level, leaving only a singular vertical interface between the member/s and the Prophet as the ideal type.

Approximated mimesis and the impossibility of perfect imitation

The mimesis of an ideal Prophetic type is certainly not an idea that is unique to the Tablighi Jama'at, or even to Islam. Since the time of Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471), the goal of *imitatio Christi* has been part of Christian doctrine and the goal of successive generations of Christian mystics. Radhakrishnan (1948), in his commentary on Spinoza, has likewise noted that for the latter the death of the living Jesus had opened the way for the adulation and imitation of the idealised Christ in turn.[63] In Islam, however, the imitation or mimesis of the Prophet is taken further than in Judaism or Christianity, an observation made by Frithjof Schuon[64] who dryly notes that the 'cult of small outward observances' takes on a less personal dimension in Judaism, where 'no Jew would ask himself how Moses sat down to eat grapes'.[65]

Notwithstanding Schuon's critique of such forms of mimesis, it remains a fact that for the Tablighis the approximate imitation of the Prophet and his companions occupies a central place in their discourse and praxis. Returning to the observation made by Sayyid earlier about the Muslim community's struggle to reconstruct the absent lawgiver after the passing of the Prophet, it should also be noted that the Tablighi's call for the emulation of the ideal Prophetic type is not intended to negate the distinction between Prophet and follower. For the Tablighi also falls back on the orthodox view that the Prophet was, and remains, unique. The ontological singularity of the Prophet, underlined further by the doctrine of the finality of prophethood (*khatam-e nabuwwat*) renders total mimesis impossible.[66]

Thus the Tablighis are encouraged to reform themselves to becoming the closest *approximation* of the Prophet, but never to become one and the same. The latter option is ruled out by the abovementioned doctrine of finality of prophethood, which guarantees the singularly unique status of the Prophet as the ideal type but one that can at best be mirrored but never reproduced. Of course, it ought to be noted that the effect of this discursive strategy is to render the Prophet-signifier fixed, stable and unique, as the nodal point at the centre of the Tablighi's discourse. What this also means is that the closest that Muslims can get to actualising the model of the Prophet is by mimicking the devotion and loyalty of those who were closest to him – that is, his companions. In this respect, the Tablighi Jama'at seeks to re-enact the founding of the first community of Muslims, and Tablighis see themselves as the contemporary mirror of the historical community of the *Sahaba*.

Proceeding from this intensely private relationship with the Prophet, the Tablighi develops its understanding of the relationship between the believing Muslim and God on an equally private and direct level. In this respect the Tablighi can also be compared to some of the reformist Protestant Churches that developed in Western Europe and North America, where the relationship between the believer and God is likewise a direct and immediate one, without the presence of an intermediary party such as a priesthood or organised Church. This accounts for the overwhelming emphasis that the Tablighi places on the ritual of prayer and *dzikir* as noted by Razak (2008)[67] and which are the themes of foundational texts such as the *Kitab Fadhilah Shalat* and the *Kitab Fadhilah Dzikir*. Prayer, which is often described as the 'gateway to God'[68] by the Tablighis, is the primary mode of self-regulation and self-discipline, as well as self-denial for them.

While prayer is of course obligatory for all Muslims, the Tablighis' insistence on a form of prayer that is conscientious and sincere (*khusyu'* and *khudu'*) lays greater emphasis on the ritual performance of prayer as the central pillar in their conduct of religious life in the social domain.[69] The Tablighis' modes of discipline and self-control are all directed towards the perfection of the performance of the ritual of prayer, so that each act of prayer mimics the perfect model that has been set by the Prophet. And because of the Tablighis' emphasis on the Prophetic ideal as the perfect model for religious conduct, prayer also becomes the bridge that connects the individual Tablighi with the Prophet. For prayer is not merely an act of supplication to God but also yet another enactment of the norms of the Prophet. Prayer thus becomes part of the process of mimesis of the Pro-

phetic ideal type, and it is for this reason that failure to perform the act of prayer entails not only the failure to submit to God, but is also seen as the abandonment of the Prophet's path.[70]

Notwithstanding the strong emphasis that the Tablighi Jama'at places on the individual and his agency and free will, it is nevertheless a communal movement that is founded and sustained by strong and intimate collective social bonds. This is outlined in the four other foundational principles of the movement that place equal emphasis on the need for the Tablighis to honour and respect their fellow Muslims and to hone their determination to serve as model Muslims for others to emulate via the path of missionary (*dakwah*) work and which have been elaborated upon in works like the *Kitab Fadhilah Tabligh* and the *Kitab Kisah-kisah Sahabat.*

The Tablighis' emphasis on chivalry and the code of honourable conduct betrays some of its South Indian roots and its Sufi associations, for much of what the Tablighis have to say on the matter of honour and respect echoes the doctrines that were also propounded by numerous Sufi orders that emanated from South and Central Asia and which had been codified by the tenth-century scholar Muhammad ibn al-Husyan al-Sulami in his compendium, the *Kitab al-Fatuwwah.* Maulana Muhammad Ilyas al-Khandalawi, for instance, has been quoted time and again to say that it is the duty of the Tablighis to protect the honour and reputation of their fellow members and to reserve their judgement of other Muslims who have yet to enter the fold of the Tablighi.[71] A striking parallel is found in the saying of the Prophet quoted by Ismail ibn Ahmad al-Khallali that is found in the Sufi compendium of al-Sulami where he quotes: 'The first sign of intelligence is to believe in Allah; the second is to be lenient with people in affairs other than abandoning the faith.'[72]

The Tablighis' stress on chivalry and honour is also one of the factors that prompts them to take to the path of missionary work in the first place, as sacrificing one's private life and luxuries is regarded as one of the most honourable achievements that any Tablighi can claim in this life. To go out into the world on the path of God and to save other Muslims by bringing them to the Tablighis' interpretation of the right path of Muslim devotion is elevated to an article of faith itself and is consequently placed on par with other forms of religious worship. Missionary work is cast as being part and parcel of doing God's work on earth and remaining close to the path of the Prophet who was, in the Tablighis' view, the first Muslim missionary who initiated the work of *dakwah* in the first instance.

As in the case of worship of God and the emulation of the Prophetic ideal type, missionary work for the Tablighis is a personal matter that involves personal sacrifice, personal commitment, intentionality (*niyyat*) and devotion. The Tablighis therefore seek to combine all these priorities into a singular purpose via the act of missionary activism, where the members of the Tablighi are expected to be on their best behaviour and to literally follow in the path of the Prophet, inviting others to join them in the same manner that the Prophet initially invited the first Muslims to embrace the religion.

Thus the personal spiritual economy of the Tablighis is brought into the public domain, as the members of the movement seek to re-enact their own personal process of self-realisation and self-renewal via public devotion and sacrifice. The Tablighis' willingness to endure hardship and privation, sleeping in mosques and living on the charity of others, all point to an integrated economy of self-denial that was outlined in Maulana Zakaria's *Kitab Kisah-kisah Sahabat*, as we have seen earlier. However, this can only succeed if the Tablighis have managed to fully understand, integrate and internalise the values and praxis of the Prophetic ideal type first.

In order to understand the modalities and norms of Tablighi life and their stress on the primacy of individual piety, their personal identification with the Prophetic ideal and their willingness to engage in self-sacrifice, the spiritual economy of the Tablighi Jama'at has to be understood as a totalised system. For the Tablighis, the relationship between the domains of faith (*aqidah*) and religious praxis (*ibadah*) are intimately linked and founded upon complementary principles. Proceeding from the foundational premise that God is singular, absolute and omniscient, the total servitude of the Tablighis to God – via their emulation of the Prophetic ideal type which they regard as the closest approximation of right and proper religious devotion – entails their total surrender to the will of God. This accounts for what is sometimes seen as the fatalism of the Tablighis, whose disdain for worldly matters and material concerns has led to them being (however unjustly) accused of fatalism, carelessness, neglect and even of being 'contaminated' by Hindu and pagan beliefs and values.[73]

Yet the Tablighis would insist that their steadfast faith in God – grounded on *aqidah* – is the factor that allows them to perform their religious and social obligations – *ibadah* – in earnest and with scant concern for their own personal safety and well-being. From the Tablighi viewpoint, faith in God has to be total and absolute, which defines the identity of the

true Muslim as one who *totally* submits to the will of God. In real terms, this entails the willingness to sacrifice one's time, wealth, family and career on the basis of the belief that God will provide wherever and whenever one is wanting – as was outlined in the exemplary stories recounted in the *Kitab Kisah-kisah Sahabat*. The model that serves as the justification and rationale for this disdain for material attachment is again the same master signifier that has always been at the heart of the Tablighis' discourse: the Prophetic ideal type and the first companions.

The Tablighis' spiritual economy is therefore far more complex than it may appear at first glance. As in the case of their complex relationship with the Prophetic ideal type, where individual agency and free will is called upon only to lead to the denial of identity and the Self; the Tablighis' relationship with piety and religious praxis is also one that contains a number of interesting paradoxes and juxtapositions.

On the surface of things, the epiphenomena of Tablighi life may appear to be a case of collective self-denial and disempowerment leading to fatalism and weakness. Indeed, the most common admonition of the Tablighi Jama'at is that it is a movement that will ultimately disempower Muslims and lead them towards a life of social dependency and chaos.[74] But for the Tablighis themselves, this collective act of self-denial and self-sacrifice is also a demonstration of collective as well as private will and intent, as was emphasised to me several times in the course of my fieldwork and interviews. The Tablighis' foundational texts such as the *Kitab Kisah-kisah Sahabat* do not see world renunciation as a sign of capitulation or surrender but rather a test of will; and many Tablighis will insist that by denying themselves the comforts of the world they have merely shed their dependency on things material and corrupting. The gradual process of detaching oneself from dependency on such luxuries means that they are capable of feats of sacrifice and devotion that are rarely matched by other ordinary Muslims. Their willingness to leave their families for months on end, to travel in the harshest of conditions (and sometimes face real dangers as well), their refusal to adapt to a life of settled ease and regular comfort, etc. all point to a regime of self-discipline that is martial and Spartan, and in the eyes of many Tablighis ultimately more empowering.

This mode of empowerment-via-renunciation also has to be understood within the framework of the Tablighis' own discourse that is founded on the premise that only God has ultimate – and real – power in the universe. As such, by turning their backs on the ephemeral attractions of the material world, the Tablighis hope to attach themselves to the one

and only source of true power, God – albeit via the narrative device of the Prophetic ideal type that serves as the vehicle for that ultimate salvation. For the Tablighis, theirs is not a life of moribund fatalism or powerlessness, but rather a recognition of the fact that human beings are ultimately powerless to affect changes in the world without the aid of God.

Drawing the discursive frontiers of the Tablighi Jama'at: What it *is*, and what it is *not*

> *The impossibility of ultimate fixity of meaning implies that there has to be partial fixations – Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate a field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre.*75
> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe

A cursory overview of the Tablighis' discourse will point to the following salient features. The Tablighis' discursive foundations are strikingly sparse and rudimentary. Apart from key Tablighi texts such as the *Himpunan Fadhilah Amal* (*Fadhail A'mal*), the Tablighi's reliance on textual sources is minimal. The Quran and *Hadith* serve as its primary textual sources, while works like the *Fadhilah Amal* are read as guidebooks that determine how those sacred sources are to be interpreted. As such the Tablighi's reliance on these key texts makes it relatively easy for the movement to spread its ideas and praxis further afield, as entry and membership within the group is simple. Unlike the cadre-based Islamist movements of today that operate through systems of intensive ideological indoctrination, there are few rules of membership and rituals of association that are used by the Tablighi Jama'at, and the movement rarely requires its new members to be entirely familiar with the primary textual sources of the movement before they gain membership.

The self-contained and self-referential nature of Tablighi discourse also accounts for why it does not engage in in-depth polemics with other Muslim sects and communities, or other faith communities. (In fact, as we shall see in the following chapter, the Tablighis are loathe to entertain such doctrinal disputes.) As the Tablighis regard the Quran and *Hadith* as the only sources of divinely revealed truth and knowledge, they spend little time elaborating upon the belief and faith practices of other religious communities. This is borne out by their somewhat shallow and often caricatural understanding of other religions, a fact often underlined in the

course of the fieldwork interviews I conducted over the years. Needless to say, for many members of the Tablighi Jama'at, the scriptures of the Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, Confucianists, etc. are never consulted or read, even for reasons of comparative study or inter-religious dialogue.

This exclusive approach to reading and exegesis in turn accounts for the somewhat isolationist tone and tenor to the discourse of the Tablighi, which sees and presents Islam as God's blessing to all of humankind and which consequently rejects all other belief systems as fundamentally untrue. The primacy afforded to the Quran and *Hadith* as the universal standard of truth by which all beliefs are to be judged means that there can be no truth value (even relatively speaking) conceded to any other belief system. Consequently inter-religious dialogue becomes entirely redundant, as there can be no dialogue between different discursive economies that do not stand on a par with one another. Simply put, for the Tablighis, Islam is truth itself and the *only* truth at that. Nor can there be any other alternative claims to truth outside the discursive economy of the Tablighi's Islam. To even entertain the notion of inter-religious dialogue would jeopardise the unique status given to Islam as the sole depository of truth-value. Again, it has to be noted that there is nothing new or unique about the Tablighis' stand on the question of religious pluralism, for a similar position has been taken by many other Muslim scholars of old, such as Taqial-din ibn Taymiyya, whose writings demonstrated a similar concern to protect Islam from contamination by/from the other. The Tablighi Jama'at's position on religious pluralism parallels that of conservative scholars like ibn Taymiyya, further reinforcing their claim to belong to the ranks of the orthodox as well.

As the Tablighi sees itself as a movement that seeks to renew the faith of Muslims by returning them to its own vision of an undifferentiated Muslim community that was – in their view at least – united during the time of the Prophet, the movement necessarily regards all 'heretical' and 'deviant' groups as dangerous signs of the fatal dismemberment of the Muslim community which they seek to repair. Part and parcel of the Tablighis' reform mission is the quest to restore this sense of lost unity by first addressing the ruptures within the Muslim community.

The socio-religious landscape of the Tablighi Jama'at is a complicated one that has its own internal hierarchies and modes of differentiation and distancing. Standing outside the material order of things in the world is the omnipotent and omniscient God of Islam, and at the peak of the social order of men is the Prophet who remains unequalled as the idealised model Muslim. In accordance with the gradations of mimesis, there then

comes the Tablighi Jama'at, whose members are themselves engaged in the conscious emulation of the first community of Muslims and trying to re-enact in the present day the pristine moment of Islam's founding. Those Muslims who have yet to follow the Tablighi are seen as fellow believers and members of the wider *Ummah* who have yet to realise the moral necessity and transformative potential of world renunciation as the Tablighis do.

Beyond the Muslim *Ummah* there are the non-Muslims, who may be divided between the unbelievers who may yet be converted to the true path and those who are hostile to Islam and thus beyond redemption. What puts all of the unbelievers on an equal footing is the fact that they do not acknowledge the truth of Islam – for the Tablighis, the *only* religion – and persist in their false beliefs and delusions. Yet this entire social landscape made up of exemplary Muslims, wayward Muslims, friendly infidels and hostile infidels is still bound within the singular economy of *Tauhid*, or the doctrine of the singularity and unity of God and creation.

In summing up, it can be said that the discourse of the Tablighi Jama'at is one that is ill at ease with alterity and difference. It denies comparison and/or commonality with other faiths, as demonstrated by its consistent denial of the truth-claims of other religions, ideologies and epistemologies; and it seeks to ultimately eradicate all symptoms of plurality and difference in the Muslim community as well. For in the long run, the goal is to draw a neat frontier between Islam and its constitutive Other – the latter being made up of all other forms of non-belief and false belief. Because of this heavy emphasis upon conformity to the Prophetic ideal type and the founding community of the first companions, the Tablighi can be classified as a literalist fundamentalist movement that seeks to restore a sense of lost purpose, order and identity to Muslims, albeit based on an understanding of an ideal Prophetic type that is constantly being re-invoked via the host of discursive strategies it employs.

Another discourse, another mindset? The foundational texts of the Tablighi Jama'at as a window to the Tablighi worldview

This chapter began on a somewhat cautionary note by raising the philosophical question of other minds. I did so for fear of falling into the trap of making essentialist propositions about the Tablighi Jama'at, or about there being some essentialist underpinnings to a 'Tablighi mindset' which are, in my opinion, unverifiable and thus untenable assumptions.

Opting for a Quinean approach, I have tried to understand the Tablighi Jama'at by looking at its language – via reference to its primary textual sources and how these foundational texts have been read in such a manner as to give the Tablighis a worldview that is special to them. To talk of the uniqueness of the Tablighi Jama'at is something that we need to do with care, for the Tablighis are, after all, Muslims like millions of other Muslims; and as such they too reside within the same broader vocabulary and discursive landscape as other Muslims do. What renders the Tablighi Jama'at special (in the non-essentialist sense) is the fact that in the discourse of the Tablighis, certain signifiers – the Prophet, his companions, the concepts of *Tabligh, Jama'ah*, *Dzikir*, *Amal,* etc. – have been elevated to the status of master signifiers occupying key nodal points that affix the chains of equivalences holding the Tablighi's discourse together.

The Tablighi may speak with the vocabulary of Islam, which happens to be the same vocabulary used by more than one billion other Muslims across the world, but their discourse is one that is guided by its own set of rules, protocols and discursive strategies that qualifies it as a language-game – in the late Wittgensteinian sense – in its own right. In the same way that lying, telling stories and composing poems are language-games that reside in the same broad language but that have rules that are specific to each, the discourse or language-game of the Tablighis also resides in the broader language and vocabulary of Islam but has its own norms and rules that determine the importance given to some signifiers over others. And as in the case of telling stories or composing poems, the language-game of the Tablighi Jama'at is a rule-governed exercise. Like learning how to tell stories and compose poems, one has to *learn* how to speak the discourse of the Tablighi, and for that, one has to learn the rules of its language-game first.

There is thus nothing *essentially* unique about the Tablighi Jama'at, but we are nonetheless entitled to speak of the Tablighi worldview and discourse as something that is distinct and which have characteristics special to them (in the same way that we are entitled to describe storytelling as a distinct language-game, different from poetry). Any talk of a 'Tablighi subjectivity' therefore has to be predicated on the premise that such a subjectivity is *discursively constructed*.

However, the cohesion of the Tablighi Jama'at is not merely guaranteed by its reliance on the foundational texts of the movement, despite the reverence shown to the movement's founder-leaders like Maulana Muhammad Ilyas Kandhalawi and Maulana Muhammad Zakaria Kan-

dhalawi. For there are also other, less erudite and lofty textual resources that the Tablighis have drawn upon. In the following chapter we will turn our attention to another equally important source of Tablighi lore, namely the portable literature of the Tablighi Jama'at, and look at how these easy-to-carry booklets and pamphlets have played a vital role in the dissemination of the Tablighis' ideas and in the reproduction of the movement as well.

III Learning on the March

The Portable, Reader-friendly Literature of the Tablighi Jama'at and Its Role in the Self-identification and Reproduction of the Movement

Like a vast shapeless rock worn to a rounded boulder by countless drops of water, experience was shaped by millions of printed words into a 'concept' on a printed page, and in due course, into a model.[1]
Benedict Anderson

From the hefty, we now move on to the lightweight. I would like to focus on the range of portable, pocket-sized reading material that has been produced by and for the members of the Tablighi Jama'at and for those whom they wish to convert to their path as well. The Tablighis in fact produce a steady stream of what can be described as reader-friendly booklets and pamphlets, which are widely consumed, distributed and shared among their members. This is particularly true in the case of Indonesia where a number of Tablighi publishing companies have emerged (Pustaka Assajadah, Pustaka Ramadan, Pustaka Nabawi, etc.) that seem to specialise in reading material for the Tablighis themselves. Similar presses have also appeared in other parts of Southeast Asia, including Malaysia and Thailand.[2]

Before discussing the common general features of these pamphlets in terms of their style, form, themes, etc., I will offer a sampling of some of the more popular ones that have made their rounds over the years and which I came across in the course of my field research.

Of course, much of Tablighi literature is concerned with the primary textual sources that outline the form and purpose of the movement itself. The works of the Tablighi's founder-leaders Maulana Muhammad Ilyas, Muhammad Zakaria and Muhammad Yusuf Kandhalawi loom large as the first major texts to be studied and, as I have shown earlier, have been reproduced in their most complete form for educational purposes.

There is, however, also another type of Tablighi literature that comes in the form of small, pocket-sized pamphlets where works like the *Fadhail*

a'mal, the *Hayat al-Shahabat*, and the *Muntakhab a-Hadits* of Maulana Muhammad Zakaria have been extensively edited and reduced for quick and easy reading, particularly by new initiates to the movement.[3] In the course of my fieldwork I discovered some very succinct renditions of these texts, the briefest coming in the form of a single page of A4 paper that was folded twice and stapled, which was the shortest rendition of Muhammad Ilyas Kandhalawi's elaboration of the six fundamental principles of the Tablighi.[4]

Apart from the foundational works that define the Tablighi Jama'at, there is a wide range of other reading materials that touch on a spectrum of issues and concerns that affect the movement and its members. The themes addressed, narrative styles, pedagogic strategies and modes of self-representation that are found in these pamphlets are likewise diverse, and below is a brief resume of some of the booklets that one can find circulating among the Tablighis today. As the average member of the Tablighi Jama'at cannot be said to be swimming in cash, we might as well begin with the tract by Ustaz Abdurrahman Ahmad As-Sirbuny, as he praises the virtue of poverty.

It's great to be poor: Ustaz Abdurrahman As-Sirbuny's *Untung Jadi Miskin*

> *O men! Ye are the poor (*fuqara'*, in need) in relation to God, and God is the rich (al-Ghani).*
> Quran, Surah al-Fatir: 15
>
> *The Prophet has asked us to improve and correct ourselves, lest we end up becoming unbelievers. This is the true calling: to become true believers, even if it means becoming poor in the process.*[5]
> Abdurrahman Ahmad As-Sirbuny

The Tablighi Jama'at remains a largely lay Muslim missionary movement which, unlike the Jesuits or other Christian missionary organisations that have the benefit of institutional support behind them, has never really been known for its wealth or capital reserves. The image most often associated with the Tablighis is that of an organisation made up of humble, everyday Muslims who go out of their comfort zones in order to bring the message of Islam to other Muslims. But the Tablighis have maintained from the outset that the apparent poverty of the movement is more a matter of choice rather than circumstance, for the poverty of the Tablighis

– though not *affected* – is nonetheless a *calculated* one that is the result of wilful renunciation. Entry into the ranks of the movement, as I have shown earlier, requires some degree of sacrifice on the part of new members, and as such it hardly comes as a surprise that there is a range of Tablighi reading material that deals with the question of wealth and poverty, belittling the former while lauding the virtues of the latter. Ustaz Abdurrahman Ahmad As-Sirbuny's *Untung Jadi Miskin* (*It's Good to Be Poor*, 2006) is one such example.

As in the case of some Tablighi tracts, As-Siburny's text begins with the premise that the Muslim world is in a state of constant siege, surrounded by hostile forces that wish to detract Muslims from their appointed path and goal, which is the realisation of Islam's destiny as the religion of all mankind. Among those whom he identifies as the adversaries of Islam are the Jews and Christians, who will stop at nothing to corrupt the faith of Muslims by luring them down the path of worldly material temptation:

> Because they (the non-Muslims) know that the weakness of the Muslims lies in wealth and riches, the Jews and Christians have used the Hadith to confuse the minds of the Muslims, so that they will not accept being poor. They want Muslims to be rich, by any means necessary. And through their campaigns in the media they encourage Muslims to seek wealth and more wealth, wealth and more wealth, until they have forgotten their faith. The Jews and Christians have continually reminded Muslims never to allow themselves to become poor. They have made Muslims fear poverty. This is like the work of Satan, until they say unto the Muslims: don't be poor, even if you end up an infidel![6]

As-Siburny does not conceal his disdain for all forms of material attachment to the world, as he bluntly declares that wealth is divisive (*harta itu fitnah*).[7] He does, however, immediately elaborate upon this somewhat bold statement by qualifying that by *fitnah* he also means a test – of will and commitment to sacrifice. In an argument that echoes the Platonic exhortation to stoic indifference to material comforts, he argues that wealth – if unguarded against – can totally overcome the sensibilities of the individual and take possession of all his faculties (including his nervous system, of all things):

> Wealth can eventually become a God that is worshipped. That's what happens to those who are crazy for wealth, and that's why we call them wealth-crazy. Once you have reached that stage, then even your ner-

> vous system will be in error – a major breakdown. Someone like that will no longer recognise his brother, friend, father or mother; for everyone has become an enemy and a threat to his wealth. Wealth has bound his hands and feet, and he can no longer do anything, for whatever he does will just bring calamity upon calamity upon himself.[8]

The test (*fitnah*) faced by Muslims is therefore the test of wealth, or rather the renunciation of wealth which in turn is linked to the goal of ultimate surrender to the will of God.[9] As-Siburny insists on the tradition of the Tablighis that one cannot know God unless one is prepared to put one's total trust and faith in God and accept that one's lot in the material world of the here and now is entirely in the hands of the Almighty.[10] It is only then that the Tablighi who has renounced his attachments to the world realises the wealth of poverty (*kekayaan orang miskin*), which is less of a material nature and more of a spiritual nature.[11]

Such a stand is reminiscent of Frithjof Schuon's observation (1981) that *holy poverty* was valued as one of the markers of piety and nobility during the foundational moment of Islam's arrival to the world.[12] Though the theme of the 'poverty of riches and the riches of poverty' is certainly not unique to the Tablighis – elsewhere we have considered the same in the modes of public piety employed by political movements such as the Malaysian Islamist party[13] – it is nonetheless one of the central tenets of the Tablighi Jama'at and its numerous benefit are listed for all to see. Poverty gives one peace of mind,[14] a healthy body,[15] a good night's sleep,[16] and helps one truly focus while performing the *dzikir* in the company of brother Tablighis.[17] To polish off any lingering doubts that might remain among the last of the believers, as-Siburny rounds off with a *Hadith* attributed to Tirmidzi where the Prophet is said to have declared that the poor will be admitted to paradise forty years before the rich – which is quite an impressive head start by anyone's standards.[18]

On the question of the abandonment of worldly attachments, the Tablighi shares the disdain for wealth that is evident in the teachings of the Sufis, too, and reading tracts such as that of Ustaz as-Siburny reminds us of the sayings of the Sufi teachers of old, who expressed a similar contempt for luxury and comfort. The saying attributed to Bishr al-Harith might as well have come from Ustaz as-Siburny's own tract against the temptations of the world when the former says that *'to be rich is to be content with little'*.[19]

As-Siburny's tract ends with a chapter that deals with the ethics and *adab* of poverty, and a long list of do's and don't's for the Tablighis to

heed, lest they mistakenly fall off the right path and go down the trail of false pride instead.[20] The final chapter is perhaps the most crucial one for new initiates to the movement, as it anticipates the sorts of questions and criticisms that may be levelled at the Tablighi as he begins on his path of inward improvement by abandoning his ties to the outer world. As I have argued elsewhere (Noor 2009), the Tablighis are extremely wary of being accused of being too influenced by Indian cultural norms to the point of having deviated from the path of Islam by emulating the ways of the Hindus. One of the most common criticisms levelled against them is that they have imitated the ways of the Indian *saddhus* and *fakirs* in their efforts to distance themselves from the material world around them. In as-Siburny's tract, the Tablighi is being taught not only what he has to do as a member of the Tablighi Jama'at but also how to defend what he does in the wider context of a society that may not comprehend the ways of the Tablighis or may even be hostile to them.

Many of the Tablighi pamphlets were written as instructive texts, teaching the members of the movement about who and what they are, but also equipping them with the discursive tools that are required when it comes to presenting the Tablighi Jama'at to a wider audience made up of non-Tablighis. And in that wider world all sorts of strategies and tactics are required to fend off attacks against the movement, including some which may not receive the *'halal'* stamp of approval. Let us now turn to the tract by Ustaz Husein al-Bama as he wards off the barbed attacks of the so-called 'Salafis' on that unstable discursive plain known as *fiction*.

A necessary (though fictitious) evil: Ustaz al-Bama's cautious use of fiction for the higher good

> *The Tablighis do not like debates and do not like being invited to debate in forums to defend their missionary work, and that is because as far as they are concerned debates can only lead to two outcomes: arrogance among the winners and anger among the losers.*[21]
> Husein al-Bama, Introduction to *Dialog Fiktif Salafy vs Jamaah Tabligh (*2008)

Being no strangers to polemics and criticism, it is not surprising that the members of the Tablighi Jama'at are often engaged in various exercises aimed at strengthening their own convictions and preparing them for the unpleasant confrontations that are bound to occur when encountering other Muslims. Much of the popular Tablighi literature that is avail-

able comes in the form of instructional texts that are aimed at arming the members of the movement with the arguments and counterarguments required for such nasty encounters, and one of these works is the tract entitled *Dialog Fiktif Salafy vs Jamaah Tabligh*[22] (*A Fictional Dialogue Between a Salafi and a Tablighi,* 2008) by Ustaz Husein al-Bama.

Al-Bama's tract takes the familiar form of a fictional dialogue (*dialog fiktif*) where a member of the Tablighi Jama'at finds himself in the company of four other Muslims in a mosque. Al-Bama sets the scene for the confrontation thus: the Tablighi enters the mosque to pray, only to see four Muslims sitting on the floor. One of them happens to be a 'Salafi' Ustaz who is teaching the other three Muslims around him. Among the other Muslims there happens to be a former member of the Tablighi who has 'repented' his past and who now follows the Salafi path instead. The dialogue begins only when the Ustaz invites the Tablighi to join them in his small class where he is denouncing the Tablighis *in toto* as a crew of deviants. Confronted by such an accusation in this small company of men, the chivalrous Tablighi is forced to defend himself and his brother Tablighis.[23]

Al-Bama notes from the outset – with a tone of regret – that he was compelled to write this tract in order to prepare his fellow Tablighis for the trials that lie ahead as they walk on the path of *dakwah*. For he notes that the Tablighis have come under the attack of the Salafis for decades, and that the Salafis will never give up their nefarious efforts to undermine the Tablighis due to their own arrogance and self-confidence:

> The Salafis will never relent, and they feel they are always right because they quote the Quran and Sunnah, and since they have focused their time on studying both. They have been taken in by all the nonsense they have read, written by stupid people on the internet, who claim that the Tablighis have lost their way. So much so that even at gatherings when they sit next to us, they are only interested in preaching to us, but never listening to our side of the story.[24]

The tone has thus been set for what promises to be a rather heated encounter where manners and fair play are quickly shown the exit. The Salafi Ustaz launches into a barrage of criticisms against the Tablighis that are aimed at their faith and praxis, the sum of which is the critique that the Tablighis have exceeded the bounds of orthodoxy by raising the status of missionary work to the same level as belief and faith (*aqidah*). Among his criticisms are the claims that the Tablighis have turned missionary work into a religion in itself;[25] made the promotion of the good (*amal*

makruf) more important than the eradication of evil (*nahi mungkar*);[26] prioritised missionary activity (*dakwah*) before belief;[27] deviated from the true path by creating unlawful innovations (*bid'ah*);[28] invented traditions that never existed in Islam;[29] are confused in their faith;[30] and are guilty of blasphemy because of their veneration of their elders and founders of the movement.[31]

Al-Bama's Tablighi spokesman responds to the criticisms one by one, citing arguments that would be familiar to those who know the tenets of the Tablighis. From the outset, the Tablighi notes that the work of the Tablighis is a form of piety that recognises God's bounty bestowed upon humankind, and that it is doubly important for Muslims to acknowledge God's generosity by returning to God what is rightfully his, namely their lives:

> Allah has given his bounty to us (Muslims) as he has done to the non-believers, in the form of our wealth, our bodies and our time; save that the non-believers use their bounty according to their lustful wants, while we can do otherwise and return the bounty of Allah to him, and we shall benefit.[32]

In the course of the debate, the Tablighi spokesman continually refers to the *Sunnah* of the Prophet as the guideline for the Tablighis themselves. In response to the Salafi's criticism that the work of the Tablighis has nothing to do with Islam or the goals of the Muslim *Ummah*, the Tablighi states again and again that the work of the Tablighis rests at the heart of Islam itself and that it takes as its exemplary prototype the life of the Prophet. As is typical of many other Tablighi tracts, the argument is that *dakwah* work began with the Prophet Muhammad, whose mission was to convert his first companions *within*, before they (the first Muslim community) undertook the task of transforming the society around them:

> If you want a reason or justification (for our missionary work) then look no further than to the Prophet himself. The Prophet never destroyed the idols in Mecca when they (the Muslims) were weak. Instead he destroyed the idols that were in the hearts of his companions first, so that they could later destroy the idols themselves.[33]

The Tablighi then argues that the work of the Tablighis does not jeopardise or distort their faith but rather reinforces it, for when Muslims alter their behaviour then it goes without saying that their faith has been altered as well.[34]

As the debate heats up, the Tablighi occasionally turns the tables around and begins to interrogate the Salafi in turn. In one instance, he bluntly asks if one could have a child by reading books on marriage, or if one could be rich simply by reading books on finance – to which the Salafi responds with a negative. The Tablighi then retorts with the following question: can a Muslim therefore be pious simply by reading holy books and not performing *dakwah*? (It goes without saying that al-Bama's fictional Salafi concedes defeat at this point.[35]) The Tablighi's counterassault on the Salafi proceeds until he re-states the claim of the Tablighi Jama'at: namely that Islam cannot spread across the world unless Muslims are committed to the work of *dakwah* and are prepared to follow in the footsteps of the Prophet by renouncing their attachments to worldly things and to live only for the glory of God and Islam.[36] The *khuruj* of the Tablighis is, therefore, the highest form of *jihad* modelled after the life of the Prophet, and nobler than the religious study of the Salafis.[37]

And as the debate comes to its end, the Tablighi closes his case with his final retort to the Salafis who have accused the Tablighis of being guilty of unlawful innovation, deviation and blasphemy by noting that unlike those Muslims who are members of political parties (who he argues 'worship' their leaders by hanging their photographs in their offices, mosques or homes) or who preach Islam through the medium of popular media and education, the Tablighis have resisted all forms of modern communication technology and have shunned the tools of modernity – which he describes as the *'Super Bid'ah'* of the age we live in.[38]

The Name of The Rose it certainly isn't, but al-Bama's fictional dialogue between a Salafi and a Tablighi is less concerned with complex theological debates and doctrinal hairsplitting than it is with the defence of the Tablighis' practice of *dakwah*, which is historically backdated to the foundational moment of Islam itself, beginning with the ideal Prophetic model.

Scholars studying the Tablighi will be familiar with most of these themes, as they tend to occupy the attention of the Tablighis on a regular basis. What is interesting is the fact that in the instance of this particular tract by al-Bama (and others similar to it), a narrative device in the form of a fictional dialogue is used as a pedagogic-instructional tool and is meant to serve as part of the Tablighis' training as they enter the ranks of the movement and struggle to defend its work. Yet as the author himself notes at the beginning of his tract, the Tablighis have never been comfortable with debates of any sort, and even more suspicious of modern inno-

vations such as television, radio and the internet. Nonetheless, the form of the pamphlet – obviously a relatively modern tool in itself – is deemed permissible, as it is meant to serve a purpose that is compatible with the goal of the Tablighis as well.

It is also important to place this particular tract (and others like it) in the category of modern innovations that may be deemed as 'necessary evils' in the light of present-day realities and the hostile world that the Tablighis occasionally find themselves in. In terms of its form and content, it is clearly a work of *fiction*, which generally receives considerable censure from the Tablighis, for fictional literature as a whole is seen as potentially corrupting. And compounding matters further is the fact that it is a fictional account of a *debate*, which is something that the Tablighis have tried to avoid at the best of times. But as a work of fiction, al-Bama's work can still be defended by appealing to its intended purpose, which is to train the Tablighis should they find themselves in a situation similar to that of the fictional Tablighi character in the tract.

At no point in the narrative, however, does Ustaz al-Bama allow his pen to wander, and despite the animated tone of the debate (punctuated by the odd gasp of disbelief and expression of anger, frustration or disgust) the debate remains a dry, joyless one without flourish. If it is joy that one seeks, then perhaps we ought to turn to the tract by Ustaz al-Enjoy instead, which we shall look at next.

Joy in work: Ustaz al-Enjoy's report card on the Tablighi Jama'at

> *It is recognised, Lawrence, that you have a funny sense of fun.*
> *Lawrence of Arabia*, dir. David Lean, 1962

The defence of the Tablighi Jama'at against its detractors is a theme that recurs time and again in the works written by and for the members of the movement, and serves as the dominant theme in another short tract entitled *Raport Merah Jamaah Tabligh Menjadi Hitam* (*The Tabligih's Report Card Turning from Red to Black*, 2009)[39] by another popular Tablighi commentator who goes by the somewhat idiosyncratic name of Ustaz Haji Musa al-Enjoy and published by the equally quirky Al-Enjoy publishers of Kamayoran, Jakarta.

Beginning with the familiar premise that the work of the Tablighi is a continuation of the labours of the Prophet, al-Enjoy emphasises that the movement is not a school of thought or *mahdzab* in its own right, but rather predates the coming of the different schools of Muslim legal

thought and the other sects that have since developed over the course of Muslim history. Like many other Tablighi spokesmen, al-Enjoy insists on the centrality of the Tablighi's work and how its genesis can be rooted in the foundational moment of Islam itself.[40]

Al-Enjoy places great emphasis on the joy of missionary activism and working for the Tablighi, and he chastises other Muslims who have taken up political causes for their neglect of what he regards as one of their highest obligations, which is to do missionary work in the name of Islam:

> There are so many banners and slogans condemning Israel for its invasion of Palestine and the Mosque of the Dome on the Rock: 'God Curse Israel!' and so on; and even when Muslims speak of the Pharoahs of the past they never fail to add 'may he be cursed by Allah'. Yet do they not realise that to abandon the path of *dakwah* is also to be cursed by Allah?[41]

Al-Enjoy draws a distinction between working for Muslims and labouring for Islam, the latter of which he argues is the *real* work of the Tablighis. He illustrates his point by reference to a story about a certain Pakistani cricket player named Imran who had apparently lost his way:

> And there are those who are inclined to do good works, building Islamic universities, building Islamic banks, building Islamic hospitals, taking care of widows and orphans, giving aid in times of disasters and natural calamities. But when they are invited to do *dakwah*, they think they have done enough work for religion. And this is what happened to a certain Pakistani cricket player named Imran when he visited Sheikh Sa'ad Khandalavi at the *Ijtima* in Raiwind, Pakistan. Our Maulana had invited him to join them to do the *tashkil* in the name of Allah, and Imran said: *'Sheikh, I have done many good deeds like building mosques and taking care of orphans, taking care of widows, building madrasahs, have I not done enough for religion?'* To which the Sheikh replied: *'No, for so far you have only helped Muslims, but you have done nothing for Islam.'* Imran was shocked to hear that his work thus far was only for Muslims and not for Islam! The Maulana then told him that to serve your fellow Muslims is different from serving Islam. With good deeds we serve our fellow Muslims, but it is only through *dakwah* that we can serve Islam.[42]

The passage quoted above is typical of the sort of exhortations to the path of missionary life that is found in many instances of Tablighi literature. Typically it places the work of the Tablighi above the labours of other Muslims, whose efforts are seen as worldly in comparison, as far as the glory of Islam is concerned. To underscore the point further, Ustaz al-Enjoy also notes the manifold successes of the Tablighi in their pious endeavours, citing the instance of a group of Tablighis from the *markaz* of Senen, Jakarta that was made up of former thugs and gangsters (*mantan preman2*) who had succeeded in converting a hundred and twenty-four Hindus to Islam on the slopes of Mount Bromo.[43]

As expected, much of the tract is concerned with the charges and criticisms that have been levelled against the Tablighi Jama'at – hence the reference to the movement's 'red report card' in the title of the tract. Al-Enjoy takes a dim view of the way in which the Tablighi has been cast by the media and the state which, since the time of President Suharto and the New Order era, has exhibited a disdain for all forms of organised Muslim activity.[44] He lists the charges against the movement and notes that the Tablighis have been labelled as conservative, fanatical, extremist, militant and deviationist by a range of adversaries – some of whom happen to be conservative Muslims themselves.

In a fashion that is typical of Tablighi tracts, al-Enjoy's narrative is methodical. The charges against the Tablighi are listed one by one,[45] then duly discussed in turn before they are systematically refuted. No charge is left unanswered, and al-Enjoy is not about to allow even the slightest slur pass. He takes particular offence against the accusation that the Tablighis are a messy bunch who dirty the mosques they inhabit and who routinely hang their wet underpants in the confines of the mosques as well. Al-Enjoy insists that the Tablighis would only hang their wet underpants *after* the offending garments have been covered by other wet clothes on the washing line. To add a second line of argument, he then notes that most Tablighis do not wear underwear anyway, for such items of clothing are not *Sunnah*. As new members enter the Tablighi fraternity, al-Enjoy notes that among the first things they don are the skullcap (*kopiah*) and among the first items to be jettisoned are their Y-fronts.[46]

Immediately after extolling the virtues of 'going commando', Ustaz al-Enjoy proceeds to demolish the arguments that have been hurled against the Tablighis one by one. His pamphlet ends with a call to the joys of *dakwah* and a strongly worded critique of those who have accused the Tablighis of being deviant Muslims engaged in unlawful innovation (*bid'ah*). Al-Enjoy notes the irony of the situation in which many of those who have

accused the Tablighis of being deviationists have themselves used modern modes of communication such as the TV, radio, the internet and even audio tapes, DVDs and CDs to preach their brand of Islam – all of which he summarily dismisses as the latest forms of *bid'ah* that have infected the Muslim *Ummah*.[47] Declaring that those who cry *bid'ah* are often the worst deviationists themselves, al-Enjoy closes his case and declares that the Tablighi Jama'at has passed the test of Muslim orthodoxy with flying colours – hence the report card being no longer red but black.

That the Tablighis choose to 'go commando' may have a peculiar significance for those who are familiar with other samples of Tablighi literature, for many Tablighi authors have also likened their movement to that of an army, though in this case it is a *holy army* that fights beneath the banner of God, as the next author Ustaz Abu Muhammad Fahim argues.

The commandos of God: Ustaz Fahim's strategy to defeat the *Komando Iblis*

> *Satan's plan to render all the Muslims of the world stupid has failed miserably. For the Muslims have taken to the path of khuruj into the world.*[48]
> Abu Muhammad Fahim, *Bahayanya Jama'ah Tabligh Bagi Dunia Iblis dan Sekutunya* (2008)

While some of the works that have been authored by Tablighi writers are concerned with defending the reputation of the movement, other works continue to remind the Tablighis of their mission on earth, which is to raise the banner of Allah and to defend the world against the forces of Satan and all that is evil. One such work is the tract entitled *Bahayanya Jama'ah Tabligh Bagi Dunia Iblis dan Sekutunya*[49] (*The Danger of the Tabligih for the Devil and his Allies*, 2008) by Ustaz Abu Muhammad Fahim. There are several other tracts where the same theme is repeated, such as Ustaz Abu Salami's *Dajjal vs Kerja Tabligh*[50] (*Dajjal versus the Tablighi,* 2008) and Ustaz Aboe Istiqomah's *Kerja Tabligh Kalahkan Iblis Syaitan dan Sekutu-Sekutunya*[51] (*The Tablighi's Work Defeats the Devil and His Allies,* 2009).

Fahim's tract is concerned primarily with the threat posed by the devil (*Iblis*) and the plans that have been hatched by the evil one to dominate the world. It begins with a short description of the devil himself, explaining the etymological roots of his name and the names of his ilk and kin, their general appearance, form and purpose and the contest between God and the devil for worldly domination.[52]

The author notes that from the outset the devil is firmly rooted in the world that is also inhabited by humans and djinns, though allocated specific places, roles and spheres where his powers are at their strongest. The devil's natural habitat is the toilet;[53] his social circle is that of cinemas, nightclubs, discos and other places of entertainment (many of which, it has to be noted, had not even been invented yet at the foundational moment of Islam);[54] his scripture is in the form of stories, poetry and other forms of fictional art that lull the senses;[55] his heralds and messengers are witches, soothsayers and fortunetellers;[56] his writing and scripture come in the form of lipstick, mascara, tattoos, piercings and other forms of bodily adornment;[57] and his trap for men is women.[58]

Again, the narrative device of a fictional dialogue is used to communicate the lesson that Ustaz Fahim wishes to teach. In a lengthy thirty-page question-and-answer session between the Prophet Muhammad and the devil, the latter unveils his dastardly plan for global domination. Interestingly, the devil is so confident of the eventual success of his scheme that – in the manner of all notorious villains from Dr. No to Megamind – he goes so far as to lay down not only his plans but also reveal his own weaknesses and the possible countermeasures that can be taken to prevent him from reaching his goal of total universal control.[59] (The devil concedes, for instance, that his evil powers wane whenever there are pious Muslims praying near him – which is why he avoids mosques whenever he can – while his powers are magnified in places like funfairs and cinemas.[60])

The twist in the narrative appears when the Prophet interrogates the devil further and invites the latter to describe the members of his great evil army – the *komando Iblis*. Naturally, the rank and file of this malevolent horde are made up of lost infidel souls who have abandoned the path of faith and opted for the temptations of the world instead: the rich merchants, the greedy materialists, the doubting sceptics and so on. Interestingly, the devil also includes in his order of battle those who stand in the path of *dakwah*. It is here that Fahim's narrative turns into a sectarian one as well, for he includes in the ranks of the devil's forces the conservative 'Salafis' who have constantly berated the Tablighi Jama'at for its missionary work.[61]

The thrust of Fahim's tract is the defence of the Tablighis who – on the devil's own account – are at the forefront of the army of God and whose missionary work has demonstrated their freedom from all forms of material and sensate attachment. In the first round of the battle between Good and Evil, the devil's primary task is to keep Muslims at home and off the

path of *dakwah*. Following the logic of this argument, *all* the 'Salafis' who have condemned the Tablighi for their missionary excursions have only served to further the devil's work by keeping Muslims domesticated at home when instead they ought to leave their homes and strengthen their ties of faith and solidarity against evil instead.[62]

Reminding his fellow Tablighi readers that the devil may attack at any time and from all sides, Fahim praises the virtues of *tashkil (khuruj)* as the greatest weapon in the arsenal of the good against the army of the devil, for it frees the individual from the world around him and sets him upon the path of pious self-sacrifice. The martial virtues of hard work, bravery and stoicism are also lauded as the chivalric virtues of the Tablighis who are permanently engaged in this never-ending struggle to hold the forces of evil at bay and prevent the world from slipping into infernal darkness.[63] As is typical of many Tablighi texts, a test-case example is offered to prove the point, and in Fahim's tract it comes in the tale of a former thug (*preman*) from Kalimantan whose wife-beating and alcohol-drinking ways were changed permanently after accepting the Tablighis' invitation to join them on a short three-day *tashkil*.[64]

Fahim's tract is another example of the adaptability of the Tablighi when it comes to using all manner of discursive devices to achieve their intended ends. The lengthy dialogue between the Prophet Muhammad and the devil is perhaps one of the most glaring instances of this, for the *entire* scene is a work of *fiction* that has absolutely no basis in either Quranic scripture nor recorded Prophetic history. (And as I have noted above, it is the devil himself who states that his preferred mode of scripture is poetry and fiction.) And yet, as in the case of Ustaz al-Bama's fictional dialogue between a Salafi and a Tablighi, such literary licence is allowed when it serves a higher purpose, which in this case happens to be twofold: to illustrate the complicated workings of the devil in his plot to overthrow the kingdom of God and to re-state the primacy of *khuruj/tashkil* and the Tablighis' mode of religious praxis as the exemplary model of Muslim piety to be followed by all.

In the cosmic battle between Good and Evil, all tactics seem permissible – including (devilish) fiction. And it should be noted that the Tablighi's use of fiction for higher ends is not unique to the Tablighi, for even Hobbes, in his lengthy diatribe against the dangerous potential of fiction and metaphors uses a metaphor to convince his readers of the validity of his argument: the *Leviathan*.

Onward to India: Ustaz al-Hidayah and the centrality of India

> *The Tablighi Jama'at is a movement that beckons those who dwell in heaven to help those who dwell on earth.*[65]
> Yudha al-Hidayah

If the Tablighis see themselves as the army of God, then it goes without saying that the army of God requires a headquarters. In the writings of Ustaz Yudha al-Hidayah, the precise location of that base is described in considerable detail, and it happens to be India.

Ustaz al-Hidayah's work *Ada Apa Ke India?* (*Why Go to India?*)[66] is one of those Tablighi tracts that again serves a number of purposes. It re-states the centrality of India and its importance in the calculations of the Tablighis; it defends the India-centric worldview of the Tablighis against the criticisms of other Muslims who see the Arabian Peninsula as the natural home of Islam; and it of course provides ample justification for the Tablighis' frequent pilgrimages to India – which presumably is useful when the Tablighis confront their detractors as well as their wives whenever they need to perform the *khuruj* to the subcontinent. The tract's subtitle – *'India: Negeri Yang Enjoy'* (*India: Where We Enjoy*) – may however prove counterproductive as far as the latter is concerned.

Al-Hidayah begins his tract by repeating many of the questions and criticisms that have been levelled against the Tablighis for their attachment and attraction to India. He rhetorically poses the queries:

> Why, they ask, do we study religion in India when the heart of our religion lies in Arabia, as the Prophet came from there? And others may ask: Do the Tablighis perform their pilgrimage (*hajj*) in India then? The Tablighis have been wrongfully associated with the sects and religions of India, such as the Ahmadis and the Hindus.[67]

The Ustaz is on hand to allay these concerns, and he begins by noting that the centre of the Muslim world has, over time, shifted from one locality to another.[68] Citing a plethora of writings – including the predictions of Nostradamus, of all people[69] – he notes that the centre of the Muslim world has moved from the Arabian *Hijaz* to Baghdad, and later to Ottoman Turkey and Moghul India. Furthermore he argues that the notion that the best place to study Islam is the Arabian peninsula is a myth, and that there are many other places where one can be trained to be a savant in things Islamic:

> In fact, there was never any real need for us to study religion in Arabia. The myth that one has to study in Mecca and Medina is false, for if one wanted to learn to become a true *Qori* the best place to do that has always been Egypt. And Sheikh Suleiman, a Sheikh from Yemen, once noted that if one wished to learn about the different *mahdzabs* and schools of legal thought, then one ought to travel to Hadramaut or Tarim, and if one wanted to learn more of *Hadith*, then the best place for that would be Saharanpur, India.[70]

In his effort to underscore the centrality of India for Muslims, al-Hidayah takes the reader on an excursion and presents him with a series of historical proofs that backdate the coming of Islam to India. He recounts a number of episodes in Judeo-Christian-Muslim history that place India at the centre of the world – literally – and posits the view that India was the cradle of humankind and the place where Adam first stepped foot on the earth:

> India was where humankind first began... Know that the Prophet Adam was the first among humans, and it was in India that he was brought to earth for the first time. And so India is the first place on the earth where there was human life.[71]

It is not clear where al-Hidayah has collected his information from, though the idea that Adam had first arrived in India has been in circulation for several centuries. Since the time that Arab travellers crossed the Indian Ocean, the story that Adam had first stepped foot in Sri Lanka (upon the spot that is called Adam's peak) has been part of popular Arab-Muslim lore surrounding South Asia. Al-Hidayah continues along the same vein and notes that it was from India that the Prophet Adam performed the pilgrimage (*hajj*) on foot a thousand times, making him the first Prophet who performed the *tashkil (khuruj)* across India;[72] that the great flood during the time of the Prophet Noah took place in India;[73] and that the black stone (*hajar aswad*) of the *Ka'abah* was found in India and taken by the Prophet Abraham himself to Mecca[74].

With these claims under his belt, al-Hidayah hopes to lay to rest the accusation that the Tablighis have turned their *qiblat* in the direction of India, for he insists that long before Islam had arrived in Arabia, God's prophets had already walked the earth of India and that many of the key events in Judeo-Christian-Muslim history took place on the subcontinent. What better credentials and reputation could be bestowed upon

India then, when one considers that it was the cradle of the Abrahamic tradition, home to the Prophets, and the place where God's message to humankind was first delivered?

The rest of the tract goes on to praise the virtues of Islam in India and to commend the pious labours of the subcontinent's Muslims. Al-Hidayah notes that before the Muslims of India began their *dakwah*, there was no communal form of missionary activity anywhere among Muslims and that the Muslims of India have re-activated the spirit of missionary zeal that once animated the first Muslims who lived during the time of the Prophet himself:

> Before the Muslims of India began their *dakwah*, there was no collective *dakwah Ijtima'iat* anywhere... India has changed the way in which the Muslims strive, akin to the manner in which the Prophet himself first preached our religion – that is, through the method of *dakwah*. India has reawakened the spirit of the Muslim *ummah* that was dead, for the calling of the *Muballighs* was focused solely on devotion.[75]

This is why, al-Hidayah argues, the Tablighis continue to see India as the place where the spirit of Islam is at its strongest and where the Tablighis need to go in order to recharge their convictions to continue their work relentlessly. Furthermore, he argues that the life and culture of India is ideally suited (*cocok*) to the life of the Tablighis, due to the modesty of its people and their culture, down to their cuisine – which seem less inclined to induce a Muslim to sloth and slumber:

> India is the place that is most ideally suited for our work, which is the struggle for truth (*haq*); for there the food is balanced and moderate in quantity. If it's *briani* (rice), then it's only *briani* that you will eat; if it's *salen*, then it's just *salen* with one type of vegetable; if it's *dhal*, then it will only be *dhal* with bread. That is so different from the Arab countries where wealth has overcome them.[76]

Having thus defended the virtues of *briani* and *dhal* against the consumptive and debilitating diet of wealthier Arabs, al-Hidayah rounds off his argument by waxing eloquent about the virtues of the Indian Tablighis whom he has met on his many trips to India: their frugal character, their humility and their steadfast determination to carry on their *dakwah* work without complaint or concern for themselves or the future.

Al-Hidayah's tract shares a number of familiar concerns that I have touched on earlier, including the need to defend the reputation of the Tablighis and their attachment to India. It is important to note that the most serious criticism that he identifies is the claim that the Tablighis have turned their backs on Arabia and the Arab lands and have made India the focal point of their lives. This charge has always been taken seriously by the Tablighis for obvious reasons, one of them being the desire to distance themselves from other India-centric Muslim sects such as the Qadiani Ahmadis, for whom the pilgrimage to Qadian is a central tenet of their beliefs as laid out in the *Tazkirah* of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. The rhetorical devices al-Hidayah employs – reconstructed myths of genesis, accounts of the Prophets Adam, Abraham and Noah in India – are intended to backdate the coming of Islam to India, giving historical as well as moral justification for the elevation of the subcontinent's standing in the eyes of the Tablighis, who see it as the cradle of humankind and Islam alike. Though not openly confrontational towards the Arabs in general – notwithstanding some uncharitable remarks on the richness of Arab food and the worldliness of the rich Arabs – the tract nonetheless shores up its argument by taking pre-emptive measures against any claim to Arab superiority. And like many Tablighi tracts, its primary purpose is as a tool of education and instruction for the many Tablighis who will, eventually, make their way to India to perform the *khuruj* there.

A *Baedeker* the tract certainly isn't, and if offers little in terms of knowledge and information about India and its diverse peoples and cultures. However, it has to be remembered that such tracts serve the purpose of channelling the actions of the Tablighis within the regulated confines of their communal life, which happens to be an exclusively Muslim space shared with other brother Tablighis. It is not surprising, therefore, to note that there is no mention at all of the Hindus of India, or the simple fact that India has always been populated by a Hindu majority. Then again, it should be added that the Tablighis who travel to India do so not in the spirit of religious ecumenicalism, and certainly not with a view to visiting the temples of Shiva or Vishnu – they are instead visiting the land where Adam first stepped foot upon the earth, and where Abraham and Noah have passed as well.

The power of the vernacular: Assessing the merits of the Tablighi Jama'at's portable literature

> *From the first centuries of Islam, the preachers* (qass, qussas) *sought to strike the imagination of their audience with more or less extravagant stories in order to stimulate piety, fear, hope; a double-edged sword if there ever was one, for the result was an inextricable mixture of the true and the fictitious; and in the final analysis, a sort of infantilization of pious literature.*[77]
> Frithjof Schuon

> *Vulgar notions suit vulgar discourses; and both, though confused enough, yet serve pretty well the market and the wake.*[78]
> John Locke

The availability of mass-produced and widely distributed vernacular literature has been, as Anderson (1983) has argued, one of the ways in which imagined communities are generated over time. What we have attempted to do in this chapter is to look at how the portable literature of the Tablighis has helped to create that sense of common identity and purpose across time and space, and how it has helped to define the contours of the Tablighi world and its discourse.

The Tablighis have, of course, been vilified by other Muslim groups on account of the vernacular and pedestrian character of their literature, which is certainly far from being highbrow. Yet despite the popular appearance of the portable tracts we have surveyed, it cannot be denied that their ease of use, distribution and reproduction also accounts for how and why the Tablighi has been able maintain some semblance of cohesion and unity of purpose among its members – many of whom happen to come from the less privileged sections of society and who may, for whatever reasons, not have the time or opportunity to delve deeper into the more elevated and esoteric aspects of Islamic philosophy and theology.

To the defence of the Tablighi Jama'at, it ought to be noted that the Tablighis have never claimed that the portable literature they produce is of an erudite variety and have certainly made no claims to lofty scholarship. These booklets offer further elaborations of Tablighi ideas, but they cannot be regarded as proper exegesis of the foundational texts of the movement. Occasionally there might be the odd reference or two to the works of the Tablighis' founders like Maulana Ilyas or Maulana Zakaria, but we

have yet to come across extended commentaries of foundational texts like the *Fadhilah Amal* in the form of these booklets.

This raises another important question: what do these booklets tell us about the nature of the Tablighi Jama'at as a movement? Can anyone write them? And can anyone prevent their publication or circulation? Clearly, these booklets were written by and for the members of the Tablighi themselves, but to date I have not come across any institutional mechanism that controls, vets or edits their publication or circulation. This suggests that there is some space left for individual interpretation and expression of ideas – though in the course of my field research I did not come across a single Tablighi pamphlet that expresses a dissident minority view within the group.

The apparent absence of an internal mechanism that controls the publication of such booklets and the circulation of the ideas contained in them would imply that the Tablighi – being the vast and relatively loose movement that it is – has been able to accommodate individual opinions within itself. Though none of these booklets come anywhere close to contradicting any of the fundamental tenets of the movement, they may at times feature elements (such as the fictional dialogue between the Prophet and the Devil in Ustaz Fahim's tract) that probe the limits of the Tablighi imaginary.

The modesty of the Tablighi pamphlets is also quite in keeping with the Tablighi way of life that we shall examine shortly. At this stage, all we need to do is take a step back from the material we have studied and to offer some general observations about the form and content of the portable literature of the Tablighis themselves. It can be seen that there are several similar characteristics to all of them, which I shall recount in turn.

Uniformity of form and mode of production

In the random sampling of portable Tablighi literature we have reviewed, it ought to be noted that despite the differences in authors, publishers, dates of publication, etc., there is a uniformity in form and appearance. All the booklets I collected in places as diverse as Kota Bharu, Golok, Jala, Jakarta, Surabaya, Temboro, Surakarta and Jogjakarta appear uniform in appearance, measuring ten by fifteen centimetres in size, and with more or less the same number of pages.[79]

In many instances, these booklets seem to have been written in a rush (there are often spelling errors and grammatical mistakes that have not been ironed out), and there are also many instances where whole pas-

sages seem to have been lifted in their entirety from the work of another author. Editing and rules of copyright, however, seem to be of secondary concern for the Tablighis themselves, as the authors sometimes refer to the works of their peers. Plagiarists are reminded that to steal the ideas of another brother Muslim remains a rather dastardly thing to do, however.[80]

The publishing houses that have produced these booklets also happen to be owned and run by members of the Tablighi, which suggests that they have accumulated enough capital – in Indonesia and parts of Malaysia at least – to be able to produce their own literature. Some of these publishing houses may also be engaged in publishing non-Tablighi-related work, though thus far no comprehensive survey has been conducted on all the publishing houses run by the Tablighi in Indonesia, or any other country in Southeast Asia for that matter.

The reach of these booklets is wide, and I came across them in the Tablighi centres I visited in Sumatra, Java and Sulawesi. The booklets are often sold at the modest bookshops and bookstands that are set up in the vicinity of the Tablighi centres and are easily bought by the members at a very affordable price. (In 2011, the average price of a booklet was still around 5,000 to 10,000 Indonesian Rupiah.) I also observed on many occasions Tablighis sharing the booklets among themselves, and there is a regular exchange of the booklets that takes place on a daily basis at the Tablighi centres. The Indonesian-published Tablighi booklets, however, have made less of an impact beyond the shores of the archipelago, as they are seldom distributed beyond Indonesia. The exception to this rule is the manifold instances of Indonesian Tablighis travelling overseas and carrying the booklets with them, to be shared with other Tablighis in other Tablighi centres abroad. But even then, it ought to be noted that the limitation to the leaflets lies in the fact that they are written in *Bahasa Indonesia*, and thus could only be read by other *Bahasa*-speaking Tablighis from Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore and southern Thailand.

Finally, it has to be pointed out that all of the authors responsible for the booklets disseminated among the Tablighi Jama'at happen to be *male*. And this also includes the speeches and sermons of the leaders of the Tablighi that have been documented in the form of audio cassettes and booklets as well. This accounts for the selection of topics that we find in the pamphlets, which often deal with the mundane concerns of *male* Tablighis as they study in their *markaz* or go on *khuruj* around the region. In the course of my research trips across Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand,

I did not come across any substantial reading material produced by Tablighi *women*. There is nothing to suggest, however, that this state of affairs will remain a constant in the future.

Regularity in presentation and content

As shown in the random sampling offered earlier, the contents of the Tablighi pamphlets that have been produced in Indonesia bear an uncanny uniformity of content. Almost all of the booklets state the primacy of the Tablighi Jama'at's work – which is predictably presented in the highest laudable terms as the work of the Prophet himself which has been passed down to the Muslim community, to be carried on in the present and into the future (and which, by doing so, has also stressed yet again the primacy of the Prophet as the archetypal Muslim-type to be emulated).

Many of the pamphlets are written in the form of a dialogue – either real or fictitious – and employ the narrative device of the interrogative method as its pedagogic tool. In all these dialogues, the figure of the Tablighi spokesman is the one who comes up trumps, and it is not uncommon for the authors to tilt the table of debate in favour of the Tablighis. The exposition of the tenets of the Tablighi likewise employs a range of similar narrative devices and strategies, including the question-and-answer format and the systematic point-by-point elaboration of key ideas that are accompanied by short answers, commentaries or explanations. The *economy* and *simplicity* of language use seem to be the most outstanding common feature of the pamphlets, with little fuss and fanfare or even literary flourish. There are, of course, no illustrations or photographs to speak of in any of the pamphlets I collected, and the covers are minimally decorated if at all.[81]

Oppositional dialectics and the avoidance of direct confrontation

Another interesting feature of Tablighi literature is the manner in which it effectively divides the world into two opposite camps – namely the forces of Good who are working to spread the message of Islam across the world and the forces of Evil (dubbed the *Army of the Devil*, as we have seen earlier) who are bent on preventing Islam's ascendancy. Yet, despite the manner in which this state of oppositional dialectics has been framed, there remains the tendency of the Tablighis to avoid direct confrontation as much as and as long as possible. As we have seen above, even in cases where a confrontation cannot be avoided, the Tablighis have framed them-

selves as those who are in a state of *defensive preparedness*. The tracts I have covered thus far show that much of the Tablighis' concern lies with preparing their members for the eventuality of confrontation – be it with non-believers or even fellow Muslims; and yet the posture that is adopted in all these tracts is one of *defence*, rather than offence. Even so, this does suggest that the Tablighis are aware of the fact that the discursive space of Islam is a contested one, and that there are adversaries to be dealt with.

It should also be noted that in the sampling of Tablighi tracts that I covered earlier, there are relatively few that deal with the question of other faiths and the threat they may pose for the Tablighis. Ustaz as-Siburny's praise of poverty alludes to the plots of the Jews and the Christians to steer Muslims off the path of righteous poverty in the name of God, while Ustaz Haydar Ali Tajuddin's *Sepuluh Perkara Yang Biasa Dibangkitkan oleh Mubaligh Kristian untuk Menentang Islam*[82] prepares the Tablighis for the possibility of debate and confrontation with Christian missionaries who may be blocking their path. Hindus represent another sort of problem altogether, for the worry of the Tablighis is that they may be too closely associated with the culture of India, particularly in the eyes of other Muslims who wish to brand them as a made-in-India Muslim cult.

The divisive and compartmentalising logic of the Tablighis' oppositional dialectics, however, ultimately sets up two neat and mutually-exclusive chains of equivalences where the Tablighis are positively equated with the Prophet, his companions, the first community of Muslims and of course God. A secondary negative chain of equivalences then links the Devil (*Iblis, Syaitan*) with the members of his 'evil army'; and the ranks of this army of darkness are vast indeed, encompassing Jews, Christians, Hindus, other faiths, but also other Muslims – notably the all-pervasive and ever-confrontational 'Salafis'.

The characterisation of the 'Salafis' as the perennial bugbears for the Tablighis is interesting, for in Tablighi literature the meaning of this word has been left empty and vague.[83] The floating signifier 'Salafi' seems to include all Muslim groups and organisations who have opposed the Tablighis, and this may include Islamic political parties (made up of Muslims who have abandoned the path of *dakwah* in favour of political success instead), literal-minded scripturalists (who have questioned the authenticity of Tablighi literature and textual sources), Wahhabis (who are, at times, accused of creating a cult of leadership among themselves), and of course 'modern' Muslims who have lost their way by championing causes alien to the Tablighis' understanding of Islam. *All* of these antagonists are summarily lumped together in the army of the Devil, regardless of whether

they happen to be Muslims, for they all share one thing in common: they oppose the work of the Tablighi Jama'at and, by extension, God. The floating signifier 'Salafi', in this regard, ends up being a catch-all word/sign that simply means anyone and everyone who opposes the Tablighi Jama'at.

The availability of such cheap, easily produced and widely disseminated reading material by, for and among the Tablighis means that the members of the movement have become plugged into what can be called an *imagined community* – to borrow Anderson's phrase. The fact that the members of the movement read the same things, discuss the same topics and address the same questions in a shared virtual domain of lay, vernacular Muslim writing means that the concerns of the movement are shared among the members. The goals of the Tablighi Jama'at, as laid out in these pamphlets and booklets, are the goals of the movement *as a whole*; and the opponents and enemies of the Tablighi Jama'at are equally the adversaries to *each and every member*. Critics of the Tablighi Jama'at have sometimes branded the movement vulgar and pedestrian by virtue of its open membership and lack of scholarly rigour in their textual exegesis; yet they fail to note that it is precisely the *simplicity* and *accessibility* of the Tablighis' reading material that accounts for the unity of dispersal of its message and its success in maintaining the cohesion of the movement – which is quite an achievement for a humble booklet put together in someone's backyard.

A different discourse, a different *form of life*?

I began the previous chapter by raising the question that had been posed by Quine about the possibility of understanding a language that is *radically* different from our own – via what Quine had labelled 'radical translation'. This was, as I have noted, a philosophical question that goes to the heart of what has been called the problem of other minds and asks us if we can have any knowledge of the *Other*. Notwithstanding the critique by some that Quine's approach betrays a trace of foundationalism in his thought,[84] I have taken his schema as the guiding principle in my attempt to understand the broader discursive universe of the Tablighi Jama'at as a whole.

I have indeed attempted to enter the discursive world of the Tablighis via a sampling of select books, booklets and pamphlets that were written by and for the Tablighis themselves for internal consumption and which are meant to serve as pedagogic tools for the reproduction of the movement. Though by no means exhaustive, these texts have at least opened the way for us to enter the discursive field where the Tablighis interact

with each other and where they represent themselves to other Tablighis and to the world without.

My intention, however, has not been so bold as to claim knowledge of the 'other minds' of the Tablighis. All I have tried to do is to give a glimpse of how, in the discursive world of the Tablighis, there exists a discursive economy that is bound by normative rules of meaning and signification that are in turn tied up with other modes of behaviour and social norms that define the group for what it is. The aim was not to reveal the subjective 'inner' world of the Tablighis but to simply demonstrate that there *is* such a *thing* as a Tablighi discursive economy, and it is one where signifiers mean what they do according to the rules of signification of the Tablighis who use that language.

In this sense, I have tried to show that the discursive economy of the Tablighis is a language-game in the Wittgensteinian sense; and that like all language-games, it may share some superficial family resemblances to other language-games but is nonetheless a language-game *in its own right*. The Tablighis are Muslims who speak the language of Islam while using the same signifiers as other Muslims do, but in the context of their specific Tablighi language-game, signifiers like *dakwah, jihad, khidmat*, etc. take on a meaning of their own. A Tablighi and a Sufi might both agree that *jihad* is an important concept in Muslim religious praxis, but what they mean by *jihad* are two different things.[85]

This chapter and the previous one are both focused on the texts that form the basis to the Tablighi worldview. I have attempted to account for both the foundational texts of the Tablighi Jama'at as well as the portable samples of their everyday learning and discourse among themselves. To stop at this stage, however, would not be enough – for I have yet to show if the discourse framed in these texts have any resonance as far as the shaping of the Tablighi world is concerned. Guided still by Quine's approach towards the question of other minds, I am also persuaded by the Wittgensteinian notion of language-games being rooted in modes of collective behaviour – what he calls *'forms of life'*[86] – and how a language-game has to be located amidst rule-governed norms that provide meaning and context. Beyond the register of textuality lies the register of speech and storytelling, and it is to that domain that I shall venture next, in order to see what we can learn from the conversion narratives of the Tablighis and what these narratives tell us about them and who they are.

IV The Stories We Tell

The Conversion Narratives of the Tablighi Jama'at and the Internalisation of Tablighi Identity

But who, except God, can say that a man is wise or foolish if he follows the call of his conscience?[1]
Muhammad Asad

In the previous chapters we looked at the foundational texts of the Tablighi Jama'at as well as the locally produced vernacular literature of the movement. Now we shall turn to the personal microbiographies of the Tablighis themselves, focusing in particular on the stories they tell of themselves and to themselves – which may help us in our attempt to understand what may be termed the Tablighi mindset. Labouring still along the path set by Quine and his notion of radical translation of the language of the Other, I will extend the scope of my enquiry beyond the written to the spoken word.

The Tablighis are, obviously, Muslims – but they also happen to be *Tablighi Muslims*, which means that they belong to a particular community set against the broader context of the wider Muslim community as a whole. Though it would be hard to dispute the Tablighis' claim that they belong firmly within the fold of orthodox Islam and that they are not a cult or sect by any stretch of the imagination, we still need to account for how and why ordinary Muslims choose to abandon their former lives in order to gain membership to this rather select fraternity. My focus in this chapter will be the conversion narratives of the Tablighis, by means of which I hope to understand the internal workings of the Tablighi Jama'at as well.

In the course of my field research, I have come across a wide variety of conversion narratives among members of the Tablighi who reside throughout Southeast Asia. Earlier I argued that the discursive economy of the Tablighi should be seen as a system with its own set of rules of meaning. The discourse of the Tablighi is in some respects self-referential and distin-

guishes itself from others by way of the discursive strategies – of identity construction, boundary marking, exteriorisation of difference and denial of alterity – that can be found in other minority discourses as well.

Self-identification is of course part and parcel of the Tablighi's discursive economy, and in the case of the Tablighis, self-identification is taken to the extent of involving not only the rites and rituals of mutuality and exclusion that are special for them but also the sartorial and behavioural norms that set them apart from other Muslims. This gives the Tablighis the internal cohesion they seek, while also furnishing them with the coveted status of a minority group that seeks to do its good work while being generally misunderstood and rejected by others. The discourse of the Tablighi thus relies on such narrative devices – foremost of which is the narrative of hardship and rejection, which in turn opens the way for the reactivation of the memory of the founding community of the first Muslims. Yet the question remains: why would an ordinary Muslim choose to abandon his/her former lifestyle to become one of the Tablighi?

Despite their numbers, the Tablighis remain a *minority* group among the Muslims of the world. Their background and orientation mean that from the outset they can only present themselves to certain Muslim groups and not others, for the reason that it is seen as antagonistic towards Shias as well as other communities such as the Ahmadis, Ismailis and Bohras. Yet this group is one that seeks to convert other predominantly Sunni Muslims to their way of life, cognisant of the fact that it is in a minority position itself. We can label the Tablighi an *active minority* group, to borrow Moscovici's term,[2] that actively tries to inject itself into the mainstream of Muslim society and to confront the prevailing social order with the ambition of changing it in the long run – a disposition that identifies it with the first Muslim community during the time of the Prophet and his companions.

Here Moscovici's theory of conversion comes to mind, and in particular his thesis of how minority group influence can bring about a psychosocial change in individuals who are at first repulsed by such minority groups, which later affects and possibly changes their own orientation in life. In most instances where minority groups enter the public domain with the stated ambition of altering that public domain, public hostility and rejection are the result. This is certainly the case with the Tablighi Jama'at (as the narratives below will testify), and it also accounts for why the Tablighi can, at times, present itself as a liminal grouping for the sake of establishing the distance it needs with the social order it seeks to convert to its cause.

The discourse of the Tablighi, replete as it is with its self-referential claims to historical precedent, authenticity and moral superiority, is necessarily one that immediately poses a challenge to the rest of the Muslim community. The fact that the Tablighi does not engage in negotiated settlements with those it tries to convert or reform also means that from the outset, any engagement with the Tablighi is one that can only lead to acceptance or rejection. It is this non-compromising attitude of the Tablighi – backed up by its self-sustaining discourse – that also identifies them as a potential threat to some. The conversion narratives we have collected recount how the Tablighi had managed to enter into the social circles and private domain of the converts in a myriad of ways, some of which were confrontational while others more mundane. In all these cases, however, the conversion itself was enacted both on a public as well as private register where the Tablighi was actively present as a catalyst for transformation.

In the conversion narratives that I have recorded, we come across numerous instances where the encounter with the Tablighi had led the convert to a state of self-doubt. This again conforms with Moscovici's thesis that the impact of such minority groups is to lead to a self-validation process where the potential convert is compelled to question his own beliefs that were deemed normal and sufficient in the past but no longer. Hence the Tablighis' capacity to shatter (sometimes dramatically, as we can see in some of the narratives) the settled assumptions of their converts and to re-draw the frontiers of their comfort zones is significant. In some instances, the narratives recount instances of miraculous visitations in the dead of night, accompanied by omens and dreams of the transformation to come. In other narratives we see the Tablighi appear as a near-miraculous apparition that radically disturbs the social order of the banal and pedestrian, presenting itself as an otherworldly alternative to the norms that will be rejected later. In all these cases, a consistent theme is evoked – that of the initial *alien-ness* of the Tablighis, who are seen as standing radically outside the familiar social order, only to enter that space in order to eventually reconstruct it. And because the Tablighis are an *active minority* group, their own role in this transformative process is evident as well. The fact that the Tablighi also comes prepared with its own discursive economy undoubtedly facilitates and perhaps even accelerates the process of conversion; and it has to be noted that the self-sufficient character of the discourse of the Tablighi makes it particularly easy for new converts to enact a total transformation of their lives down to the level of dress, manners and social life choices.

Let us now turn to the conversion narratives themselves, and we will begin with the conversion narrative of Ustaz Talib Zulham as he languishes in his music shop in East Java while nursing his migraine and contemplating the meaning of life.

'Then I prayed, "Oh God, please make me happy like them"': The conversion narrative of Ustaz Talib Zulham[3]

Among the themes that continually recur in the personal stories of the Tablighis is that of the change in values, and how the life of the past is devalued upon conversion to the new. This was certainly the case for Ustaz Talib Zulham, whom I met and interviewed in Temboro, East Java as I made my journey from Magetan to Malang and eventually Surabaya.

The personal history of Ustaz Zulham tells the ordinary story of a young man of mixed South Asian parentage who was born in Bangil, East Java on 15 March 1980 to a family of Indian migrants who had by then become Indonesian citizens. Ustaz Zulham's father, Muhammad bin Zaman, was of Indian origin and his family originally came from Chennai, South India. Muhammad Zaman (who was born in Indonesia) owned a small business in the construction industry as a supplier of construction material. His mother, Mahrun binti Nizam, is also of Indian origin and her family also came from Madras. His maternal grandfather, Hassan bin Ali, was born in Madras and had worked as a traditional healer and doctor in Madras before migrating to Indonesia in the 1930s.[4] Ustaz Zulham is the eldest in a family of three boys and two girls, and his brother was then working and living in the United States of America. Ustaz Zulham had grown up in Pasaruan and lived in his own house in Brigen. Though his family were originally migrants, life for him was not particularly difficult during his younger days. Thanks to his father's business and political connections, the family lived a comfortable life. Ustaz Zulham ventured into business at an early age, first as a poultry farmer and then into the business of distributing DVDs.

As is typical in many of the conversion narratives, Ustaz Zulham noted that his material comforts and wealth were not enough for him, and that he suffered from a profound sense of emptiness in his life. In his words:

> It was a good life then, but somehow I was not satisfied. I made money, more money that I dreamt of, on a monthly basis. All my friends would say, 'wow you have really made it big! And at such a young age too!' That made me happy and content because I could afford all the things I wanted then. I was immature, you see? So I needed to keep myself

> happy by buying things all the time. I collected watches, and then I bought fast cars. I loved to drive fast on the road then, so I had one car after another, and all of them were fast cars with modified engines. At Brigen I worked in a shop where I sold DVDs and VCDs, and it was good business as they were the latest things in Indonesia. Everyone was listening to music and watching pirated videos, so there were plenty of opportunities to make money in this new business too.
>
> But even then, with all that money and material things, I was not really happy. After a while I began to feel depressed because my life was meaningless and I was not going anywhere. I was only in my early twenties and I was totally independent because I had my own business and my own income; I felt as if I didn't need anyone or any friends. But the truth is that I was very lonely and I felt as if my life was empty and with no purpose.[5]

It is crucial to note that Ustaz Zulham's story is obviously being told *retrospectively*, from the standpoint of someone who has already converted fully to the Tablighi Jama'at, and as such we can see the narrative employing the rhetorical device of devaluing the past rather clearly. Later he elaborates upon how and why his former life was pointless, and it is interesting to note that among his complaints about his past are the fact that it was wasteful and that he was often in the company of non-Muslims who were '*dirty*' and not '*our people*'.[6]

The arrival of the Tablighi into his life is presented as a moment when the miraculous interrupts the order of the mundane, and the answer to his plea to God:

> One morning God spoke to me and showed me the way: I woke up and got dressed to go to the shop, and sat in my car. I turned on the music loud and smoked a cigarette before driving; and then realised I could not go on any more. I gave up with life and I just broke down. I cried and cried in the car, and could not do anything. I was a total wreck and I prayed to God: 'God, please help me, please help me, please help me – I don't know what to do with my life anymore.'
>
> Then I looked up with tears in my eyes, and I saw a group of men standing outside the gate of my house in front of the shop in front. They were all dressed in white robes and they carried their luggage with them on their backs. They wore turbans and skullcaps, and they looked so peaceful, so calm, almost radiant. Then I prayed again: 'Oh God, please make me happy like them. I want to be like them,' I said.

> At that point I didn't even know who or what they were. I had never heard of the Tablighi, and so I thought they were just a bunch of poor people walking around the town. But they seemed to be so peaceful and content that I envied them.
>
> The miracle came that night when they came to my house. This is why I know I was chosen by God to be saved. Can you believe it? I was at my lowest point, when I had no hope at all, but that night they came to my house. They called at the gate and I let them in, and I invited them into my house. I thought they had come to beg, but no, they said they just wanted to talk.
>
> 'Are you beggars?', I asked them. They said no, we are Tablighis. And so they explained that they were here to help other Muslims return to the path of Allah, and to become better people so that Allah would love us more. It was so good to meet them, I felt as if my heart was taken out and washed, cleaned. I felt so loved by Allah at that point, I could not believe that my prayers were answered on the same day.[7]

Ustaz Zulham's conversion narrative highlights one of the aspects of Tablighi discourse that we have touched upon in the earlier chapters – namely the very personal relationship between the convert and God. That his prayers *'were answered on the same day'* alludes to God's proximity; and the fact that he had been singled out for salvation also emphasises the very personal appeal that the Tablighi has for the individuals who convert to it.

Following his conversion, Ustaz Zulham was invited for his first *khuruj* that lasted for three days and which took him all the way to Surabaya where he had never been before. His transformation was rendered complete upon his return, after which he decided to give up his former life totally and to abandon his business in Brigen:

> When I returned to Brigen, I told my family what I had done and my father was not very happy, but I think he understood. Slowly I gave up my business. I was glad to leave the DVD business because it meant I didn't have to deal with *kafirs* anymore. I only wanted to be with good Muslims from now on. I sold my things, my property I gave to my family along with my cars and other stuff.[8]

No longer forced to engage in business activities, Ustaz Zulham eventually followed the Tablighis and settled in Temboro, which would later become the biggest Tablighi centre in all of East Java. There he continued

his study of the Tablighi and eventually took to homeopathic medicine, until he became one of the local healers in the community.[9] Like many converts who have chosen to give up their past lives and former family associations, Ustaz Zulham felt that he now belongs to the wider family of the Tablighi, surrounded by his *brothers*:

> Now I am twenty-eight years old and I am married with two wives and seven children. I have totally given up on my past life and I am constantly with my brothers here. I don't neglect my family, though, and often I go to see them in Surabaya, Brigen and Pasaruan too.[10]

Settling in the Tablighi's Kampung Madinah of Temboro and marrying two wives (who both came from Tablighi families) was a conscious decision on his part to follow the *Sunnah* of the Prophet to the letter. Though he admitted that there were occasionally problems between the two women, he was more irritated by the fact that liberal Islamic groups and NGOs in Indonesia were campaigning against polygamy, which for him constituted a direct attack on the ideal Prophetic type:

> I tell you why I have two wives: I hate it when people attack our beloved Prophet and make fun of the ways of the Prophet. All these liberals and Westerners, don't they understand that polygamy is part of Islam and it follows the model of the Prophet's own life? How can you make fun of polygamy, because that would be making fun of the Prophet's own life too? That would be insulting the Prophet and insulting Islam as well.
>
> No, I am proud to keep up the banner of Islam and I will raise the banner of polygamy too. Wherever I go, I bring both my wives with me, and I make them sit together in front of everyone, to show how we are a loving family. Even if they don't like each other, they have to do it for me. I keep telling them to share their food, to look after each other, to speak to each other when I am not there. Why? Because this is how I show the beauty of polygamy, so that everyone can see that polygamy is a wonderful thing. Polygamy is a beautiful thing, and is right for men (*Poligami itu indah, cocok buat lelaki*).[11]

Ustaz Zulham's defence of polygamy has to be understood in the context of the Tablighi worldview that we have discussed in chapters two and three. It is important to note that his defence of polygamy is not couched on its permissibility for Muslim men. For what Ustaz Zulham is saying is that polygamy was a part of the Prophet's personal life history and as such

is also part of the *Surah, Sirah* and *Sarirah* of the Prophetic ideal type. And as the Tablighis see the Prophet as the best model for Muslim behaviour, it also follows that polygamy is part of the *Sunnah* of the Prophet, which Muslims are meant to emulate in their mimesis of the ideal Prophetic type.

Although Ustaz Zulham still smokes occasionally, his conversion narrative almost serves as a template for many other narratives of conversion that I came across. Recounted retrospectively from the perspective of the immediate present, it is understandable that many of the elements of his former life are cast in negative terms, including the *'dirty unbelievers'*, the wasteful life of business and the false charms of fast cars and fast women. And it is also evident that many of the foundational ideas of the Tablighi Jama'at – notably the ideal Prophetic type, the reactivation of the lost memory of the original Muslim community and the sacrifices they made – are also present in his tale. The flight from the madding crowd is a theme that pops up again in the next narrative that we shall examine, which is that of Ustaz Ataullah Muhammad Ramzan, as he plans his escape from the world of drugs, cinema and Elvis.

'Oh how the girls were screaming for me!': The conversion narrative of Ustaz Haji Ataullah Muhammad Ramzan[12]

The story of Ustaz Haji Ataullah Muhammad Ramzan shares a number of similarities with the narrative of Ustaz Zulham that was recounted earlier, for both men are Indonesian Tablighis whose families originated from South Asia. Ustaz Ataullah's family originated from Punjab and migrated to Medan, Sumatra in 1931. Born on 20 February 1946 in Medan, Sumatra, his family later migrated to Jakarta where his father established a business. Ustaz Ataullah's father was Muhammad bin Ramzan and his mother was named Manda Dibi. The third child among nine, he was brought up as an Indonesian. The family initially traded in cloth in Medan, and worked with other Indian Muslim cloth merchants who had settled across the archipelago. During the Second World War, Ustaz Ataullah's father became a member of one of the Japanese-sponsored militias who later fought against the Dutch during the Indonesian war of independence between 1945 and 1949. At the end of the war he was given Indonesian citizenship and honoured as one of the veterans of the war. In 1954 the family moved from Medan to Jakarta, and from there Muhammad Ramzan despatched his sons to various parts of Indonesia to set up their own businesses. Ataullah was sent to Surakarta in 1962. Unlike Ustaz Zulham, however,

Ustaz Ataullah was raised in a family that had already come into the fold of the Tablighi Jama'at when he was young. As he put it:

> My father joined the Tablighi in 1955, the very same year that they arrived for the first time in Jakarta. He grew very pious and wanted me to behave in a responsible manner. But I was young then! I didn't care much for religion when I was in my teens and my twenties. I did my early studies in Jakarta, and all I wanted then was a good time and I wanted to travel, to see the whole archipelago. When I was finally allowed to leave the family home in Jakarta and come to Surakarta in 1962, you cannot imagine how happy I was. I was free at last![13]

Having been sent to Surakarta to start his own life, Ustaz Ataullah wasted no time and began to enjoy the fruits of his newfound freedom. In 1965 he married an Indonesian-Indian girl from Medan, and was soon well integrated in Solo's Muslim community – which had a high number of Indian and Arab Muslims who were engaged in the *batik* cloth trade that Solo was famous for. However, the *batik* trade was hardly enough for a sprightly young man like Ataullah then, and his life changed radically when he turned thirty years old:

> Then when I turned 30, I did something I had always wanted to do: I became an actor. Those days it was hard to get any foreign-looking guy to act in an Indonesian movie because there were so few non-*pribumi* (indigenous) actors who could speak *Bahasa Indonesia* well. But I was born in Medan and I had been speaking *Bahasa* since I was born, so there was no problem for me.
>
> So from the mid-1970s onwards I began my acting career, even though my father did not approve. I started at the age of 30 and I made fifteen films altogether. Some of these movies were really great blockbusters. I made *Romusa* in 1972, *Matinya Seorang Bidadari* with Faruq Alfiro and Rudy Hartomo in 1972 and *Bandung Lautan Api* in 1973. *Bandung Lautan Api* was great. It was about the independence war in Bandung and I had to play a really macho part.
>
> Oh how the girls were screaming for me! I was so muscular and strong then that the bren gun was as light as a toothpick. You say I look like Rambo? How can I look like Rambo? Rambo looks like me! Bandung was made in 1973, long before Rambo. The pose is the same, so Stallone must have copied my photograph! Yes, I looked very handsome then, with my sideburns too.[14]

Finding himself in the company of the biggest names of the Indonesian film industry like Faruq Alfiro and Rudy Hartomo, Ustaz Ataullah admitted that he was not all that concerned about religion then. Things only began to change by the mid to late-1970s, when the entertainment industry was visited by a relatively new phenomenon: drugs.

> By the late 1970s, the movie world was beginning to change. We all knew that movie stars have a naughty reputation. So many of them were in the newspapers and magazines all the time, and yet they couldn't get enough fame and fortune! There would be one scandal after another, more and more gossip; and it all seemed so unreal to me by then.
>
> But by the late 1970s we began to see the danger of drugs for the first time. Of course everyone was smoking and drinking hard liquor like nobody's business. That was normal, part of the game. The audience loved you more if you had a bad boy image and was known to be slightly on the dark side. I too had my image – I always played the tough macho guy, the strong man, the muscular hero or villain. But there was one thing I never did in all those years when I was making movies, and that is to drink. I swear to you, in my whole life, and even though I was surrounded by alcohol and drugs all the time, I never touched a drop of alcohol and let any drugs into my body. No heroin, no cocaine, nothing.[15]

The advent of heroin and cocaine also coincided with several changes in Ataullah's personal life. He was married, but remained childless. He and his wife opted to adopt children of their own, only to see them grow older and eventually leave them. It was at this low point in his family affairs and career that God came to the rescue:

> I grew older and tired of the world of film stars, and Allah was kind to me. You see, my father was a pious man and very hard working. He was very strict with his children and especially his sons. But I was the bad boy who left and travelled everywhere, making movies and getting women to run after him. My father must have despaired then! He became a member of the Tablighi in 1955, but not me.
>
> When I moved to Solo in 1962 the Tablighi was already here. But I never joined. I stayed away from their activities at Masjid Tanjung Anom and was busy making movies instead. Then I remembered what my father taught me, and how happy he was with his life. So I began to go to the mosque and began to see what they (the Tablighis) were like.[16]

As in the case of Ustaz Zulham, Ustaz Ataullah's transformation and conversion was an act of choice that necessitated a number of sacrifices on his part. He continued to visit the *markaz* of the Tablighi at the Tanjung Anom mosque for years, and it was only in 1982 that he finally took the plunge and became an active member of the Tablighi Jama'at, thanks to the *dakwah* work of a certain Emir Fakir Gul, who hailed from Pakistan.[17] And as was the case for Ustaz Zulham, Ustaz Ataullah's break from the past was a radical gesture as well:

> After joining the Tablighi I stopped making movies then but was still in business. I left for good the world of films, of Elvis, of Satan. (*Saya tinggalin dunia filem, dunia Elvis, dunia Shaitan*.) In my life I had a wider network of friends, some who were religious and some who were not. But I remember that when I was young I was not religious either, so it was Allah who brought me back. Perhaps it was because during all those years while making films I never did drugs or touched alcohol. Maybe that was the test and I passed it.[18]

Ustaz Ataullah is not the only one to have left the world of popular entertainment to take to the Tablighi path. In 2006, the guitarist Sakti (Sakti Ari Seno) of the popular band Sheila on Seven (SO7) caused a stir among his fans when he announced that he would be leaving the band after the release of their fifth album. Sakti went missing for several months and only materialised later in 2007 in Jogjakarta when he announced that he had become a member of the Tablighi Jama'at and was now focusing his attention on religious music instead. The artist formerly known as Sakti was now going by the name of Salman al-Jogjawy, and his transformation was apparently a complete one, down to his dress and appearance, complete with the Tablighi beard and skullcap.[19]

Unlike Sakti/Salman al-Jogjawy, it is interesting to note that although Ustaz Ataullah is now a full-time member of the Tablighi, he does not don the garb of the Tablighis. In the course of my meetings and interviews this was explained to me as being part of the *'other, softer'* face of the Tablighi; and that the role that was played by Ustaz Ataullah and others like him is to travel across the length and breadth of Indonesia to seek out new mosques, towns and villages where the Tablighi may come to conduct their *dakwah* work. But as one of the first and foremost emissaries of the movement, Ustaz Ataullah chooses to dress and behave like any other ordinary Indonesian Muslim instead. And not only does Ustaz Attaullah conduct his *dakwah* work alone in the remote towns and villages of Indonesia without

any of the sartorial trappings of the Tablighi, he has also brought the message of the Tablighi to Indonesian politics and has involved himself in the work of Muslim parties like the Partai Amanah Negara (PAN) that was founded by the Muhammadiyah leader Amien Rais.[20]

The intensely personal relationship between God and the individual is once again re-stated in Ustaz Ataullah's narrative when he reflects upon the many paths that he has taken, and how God had intervened in his life just to rescue him in time from the abyss:

> When I look back at my movie career and my youth, I am so thankful that despite everything I was not forgotten or neglected by Allah. Allah has saved me by giving me the chance to do my *dakwah* work through the Tablighi and even in my business. Maybe that is why I am here. After years of being an actor I know how to read the hearts of people and how to act well, so that they are convinced and their hearts are opened. *Insha-Allah*, maybe my acting skills will become useful again, and through my own ways I can spread the real message of the Tablighi so that people will see that we are inviting them to the path of Allah.[21]

And as was the case of Ustaz Zulham whose conversion and transformation was and remains a work in progress, Ustaz Ataullah's new life as a member of the Tablighi is not without some residual traces of the past. He remains a businessman with one foot in the material world, and he retains his interest in musical instruments that he loves. During my third visit to his shop,[22] he showed us the latest handmade guitar he wished to put on the market. To enhance the appeal of the guitar further, Ustaz Ataullah was considering stamping them with photos of his brother while the latter was young and sporting Elvis-like sideburns. Ustaz Ataullah noted that if the name 'Elvis' could be marketed, then so could a guitar bearing the image of his younger brother. Ustaz Ataullah wanted to name the new brand of guitar *'Hafiz Presley'*, after his brother Hafiz.

'I realised I was Indian as well': The conversion narrative of Ustaz Dr. Murshid Ali Khan[23]

If the Tablighi was the means of escape from the past for some, for others it has served as a means of reconnecting with an even older past that may have been denied for ages. This holds particularly true for those Tablighis of mixed ancestry, and as we have seen in chapter one, the Tablighi's suc-

cess across Southeast Asia was partly due to the fact that its leaders were able to connect with the hundreds of Indonesian, Malaysian, Thai, Singaporean and other Southeast Asian families that trace their roots back to South Asia.

One such figure who eventually rose to some prominence in Malaysian Tablighi circles is Ustaz Dr. Murshid Ali, whose family originally came from Punjab and who was brought up – along with his brothers Kasseem Ali and Jamal Ali – as Malaysians since childhood. (As I have shown in chapter one, it was through Dr. Murshid and his brothers that the Tablighi Jama'at managed to gain a presence in Kelantan.) A medical doctor by training, Dr. Murshid was also an officer in the Malaysian armed forces before he joined the Tablighi in the mid-1970s. All three brothers were born in Malaysia and were thus third-generation migrants. None of them spoke Urdu or Hindi, as Malay was their mother tongue. When Malaya became independent in 1957, the family chose to take up Malayan citizenship. Up to the 1970s, none of the brothers had ever left Malaysia. Dr. Murshid's father wanted him to become a doctor, and after his graduation he volunteered in the Malaysian Armed Forces and served as an army doctor from 1971 to 1973. He left the armed forces at the end of 1973, by which time he had risen to the rank of captain. By his own admission, he had lived a largely non-religious life. In his own words:

> Up to then (1974), I have to say I lived a totally secular life. All I knew was medicine and life in the army, and life in the army then was very relaxed as far as religion was concerned. We were not that religious in the army, especially among the senior officers.[24]

The appearance of the Tablighi Jama'at into the lives of Dr. Murshid and his brothers could only be described as a somewhat radical intervention of the miraculous. As he describes it:

> In June 1974 I decided that I wanted to set up my own clinic in Kota Bharu, Kelantan, so I negotiated a loan with the local bank. It was easy to do because I was a doctor and a former army officer, so my profile looked good to the bank manager. Everything had been set and I was ready to work in my own clinic when a miracle happened that brought me into contact with the Tablighi.
>
> My brother Jamal contacted me from Kuala Lumpur and asked me to come to the capital to meet with a Tablighi delegation that had come

all the way from Bangladesh. At first I did not want to go to Kuala Lumpur. I did not know who the Tablighi were and I did not want to get involved with them, as I had my own work to do and was busy with setting up my own clinic here in Kota Bharu.

But then the night before I was meant to open my clinic, I had a dream: I saw two men who approached me, wearing green turbans. One had a white beard and one had a black beard. They came to me in my dream and invited me to India. In my dream, the two men told me that I had to find my real purpose in life or I would simply waste it. They told me my destiny was in India and that I had to go to India soon.

I did not know what to make out of the dream I had. The next day I got up in the morning as I usually do. I was ready to open my clinic and I went to the new office in Kota Bharu to meet my bank manager who was supposed to hand me the keys. It turned out that he somehow lost or forgot the keys somewhere, and so I could not open the clinic that day. I stood at the door of my clinic but could not go in as nobody had the keys and they were nowhere to be found. I called my brother in Kuala Lumpur to ask what this meant, and I resolved to go to Kuala Lumpur to see him and meet the members of the Tablighi.[25]

In Kuala Lumpur, Dr. Murshid met the members of the Tablighi for the first time. The delegation from Bangladesh was conducting a *khuruj* across Malaysia and Southeast Asia. Prior to this meeting it has to be noted that the doctor had no contact whatsoever with the Tablighi and did not even know who or what they were. As expected, the first contact with the members of the Tablighi was a life-changing one:

I met the members of the Tablighi and they entered into a long discussion about the purpose and meaning of life. I was told that some of the members of the delegation had already left, but that they wanted me to join them and follow them back to India. It was then that I converted to the Tablighi and I joined them on their trip back to India, in July 1974. In India I went to the Markaz Nizamuddin in Delhi, and then another miracle happened to me:

It was there (at the Markaz Nizamuddin) that I met the man I saw in my dreams who I did not get to see in Kuala Lumpur. It turned out that he was Maulana Luthfur Rahman from Bangladesh. It was Maulana Luthfur Rahman who I saw in my dreams and it was he who told me that I would go to India. Maulana Luthfur then took me to see the *Hadratji*, the Grand Emir of the Tablighi Jama'at, who was there at Nizamuddin.

All this took place at Nizamuddin, in July 1974. It was then that I really became a member of the Tablighi Jama'at.

From the Markaz Nizamuddin I went on the *khuruj* across all of North India. I remember that we had with us in our entourage Ustaz Salleh Penanti from Bukit Mertajam, who went with us to Shahranpur to visit the first *Markaz* of Maulana Zakaria. Then we travelled around Uttar Pradesh and returned to Nizamuddin in Delhi.

This was my first visit to India and it felt so odd for me. I had never been to India but somehow I felt at home there, though I could not even speak the language. But I felt a strange connection to the place, and being with the Tablighi was my way of reconnecting with the homeland of my family. I had always thought of myself as a Malaysian citizen, but now I realised that I was Indian as well. After one month of travel I took my leave and returned to Malaysia with the other Malaysians. I opened my clinic at Jalan Temenggung in Kota Bharu Kelantan. This was around late July to early August 1974. So that's how I became a doctor in Kelantan at the same time as the founder of the Tablighi Jama'at in Kelantan as well.[26]

Dr. Murshid joined the Tablighi at the same time as his brothers Jamal and Kasseem. Later that year (September 1974), they opened the first Tablighi *markaz* in the state of Kelantan, at Masjid Lundang in Kota Bharu. In keeping with the theme of divine intervention into the lives of the ordinary, Dr. Murshid's narrative likewise emphasises the aspect of the miraculous in his personal conversion. As he put it:

> I don't regret my decision one bit. I realised later that the dream I had was God's way of speaking to me, to tell me what my purpose in life was and how and why I had to start my life anew. This is why I do this *ibadah* as part of my love for Allah and Islam. I don't want any credit for this, so don't go around telling people that 'Dr. Murshid is so good because he did this and that'. No, we don't ask for credit, we don't ask for fame. Allah knows best, and only Allah can judge me for what I have done. I am only happy that when I needed to change my life, Allah took me and gave me guidance. The dream I had was a miracle that proves that Allah is always close to us, that Allah will never abandon those who seek his help and guidance.[27]

That the miraculous happens to follow in the train of the Tablighi Jama'at is a familiar theme to scholars who have studied the movement, and

such narrative devices are often found in the conversion narratives of the members. In the course of my fieldwork in Kelantan and my interviews with the Tablighis there, I was also told of the miraculous arrival of the Tablighi Jama'at to the neighbouring state of Trengganu, and how it managed to cure the digestive problems, of all things, of its first founder-leader.[28]

The conversion narrative of Dr. Murshid Ali is rich with cryptic narrative devices that could be read into more deeply, but for our purposes here it simply serves to highlight the obvious elements that stand out. Apart from the traces of the otherworldly, Dr. Murshid's story is full of references to India as the home of an authentic, pure Islam that is somehow uncontaminated by un-Islamic elements. This happens to be a theme that appears recurrently in Tablighi literature, as in the case of Ustaz Yudha al-Hidayah's tract, *Ada Apa Ke India? Negeri Yang Enjoy* (2008),[29] which we looked at earlier. Dr. Murshid's passage to India serves the dual purpose of bringing him closer to the Muslim community which his secular education had alienated him from, while at the same time reminding him – the third-generation Malaysian-Indian Muslim – of his long-lost Indian roots.

For Dr. Murshid and his brothers, the Tablighi Jama'at is as much a brotherhood of pious Muslims as it is a vehicle for the return to an authentic Islam. Though the symbols, tropes and metaphors that make up this discursive universe are drawn from a gamut of (sometimes unrelated) sources, the discourse remains coherent and serves them well. True to its calling, the Tablighi has proven to be a transnational movement that bridges political as well as geographical boundaries, and here it can be seen as a vehicle for the fulfilment of personal quests of self-realisation too: Dr. Murshid not only becomes a better, more complete Muslim as a result of his trip to India, he also comes to connect with his Indian roots and realises *'that I am Indian as well'*.

Today the Tablighi Jama'at in Southeast Asia has assumed a local, indigenous face as more and more of its members come from the ranks of native Southeast Asians. For these new members of the ever-growing movement, the Tablighi's appeal does not lie in any promise of a homecoming to a distant land where one's roots may be, but it still affords them with a sense of homeliness and belonging that is keenly felt, as was related to us by Ustaz Abdullah Suparsono who had found himself in the unfamiliar surrounding of West Papua.

'No, the Tablighi never forgets us': The conversion narrative of Ustaz Imam Abdullah Suparsono[30]

Though the conversion narratives of the Tablighi are replete with references to the miraculous and even supernatural, it has to be emphasised that many of those who convert to the movement have also done so for the most mundane of reasons: there are those for whom entry into the Tablighi Jama'at marks a return to normality and a life that is ordinary. One such narrative is that of Ustaz Imam Abdullah Suparsono, who later became one of the leaders of the Tablighi Jama'at in the easternmost province of Indonesia, West Papua.

Born in Magelang, Central Java and married to a woman who was from Ponorogo, Ustaz Suparsono was one of the thousands of Javanese who took up the offer of the transmigration programme to West Papua in the 1970s. He arrived in Papua in 1974 and first served as a clerk working in the medical department of the province. It was in Papua that he met his wife and where their four children were all born. He admits in his narrative that he was less concerned about religion then, and did not even know who or what the Tablighi were:

> I was not a member of the Tablighi Jama'at then; in fact, I did not even know who they were and how they were different from any other Muslims. Most of the people in Papua did not know who the Tablighis were, as there were none in Papua at the time. And when they first arrived, everyone thought they were no different from any other Muslims. Nor were there any people who could explain the Tablighi to us, for most of the Muslims of Indian origin are based in Fak Fak, not Jayapura.
>
> At that time, all the transmigrants were new here. Jayapura was just a small town with two roads. You had to go everywhere by boat or plane and there were no roads outside. The Christian missionaries were already here and they were the only ones who were travelling inland, to convert the local Papuas, but they were not successful. Most of the Papuas would take their money and the rice they gave them, but they remained animists.[31]

The concern about the activities of Christian missionaries in their midst is a theme that appears many times in the narratives and literature of the Tablighis, and it is no surprise that it appears in the account of Ustaz Suparsono, for the long history of Christian missionary work in Papua is well known to many Indonesians.

In comparison to some of the other narratives I recounted earlier, Ustaz Suparsono's account of the Tablighi in West Papua seems refreshingly free from all traces of radical contingency or the supernatural. Rather, it seems that the Tablighi's impact was rendered all the more potent by virtue of the fact that its first emissary was an ordinary doctor with ordinary skills. In 1988 a certain doctor Nur arrived from Jakarta and brought with him the first batch of Tablighis who had been despatched there from the *markaz* at Kebun Jeruk, Jakarta. As Ustaz Suparsono noted:

> Dr. Nur came from Jakarta and he was sent to Papua. His job was to see if the Tablighi could settle here and how fertile (*subur*) Papua was for the Tablighi to grow. He had a small delegation then, only eleven Tablighis who also came from Java. They were all Indonesian, and there were no Indian Tablighis with them or any other foreigners. So it was easy for them to mix and to get around. They could speak *Bahasa Indonesia* and Javanese and they could easily get people to listen to them. Dr. Nur was a good speaker and when he started talking to the people at the main mosque in Jayapura, people would stay back and listen to him. This was new to us because at the time Jayapura was small and there were mostly transmigrants there, people from 'BBM': Buton, Bugis and Madura. Most of them would not have time to go and pray because they had just settled and were more interested in working to make money, because at that time in the 1970s if you could save money then you could easily buy land in Jayapura and other places like Marauke. That was why we were all here, to settle and build our new lives, so work was important and money was very important.[32]

Ustaz Suparsono goes out of his way to emphasise the fact that this first moment of contact was very much a mundane one that took place on the register of the worldly and the real:

> Dr. Nur was a real doctor. He was a lung specialist and he worked in the hospital in Jakarta. He was well respected, a polite and educated man. In those days when a doctor came to Papua, then everyone was impressed, especially when the doctor was an Indonesian. You see, most of the medical staff and personnel here then were missionaries who came from America or Australia, so everyone thought that all doctors were white people! But Dr Nur was a Javanese, and Indonesian, and so he was very popular with the locals when he arrived. All of the people wanted to see him, they kept asking for 'Dr.

> Nur, Dr. Nur' and they even went to see him when they were not sick! (laughs)[33]

Untainted though Ustaz Suparsono's narrative may be by elements of the fantastic, it is nonetheless one that is laced with hyperbole when it comes to describing the myriad of virtues that Dr. Nur and the first Tablighis in Papua possessed:

> Dr. Nur was a dedicated man, and his delegation had come by boat. It was a long trip for them, for they stopped at Ternate first and did their *dakwah* work in Ternate for two months. Then they took the boat to Jayapura and stayed in Papua for four months, but mostly in Jayapura, which is why Jayapura was our first base. I joined the Tablighi then, but like most of the locals we didn't have the time be full-time members. But Dr. Nur and his delegation went out of Jayapura and then tried to carry out their work in other towns too.[34]

Needless to say, the narrative culminates in a happy Tablighi ending, with Ustaz Suparsono commending the Tablighis who came from Jakarta or even further abroad from places like India to bring the message of the Tablighi Jama'at to the whole of West Papua. Indian Tablighi pioneers like Maulana Imam Nuruddin receive a mention, as do local benefactors like Haji Baduh Taufik, who left all his wealth to the Tablighis in Jayapura, so that they could finally build a *markaz* of their own, entirely under their ownership and control, in Entrop.[35] On the subject of the Tablighis from the Indian subcontinent, Ustaz Suparsono did not shy from the use of praise. In keeping with the recurrent theme of sacrifice for the sake of God, the Tablighis of South Asia are described in terms that are heroic and courageous:

> We get at least two or three delegations from abroad every year, most often from India, Pakistan or Bangladesh. For the Indian Tablighis, Papua is a very remote place but they like it because it means they are really, really committed to the path of Allah if they manage to come all the way here. Often they are worried when they see the (Christian) missionaries too and they are also upset when they watch the behaviour of the Papuas who eat pork and sell pigs in the market. But they are very tough, these Indians, and they are willing to go all over Papua for a month, even up to the tribal highlands in the interior.[36]

Again, it is worth noting that the theme of tough, pious Muslims from South Asia looms large in the narratives of the Tablighis, and connects with the related theme of India being the home of an authentic, pure Islam that is – invariably – cast in a positive light when compared to the Tablighis' portrayal of the insipid Islam of Indonesia.

Notwithstanding the internal differences that are introduced in the discourse of the Tablighi – between good Muslims and bad Muslims, tough Muslims and weak ones, etc. – what glues the narratives together is the idea that the community is ultimately one, and that they are all on the permanent march towards the betterment of the *Ummah*. Ustaz Suparsono's conversion to the Tablighi was one that took place without the special effects we have come to expect of other conversion narratives, but it is still one that harps on the same themes that are found everywhere in the movement's shared discourse. For after all, the Tablighi is one, and as Ustaz Suparsono points out, *'the Tablighi never forgets us.'*[37]

The everyday aspect of the Tablighi is something that needs to be stressed, as there remains the need to see the movement for the mundane phenomenon that it is. Yet even on the register of the ordinary, there are many accounts of the Tablighi that continue to challenge some of the earlier assumptions held by scholars who have studied the movement. One such account comes from the narrative of Sidek Saniff, who was not only a member of the Tablighi Jama'at but also a cabinet minister in the government of Singapore.

'All that we do, we do for Allah, with the Prophet as our model': The conversion narrative of Cikgu Sidek Saniff, former cabinet minister of Singapore

Much has been written about the otherworldliness of the Tablighi and how the movement is said by some to eschew the world and all things worldly. Yet among the many members of the movement I have met in the course of my research, several have stood out by virtue of their location at the heart of society, as active members of the communities they inhabit. Perhaps the most interesting narrative I encountered was that of Cikgu (teacher) Sidek Saniff, former senior minister in the government of Singapore.

Sidek Saniff was born in Singapore in 1938, when the city-state was still a Crown colony and part of the British Straits Settlements. A cosmopolitan commercial hub from the beginning, Singapore was home to many different Asian and European communities that lived side by side and often overlapped with one another. Brought up in Singapore and given a

secular education during his childhood, Sidek Saniff's first job was as a teacher. His introduction to the Tablighi took place on the register of the mundane. In his own words:

> How did I join the Tablighi? Many years ago, in 1974, long before I entered politics and government, even before I took up my higher studies, I was a teacher at a school here in Singapore. Then one day one of my colleagues said to me, *'Sidek I have a problem with one of my students. He seems to be chanting (*doing *dzikr) all the time, in class. I don't know what to do with the boy.'* So the teacher thought, *'this has to be one of those Bencoolen boys'* (boys who prayed at the Bencoolen mosque in Singapore) – the centre of *dakwah* then.
>
> So I went to the Bencoolen mosque to investigate, but it turned out that the boy had moved on to some other prayer group at another mosque. But while I was at the mosque I met with the leader of the congregation there, the *Bayani*, and I noticed that they were all engaged in discussions at the mosque. The *Bayani* was Professor Majid Pasha, and said to the congregation: *'When the Prophet was given the choice of being with those who read the Quran, those who performed* dzikr*, and those who were engaged in discussion or* muzakkarah*, he chose the last. Why? Because to read the Quran and to do* dzikr *are private things for the individual's soul. But when we discuss we do so in the company of others and for others.'* I found that attractive and so I began to join in their discussions, and that was when I first took part in the work of the Tablighi Jama'at, in the year 1974.[38]

Sidek Saniff's entry into the Tablighi seems to have been without much fanfare. An educationalist at heart, it took place in 1974 when he was also pursuing his higher studies via a correspondence course with the University of London, in Malay and Indonesian Studies, as well as sociology. (He passed with honours in 1976.) Shortly after his entry into the Tablighi, however, something out of the ordinary happened to him. He was invited to join the ruling Peoples' Action Party (PAP) and asked to stand for elections:

> Then in 1976 something unexpected happened: I was invited by the government of Lee Kuan Yew to stand for Parliament, and to become an MP. I did, and it turned out that I was successful and so I became a Member of Parliament for the constituency of Kolam Ayer, in December 1976 (and later at Eunos, from 1991).

> Now you must note that by this time many of my friends knew I was already active in the Tablighi Jama'at; I am quite sure Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew knew it too and it was never an obstacle for me. It is important to remember that I was in the Tablighi *before* I entered politics, not after.
>
> Some people think that once you join the Tablighi then you leave the world and have no attachment to it. That's not true. What do we have to be? We have to be the best that we can be, whatever job we choose for ourselves. If you are going to be a teacher, then be the best teacher. If you are going to be a scientist, then be the best scientist. But above all, as Muslims, there is one thing that none of us can ever neglect, which is the original duty that was passed on to the Prophet Muhammad and was then passed down to the *Ummah*. This is the duty to learn and convey Islam (*taklim wa taklum*) whenever we can. This was the task passed down by Allah to Muhammad, and it is the task of the *Ummah* today. We must go back to the basics. Every Muslim has to do this.[39]

The interesting thing about Sidek Saniff's story is that his entry into the Tablighi did not hinder his rise in politics. As he noted himself, his Parliamentary and cabinet colleagues – though not entirely familiar with the Tablighi – were not apprehensive of him being a member of the movement, though he was asked on several occasions about why he needed to go on *khuruj* with his fellow Tablighis from time to time:

> I remember when I was in government as Member of Parliament and later in the cabinet, the Prime Minister would sometimes ask what I was doing and why I was taking twenty days off to go here and there. I used to take twenty days off because I could not do forty days, and I called this my *'half-chela'*. One day Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong even asked me*: 'Sidek, where do you go when you take leave like that? Where do you travel to and where do you stay? Some five-star hotel?'* I simply said *'No, I simply go to do our missionary work and where I go is not up to me. It's like in the cabinet, where the cabinet makes the decisions and the ministers follow. For us, the Shura council makes the decisions and I follow. And I don't stay in five-star hotels, but rather I sleep in mosques. And the mosques are even better than the five-star Ritz hotels, because the malaikat* (angels) *are there!'* The Prime Minister understood, as did my colleagues, and they never interrupted my work when I applied for leave then. Once the Prime Minister was so curious that I even passed him the work of Maulana Ilyas al-Kandhalawi for him to read.[40]

In fact, he noted that *'after every successful trip I made with my Tablighi brothers, I found that I got promoted when I got back in Singapore'.*[41] Notwithstanding the advances in his career, it was clear to Sidek Saniff that his work in the Tablighi was a higher calling and a mission that was placed upon him by God, transmitted directly from the Prophet:

> When Moses was doing his duty, he begged God to appoint his brother Harun as his helper. During the time of the Prophet Isa, he had his twelve disciples to help him too. But the Prophet Muhammad had no disciples – he had only his *ummah*, and his *sahaba*. And that is what we are today: we are the followers of the Prophet and we have to do our duty too.
>
> Our outlook among the Tablighi has always been simple: all that we do, we do for Allah, with the Prophet as our model. Those are the first two points. Then we perfect our prayers (*sholat*), for as we say, if your *sholat* is wrong then all that you do is *salah* (incorrect). Then the pursuit of knowledge. Later we develop our *dzikr*, which brings us closer to Allah and which reminds us that as one gets wiser one has to grow more humble too. And our actions are sincere (*ikhlas*) and finally we remind ourselves that all of the Prophets before us were also on this *khuruj* on the path of Islam. So we live constantly in the company of God (*habluminallah*) and live for the benefit of society and others (*habluminnannas*).[42]

Thus while he was a politician in Singapore – serving for a period of 25 years in government, rising from a member of parliament and later to the senior minister of state for education and finally environment – he was also a member of the biggest network of itinerant Muslims in the world. And as a result of this, he ended up travelling to America, Canada, Britain, France, China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and all of Southeast Asia. In Jakarta he met with Haji Zaristan Khan, Pak Haji Sidek and Pak Zhulfaqar, a colonel in the Indonesia Army, who welcomed the first delegation of Tablighis to Jakarta in 1955.

The reason why Sidek Saniff's narrative stands out is because it goes against the popular notion that the Tablighi Jama'at rejects politics as something that is contaminating. This view of the Tablighi, however, is not limited to scholars and outsiders who look at the Tablighi from afar but, as Sidek noted, was also common among some of the members of the movement too:

> The only difficulty I faced was due to my position in government and the fact that I was then a minister. In some countries like Bangladesh or Pakistan you find ex-ambassadors and ex-politicians joining the Tablighi; but there I was, a Tabligh who was also a serving member of the cabinet of the Singaporean government. I remember in Toronto, Canada in 2000 some of our brothers could not believe it when they were told I was an active politician. Later they came to me to apologise for the misunderstanding. But then the *Sheikh* there told me: perhaps it would be better if I was someone with no name (*ghun nam*), for then people would not know who I was or ask any questions about my position. I would be able to devote myself selflessly and without claiming credit. For that is all we wish to do – keep a low profile and work for others, never ourselves.[43]

For Sidek Saniff, membership of the Tablighi was something that was permanent and which proved useful throughout his career and even after. After his retirement from a life of politics, he has been called upon by his party to help them in their work, and in 2011 he was asked by the party leaders to help campaign for the PAP at the elections:

> I was called upon again by my colleagues to help the ruling party campaign at the 2011 elections. I thought: *'Alamak! It's been eleven years since I gave a political speech! How can I do this?'* But this is where the work of the Tablighi comes in useful, you see, for the Tablighis have never abandoned the world.
>
> Some people think that we Tablighis abandon our families, run and escape. But how? If you wanted to escape, you can run to a cave in the woods. But we do our work *in* society. We go *into* society to bring Islam to people, face-to-face; and in the process we face their criticism, jokes, ridicule, even hatred. But running away is not an option. I sometimes say that if Allah can bring back to life all the 124,000 *sahaba,* you would see that most of them were ordinary people like us. Not rich, not powerful. Many of them are the poorest of the poor. So poverty is not a burden and materialism is not an obstacle. We must engage with the world and not run away from it.[44]

Sidek Saniff's story is proof, if any was needed, that some of the earlier assumptions about the Tablighi Jama'at need to be revised. For in this instance – and others such as the case of Ustaz Ataullah we discussed earlier – the Tablighi has served as a vehicle for integration rather than escapism.

Far from taking him away from the society he inhabited, the Tablighi's work was complementary to Sidek Saniff's duties as a citizen and a public representative, allowing him to ascend and descend the vertical interface between the highest and lowest levels of Singaporean society. At a time when the governments of Southeast Asia are trying hard to connect with their respective electorates, Sidek Saniff noted that the Tablighi Jama'at has been doing precisely that, *'long before Facebook'*.[45]

Speaking (and reading, writing and reproducing) a common language-game: The discourse of the Tablighi Jama'at as a *form of life*

> *Pr. 23. New types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence and others become obsolete and forgotten. Here the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that speaking a language is part of an activity, a form of life.*
> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

It is practically impossible for me to compile a comprehensive typology of Tablighi conversion narratives for the simple reason that each and every one of the stories I have recorded was unique according to the micro-histories of the converts themselves.

In the small sampling I have offered here, there are themes, tropes and narrative devices and strategies that overlap and may be in common; yet the configuration of the narratives is such as to create a range of possibilities so wide as to escape totalisation. Yet these narratives remain the conversion narratives of the members of the Tablighi Jama'at, and they could not have come from any other movement or organisation for the simple reason that despite the un-uniform nature of the compositions themselves, they still draw upon a common repertoire of images, themes, analogies and rhetorical/discursive devices that are part of the Tablighi discursive landscape as a whole.

What I have tried to do in this and the two previous chapters is to map out the contours of this discursive landscape and to point out the salient peaks that dot it, serving as the nodal points that anchor the discourse and give it the identity it has. Chapters two and three have focused on the discursive construction of the Tablighi world and have looked at the textual sources for the Tablighis as well as the stories that they tell to themselves. It will be noted that thus far I have concerned myself mainly

with the discourse of the Tablighi Jama'at, which can and ought to be seen as a language-game in its own right – borrowing the term coined by Wittgenstein – and one that is rule-governed and context-bound. Such a language-game makes sense for the Tablighis, as they are engaged in a mode of life that is common to them all. Admittedly, from a non-Tablighi's perspective, such a language-game may seem incomprehensible or littered with falsehoods, but this merely underscores our argument that in order to understand the Tablighis better – and to be able to make any verifiable knowledge-claims about them – one literally has to immerse oneself in the discourse they inhabit.

It would be difficult to assess the impact of the Tablighi's discourse on the framing of the Tablighis' mindset, but a qualitative assessment is possible – if only intuitively – by picking out the manifold instances where the narratives of the converts seem to derive their inspiration from the language-game that is used among them. The language of these narratives is Tablighi in character. As such, familiar topics make their appearance time and again in the stories that they tell, such as the value of sacrifice and the valorisation of poverty and asceticism.[46]

It would be useful for me at this stage to offer some general observations about these conversion narratives, and I begin by stating their obvious commonalities.

Valuing the (Tablighi) present and devaluing the (non-Tablighi) past

> *I turn around in my saddle and see the waving, weaving mass of thousands of white-clad riders, and beyond them, the bridge over which I had crossed: its end is just behind me, while its beginning is already lost in the mists of the distance.*[47]
> Muhammad Asad

People change, and in some instances, people may change almost entirely to the point where they are no longer recognisable to those who once knew them. This has been one of the questions that has bedeviled philosophy for ages, and is related to the problem of other minds and the question of how the Self can be said to exist consistently over time and into the future. We need not go as far as Bernard Williams (1973), whose example of the Self-altering machine is familiar to those who have looked into this question deeply,[48] but we need to address it nonetheless in the case of the Tablighi Jama'at and the claim that the conversion process among the Tablighis is one that is meant to bring about a radical transformation of the Self.

I note that in all the narratives recounted earlier there is a linear temporal-sequential progression from a devalued past to a valorised present, presumably moving on towards a brighter future. Obviously all these narratives were recounted in the immediate present, and each convert can only view the past through the somewhat jaundiced perspective of his present state. As one who has passed the trials of entry and inclusion, the present-day convert has internalised the values and worldview of the Tablighi Jama'at, and adapted that worldview in his own estimation of his present worth as well as the devalued status of his past.

That past, however, is rarely the same, for these converts have converged upon the Tablighi present from a myriad of origins. For some, the devalued past lies in a life that was wasted or aimless. Whatever those origins may be, the one thing that equalises them all is their devalued status in comparison to the newfound value of life among the Tablighis. Recollections of the pre-Tablighi past are often accompanied by expressions of regret (*'my wasted youth', 'my lost years,'* etc.) and repeated assertions of their devalued status. Conversely, the immediate present is punctuated by repeated expressions of joy (*'I am so blessed now'*, *'I am thankful to God'*, etc.), to underscore the positive status of the transformation that brought them to where they are today.

The valorisation of the present is in turn a result of a combination of factors. I would not like to suggest that there is some false consciousness at work among the Tablighis I met, but not because the presence of such a false consciousness cannot be verified or falsified in the first place. Rather, what is of interest to me in this study is how the present-day realities of the Tablighis and their view of the world – which includes the world beyond the circle of the Tablighi community as well as the world of the past dating from their pre-Tablighi days – has been discursive constructed through their engagement with, and internalisation of, the Tablighi discourse that we have looked at earlier.

Sacrifice and the Spartan spirit: A return to authenticity the hard way

> *Go forth, light-armed and heavy-armed, and strive hard in Allah's way with your wealth and your wealth and your lives; for this is better for you, if you know.*
> Quran, Surah at-Taubah: 41

Life in and among the Tablighi is hardly a vacation at Club Med, and the Tablighis have made it a point to emphasise the sacrifices they have

made along the way that brought them to where they are in the immediate present.

The theme of sacrifice is one that recurs in many of the Tablighi stories, and this happens to be a theme that also resonates very well with the corpus of Tablighi writings. The Tablighis, as we have seen in chapters two and three, do not just extol the virtues of sacrifice; they seem to positively relish in it. And that sacrifice can come in a number of forms. For some, it comes with the loss of property and a life of settled ease; for others, it comes with the shattering of assumptions that once marked the borders of their comfort zones. Many of the Tablighis we spoke to talked of the loss of family ties and kinship bonds and the sense of alienation they felt when they first joined the movement – much to the shock and disapproval of relatives, friends and society in general.

But again, following the terms of Moscovici's thesis, such a transition accompanied by loss would be normal in the case of any conversion to an active minority group, for it necessarily entails breaking away from the mainstream and the familiar, and an entry into the domain of a minority that is misunderstood by outsiders. Once in the company of the active minority group, however, the internal discourse of that group kicks into motion and sets the convert on the path of group-think and communal consensus. Many of the conversion narratives we have looked at talk about the feeling of acceptance, being understood, and having found the middle path in life (*'I am at home now', 'this is the best place to be'*, etc.). Though actively struggling for acceptance in the broader mainstream, it has to be noted that being in such an active minority group (that is exclusive and closed unto itself) means that another register of normality is at work within.

Thus it comes as no surprise that in cases of successful conversion, the convert finds himself settled in a new social space with a new comfort zone that even, in some instances, can be seen as *'fun'.* In this respect the Tablighi is no different from many other exclusive homosocial groups with strictly policed borders that distinguish between the in-group and the out-group. Soldiers, scouts, pioneer organisations, etc. all thrive on the feeling of exclusivity which in turn confirms their belief in their special status and character. The Spartan life of the Tablighis further adds a masculine, martial demeanour to the group, and when correlated with the stories of the first (pioneer) Muslims adds yet another layer of value to their narratives.

This sense of shared loss thus becomes the price that has to be paid in order to shed one's ties with an external world that is deemed corrupt

and corrupting; and turns the face of the convert to the cherished dream of mimesis of the ancients and the valorisation of a past that has been lost but can still be redeemed – though only through sacrifice. The Tablighi's conscious admiration of the Prophetic ideal type and the model Muslim community serves as the starting point as well as the endpoint for this process of conversion and transformation. But the goal can only be reached by paying the price that is due to it: a renunciation of the world for a life of hardship with the promise of heavenly reward in the hereafter.

Proximity to God and salvation: The personal piety of the Tablighis

God is closer to you than your jugular vein
Quran, Surah al-Qaaf: 16

If a life of sacrifice is what is expected of the convert, then what of the rewards? As we have seen in chapters two and three, God, for the Tablighis, is close to each member and intervenes directly in their lives to bring them closer towards the goal of realising themselves. Hence, in almost all of the conversion narratives I have recounted, there is the presence of a benevolent, loving God who is less a God of vengeance and more a God of salvation, forever rescuing lost souls and bringing them to his side ('*Thank God I was saved', 'It was God that showed me the way', 'It was a miracle that God brought me here*', etc.) The personalised God of the Tablighis is one who acts with intent and who demonstrates his loving kindness in tangible ways. In some cases (as in the narrative of Dr. Murshid), miracles appear amidst the humdrum and every day. In some cases (as in the narrative of Ustaz Zulham), prayers are answered on the very same day.

God's proximity to the Tablighi Jama'at is doubly reinforced thanks to the manner in which the Tablighi's discourse backdates its antecedents to the original moment of Islam's genesis itself, as we have seen in chapter two. The Tablighi's discourse is one that is grounded not only on texts, but the holiest text of all: the Quran, which serves as the primary foundation upon which the entire columbarium of ideas rests. Critics and opponents of the Tablighi may complain of their appropriation of dogma and scripture and their selective reading of Muslim history as they backdate their claims to posterity. But from the point of view of discourse analysis, this is a weak critique as it does not detract from the fact that the discursive economy of the Tablighi Jama'at is a thought-out system of meaningful signifiers that makes sense. All that is required is for this discourse to animate itself and come to life.

Are we closer to answering the question of what is the Tablighi Jama'at? The Tablighi worldview, couched as it is in a discourse that emanates from a common form of life, is not something that can simply be deduced from books and pamphlets alone, no matter how the contents of those texts are repeated and reproduced. There is also the stage-setting that goes into the construction of the context whereby a form of life may exist; and by this we are talking about the social norms, regulations, modes of individual and collective discipline, etc. that play an equally important role in giving that discursive community its unity in identity and purpose. Having looked at books and stories, we shall now turn our attention to the modes of social disciplining that play such a role in creating the Tablighi Jama'at world. I will consider the many ways through which the movement maintains its identity through a gamut of norms and modes of disciplining, policing and training the Self in order to create that thing called the *Tablighi subject*.

V Learning to Be Tablighi

The Rule-governed World of the Tablighi and the Disciplining of the Self

> *Pr. 241. It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. This is not agreement in opinion, but in a form of life.*[1]
> Ludwig Wittgenstein

What is it to be in pain, and to *say* that one is in pain? Off-tangent though the question may seem at this point, its relevance lies in the fact that to make any knowledge-claims about the states of minds of others means being able to speak about their inner subjective states – be it to claim that a person is in pain or to claim that another person is committed to the Tablighi Jama'at.

Wittgenstein's answer to the question may come in the form of his public language theory, and the idea of language-use involves speaking language-games that are rule-governed exercises that take place in determined contexts. For Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*, language-use is a rule-governed exercise that requires training and the learning of rules and norms.[2] Wittgenstein takes the view that words mean what they do when we understand how they are used in a *shared* domain and when there is an *agreement* to the rules of signification among the language users.

On the basis of this argument, for Wittgenstein to talk about 'pain' in a meaningful way is not to refer to private sensations of pain, but rather to obey the rules of the language-game whereby talking about pain is possible. The meaning of 'pain' in public language is thus not tied to our internal, private experiences of it. Rather, 'pain' means what it does in the public domain when we agree on the use of the word, and when we have the outstanding circumstances (the *'stage setting'*, as Wittgenstein puts it) that goes into determining the context in which such a word makes sense in our use of it.

I raise this point at this stage of my enquiry simply to clarify the aim and focus of my study of the Tablighi Jama'at. When studying the history,

development and modalities of a complex mass movement such as the Tablighi, I am less concerned about what each and every individual member of the movement thinks of it and how they privately identify themselves with it. The Tablighi is many things to many people; and as we have seen in our overview of the narratives and stories of the Tablighis themselves, this clearly seems to be the case – all the way down to the unique micro-histories of each individual member. If one were to study a composite entity like the Tablighi Jama'at by asking what each member of the movement thinks about it, we are unlikely to come to a final, totalised account of what it is (or we would end up with so many personal accounts that all the rainforests of the world will have to be cut down to produce enough paper to record their testimonies in full).

Important and meaningful though each experience of conversion may be to every single member of the Tablighi Jama'at, their private understanding of the movement still cannot tell us what the signifier Tablighi Jama'at means in the broader context. For if we were to construe the grammar of expressing the identity of things on the model of object and designation, then – like Wittgenstein – we would end up with the conclusion that 'the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant'.[3] Someone telling us that he is a member of the Tablighi Jama'at would not be communicating very much if the term *'Tablighi Jama'at'* was a signifier that designated an internal sensation or state of mind. It *also* requires an external context whereby it can be defined, and that context is what I wish to look at now. This chapter will therefore focus upon the lived, everyday world of the Tablighis, and look at how this *'form of life'* creates and sustains not only the rules and norms of behaviour of the members, but also provides the rule-governed context wherein being a Tablighi can be something *meaningful*.

The normative world of the Tablighi Jama'at: Stage-setting, and the rites and rituals of mutuality and association

> *This is the historical reality of the soul, which, unlike the soul represented by Christian theology, is not born in sin and subject to punishment, but is rather born out of methods of punishment, supervision and constraint. This real, non-corporeal soul is the element in which are articulated the effects of a certain type of power and the reference of a certain type of knowledge.*[4]
> Michel Foucault

We are familiar with the modern notion of the soul as something that has been freed from its essentialist, spiritual and ideational moorings. Foucault's assertion that the soul is more a product of power in the regimes of control and discipline has become one of the ideas that underpin much of contemporary social sciences, and was taken up by Darius Rejali in his study of the relationship between the Self and the state in modern Iran.[5] The merits of Rejali's work (1994) lie in the fact that he has demonstrated how even in the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the modern Islamic state was still concerned with the task of reforming the Self and creating the ideal Muslim subject.

One cannot help but view the Tablighi Jama'at through a Foucaudian lens, for so much of what the Tablighis do to and among themselves bear family resemblances to the regimes of control and self-discipline that Foucault and Rejali have written about. What I hope to show next is how the world of the Tablighi Jama'at is one that is regulated and normalised via a system of rules and norms that has high expectations of itself and those it seeks to convert.

Dress matters: What you *wear* is what you *are* in the world of the Tablighi

> *When you wear the serban* (turban)*, people recognise you and they will know you. Do you know why? Because when you wear the serban your body changes too.*
> Lecture given at the Maskaz Masjid al-Nur in Jala, Southern Thailand, 2009

Beginning from the most superficial level of external appearances alone, we can see that the Tablighi Jama'at presents itself as something that is quite distinct. For many years, the Tablighis in Southeast Asia were seen and referred to as *'those Indian Muslims'* on account of their dress and manners. Even today they remain recognisable thanks to their choice of dress – the ubiquitous *shalwar khameez* of South Asia – as they walk down the alleys of Golok, Thailand or the streets of Jakarta or the countryside of Temboro, East Java. Let us therefore begin with the most obvious of Tablighi markers: the clothes they wear and the sartorial norms that prevail among them.

As I have argued in chapters three and four, both in the popular literature of the Tablighis and their narratives we can see a historical revisionism at work. The Tablighis have time and again defended their close links

to South Asia via recourse to a selective appropriation and re-telling of Muslim history that places India at the centre of the Muslim *Ummah*. It is hardly surprising therefore that much of what passes for the markers of Tablighi identity are South Asian in origin as well. It is important to note at this point that for the Tablighis, the customs, manners and dress of South Asia are seen as being fundamentally Islamic – though here we are less concerned about the truth-value of their claims. Having made the claim that India and South Asia are the roots of religion and humanity, the Tablighis seem less bothered about defending their claims any further, despite the obvious counterargument that may follow – namely, that the Prophet himself in all probability did not wear the *shalwar khameez* or display the mannerism that they, the Tablighi, take to be Islamic to the core.

My aim here is not to dispute the Islamic credentials of a form of dress like the *shalwar khameez*, but rather to understand how a movement like the Tablighi Jama'at has managed to render such an item of clothing *de rigueur*, and by doing so succeeding at the first stage of controlling the outward physical appearance of its members. Scholars of the Tablighi will know that the Tablighi mode of dress obviously conforms to Muslim standards of decency and demonstrate the Tablighis' concern for piety, modesty and the Spartan ideals they exhort. The Tablighis are expected to dress in a manner that entirely covers their *aurat*, and to wear some form of headgear – a skullcap (*kopiah*) or turban (*serban*) – that covers their hair as well.[6] Members are encouraged to sport beards and are often seen wearing *khol* or *khajal* (eyeliner) which are also regarded as being *Sunnah*. The Tablighis even claim that they *smell* Islamic, – rose or *attar* perfumes being the fragrances of choice – which, of course, are defended on the grounds of it being *Sunnah* as well.

The movement's emphasis on clothing goes beyond making a simple fashion statement. For the Tablighis, dressing in a manner they regard to be in conformity with the ideal Prophetic type is less a matter of personal choice and far from amateur theatrics. Beyond the basic demands of decency and modesty lie the Tablighis' deeper concern, which is to initiate the process of mimesis of the ideal Prophetic type on all levels. Proceeding from one of the foundational ideas of the Tablighi that the Prophet was the first and only true instance of authentic, lived Islam, it follows that any attempt to become a true Muslim can only go through the model that was set by the Prophet himself.

Dressing in the manner of the Prophet not only links the present-day Tablighi to the original founding community of Muslims, it also brings him one step closer to realising the goal of Muslim subjectivity himself.

If the Prophet was the only true, perfect Muslim, then it also follows that whatever the Prophet did, said and wore were also perfectly Islamic too – hence the need for a total mimesis on all registers, from speech to behaviour to dress. (Again, it ought to be noted that this strict adherence to the *Sunnah* and the bodily comportment of the Prophet is not unique to the Tablighis but is also found among various Sufi orders and neo-Salafi Muslim groups like the Ahl-e Hadith and the Barelvis.)

It also follows that all other forms of dress are considered un-Islamic. In the course of my fieldwork I witnessed several incidents where members of the Tablighi consciously discarded items of clothing they regarded as incompatible and unsuitable for the new life they had adopted. On other occasions I attended discussions and lectures where Tablighi elders warned their fellow members of the dangers of wearing clothes that were deemed un-Islamic in nature – tight jeans and T-shirts being the guilty culprits most of the time.[7] And as we have seen in chapter three, some Tablighi commentators like Ustaz Musa al-Enjoy have even gone so far as to claim that underpants (whether wet or dry) are not *Sunnah* and ought to be disused altogether.[8]

It is, however, imperative for us to note at this point that despite the uniform appearance of many Tablighis, the movement has remained a flexible one that continues to accept individual quirks and idiosyncrasies – as in the case of Ustaz Ataullah, who opts for modern dress in order to present the *'softer, public face'* of the Tablighi to the world. For perfect mimesis of the Prophet is an impossibility, and what concerns the Tablighi more is the intention (*niyyat*) of the members and their willingness to remain on the path of mimesis.

Equally important is the need to qualify what we mean by the external or outward expression of Tablighi identity, and to note that for the Tablighis the outward expression of piety – in terms of dress, appearance, etc. – are not necessarily placed on a lower register of worth. Frithjof Schuon (1981) was one of the first to take note of this when he commented upon some of the external rites of Muslims. He pointed out that some of the outward expressions of Muslim piety were just as important as the internal experience of faith, for they were regarded as essential to Muslim belief and praxis. As he points out:

> We must be clear about what we mean by 'outward observances'. When one follows the *sunnah* for the most contingent actions of daily life or when one recites the formulas appropriate to the most trivial situations, one practices 'outward' or 'secondary' observances; but when one per-

> forms a rite whose content is essential, this rite is not 'outward' simply because it is performed physically.[9]

This argument likewise applies in the case of the Tablighis and how they view the dress and behaviour of the Prophet as being *essentially* Islamic, derived from the ideal Prophetic type, and as such essential in their praxis of Islam. The 'cult of small outward observances' that Schuon observes in Islam is taken to an extreme among the Tablighis at times, down to minute details such as how to take off and put on one's shoes.[10] Dressing Islamically (according to the *Sunnah*) is thus not a case of outward observance of religion – for the Tablighis, it is part and parcel of becoming Muslim in terms of identity as well. If one were to adopt Foucault's account of how practices like homosexuality evolved from the level of practice to identity (i.e. homosexuality as a subjective identity rather than only physical activity), then we can see that beyond the outward expression of, and conformity to, Tablighi rites and rituals there lies something more important – namely the internalisation of a Tablighi identity. It is that internal dimension of Tablighi life that we shall turn to next.

Body matters: The disciplining of the body as part of the cultivation of the self among the Tablighi

> *That is why, dear brothers, we must never let our bodies rule us, but we must rule over our bodies.*
> Excerpt from a Tablighi class at the Markaz Besar Jala, Thailand, 2009

One day in the second week of September 2003, I was confronted by a rather embarrassing problem. During my brief stay at the Tablighi *markaz* at the Masjid Jami' Kampung Jeruk[11] in Jakarta, I was naturally compelled to use the toilet facilities there.

The toilet, however, proved to be quite a challenge, as it was in the form of an elongated trench or drain. Along the drain was a range of small cubicles whose brick walls rose to a height of about one metre. This meant that anyone using the toilet would be forced to squat over the drain and would remain in full view of anyone else who was in the toilet area as well. As the *markaz* was filled with members of the Tablighi Jama'at then – as we have seen in chapter one, the *markaz* Kampung Jeruk was the first transit point for all Tablighis who arrive in Java from abroad and the other island provinces – there was hardly a moment when one could be alone in the toilet. This necessarily meant that anyone using the toilet would be

faced with an audience waiting in queue before him. (By the third day, I decided to end my brief visit to the *markaz* and promptly checked into the nearest budget hotel to avail myself to more private toilet facilities.)

It was noted, however, that the Tablighis who lived in the *markaz* were able to use the toilets with ease, and that despite the long queues before the cubicles – with rows of Tablighis chatting to each other – there were no complaints from any of the Tablighis. What this spectacle seemed to suggest was that for many of the Tablighis who were at the *markaz*, any sense of shame about their bodies had been eradicated, and that they were comfortable enough to be able to perform their toilet functions in full view of others.

Another equally important observation to be made is the fact that the design of the Tablighi toilet at the *markaz* provided a panoptic view of the goings-on in the toilet area and allowed the Tablighis to monitor and correct the behaviour of their brother Tablighis. The head of the *markaz* then (Imam Pak Cecep Firdaus) explained that the exposed nature of the toilet cubicles meant that it was possible to ensure that the Tablighis would urinate while squatting down rather than standing up, for that was the proper way to perform one's toilet according to the *Sunnah*. And as we have seen in chapter three, Tablighi literature is full of accounts of the Devil and how the Devil is at home in toilets, where all sorts of dubious things can happen.[12] The Tablighi elders informed me that the benefit of having such an exposed toilet was that it prevented 'unwanted' incidents from taking place in the *markaz*, such as homosexual acts or masturbation.[13]

Wary of their bodies and what their bodies may lead them to do, the Tablighis take considerable care of themselves so as to ensure that they remain fit enough to carry out their duties. While acts such as masturbation and homosexual relations are taboo, the body remains the first thing that comes under surveillance, control and care. A certain pragmatism surrounds their attitudes to the body, however, and the body is seen as an obvious necessity that has to be kept in sound running condition but not pampered or beautified beyond what it deserves. This is rendered evident in the manner in which the Tablighis are frugal in their diet, practical in their dress and attentive to their health.

Care of the body is also treated *carefully*, for the fine line between care of the body and indulging the body is something that needs to be constantly policed. On at least one occasion I encountered an instance where this frontier had perhaps been exceeded by some of the members, and it was also the only incident that led to a misunderstanding between myself and my Tablighi hosts. After getting permission to photograph the

environs of the Dusun Raja *markaz* of the Tablighis in Kelantan, North Malaysia, I snapped a photograph of a half-blind Tablighi teacher being massaged by two of his younger students. I was told in no uncertain terms that the photograph should never be published, and permission to take further photos was denied to me. The Tablighis were upset by the fact that this instance of male intimacy was caught on camera, and did not want the photograph to be made public for fear that 'people might think the Tablighi *madrasahs* were massage parlours'.[14]

The Tablighis, however, are not shy of their bodies and are prepared to engage in physical contact whenever necessary, especially when it comes to matters of health.

On the night of 30 August 2008, my colleague Mohamad Toha Rudin of Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS) was about to vomit. The reason for his state of discomfort was simple enough: Toha was seated on the floor next to Ustaz Talib Zulham (whose conversion narrative was recounted in chapter four). We were likewise seated on the floor and in a shirtless state, though our state of relative undress was not the reason for Toha's queasiness. Rather, it was the sight of Ustaz Zulham slicing our back with a thin razor a total of one hundred and twenty times before he proceeded to bleed us with suction cups in an operation popularly called *bekam* (cupping) in Indonesia.[15] Though this was perhaps an instance of taking participant observation a step too far, it was nonetheless interesting to record Ustaz Zulham's explanation of the origins of *bekam* and how it was, according to him, an essentially Islamic mode of holistic treatment that dates back to the time of the Prophet.[16]

Cupping and bleeding are obviously not practices unique to the Tablighis, for they are also performed by Muslims who are not Tablighis. Here was an example of care of the body that was rooted in history and which was retrospectively backdated to the genesis of Islam itself. Ustaz Zulham confidently explained that cupping was not only Islamic but also *Prophetic*, and as such was seen as an acceptable mode of healthcare among the Tablighis.[17] Having little faith in aspirin, Ustaz Zulham deals with all sorts of medicines that are made of organic materials such as seeds and herbs imported from Arabia, India and Egypt. Again, it was interesting to note that even in the case of the care of the body among the Tablighis, a genealogy was at work. The Tablighis, Ustaz Zulham insisted, were not against medicine, but only as long as it conformed with the norms of Prophetic *Sunnah*.[18]

The encounter with the Tablighis at the markaz of Kebun Jeruk and Ustaz Zulham with his razor blade and suction cups sets the scene for what I would like to discuss next, which is the disciplining of the bodies

of the Tablighis and the regime of physical care and control for which the Tablighis are famous.

As Rejali (1994) has argued, the development of the Muslim subject is a process that has to exceed the control of the outer body and penetrate deeper into the internal subjectivity of the individual. In the case of the penal system of revolutionary Iran, Rejali notes that Islamic authorities were less concerned about the punishment of the body and more concerned about the reform of the souls of those condemned. The care and cultivation of the Self is a process that cannot simply stop at the level of the physical. It only succeeds when the ideas, beliefs and worldview of the group have been internalised as part of the subjectivity of the individual member himself and becomes second nature to him.

True to its nature, the Tablighi Jama'at is a movement that seeks to create a newly converted subject who truly internalises its calling, moving from the register of mere practice to the register of identity. In this respect, the Tablighi shares many normative standards and practices that we see in movements and organisations that require the internalisation of a common identity and mode of group thinking, such as the armed forces. Foucault's observations about how military orders are created through the process of group discipline and the internalisation of common values comes to mind:

> The soldier has become something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit; in short, one has 'got rid of the peasant' and given him 'the air of a soldier'.[19]

As the Tablighis have sometimes cast themselves as the 'commandos of God', the comparison with Foucault's internally regimented disciplined soldier seems an apt one. And one thing that the Tablighis have in common with soldiers is their common disdain for the body and the willingness to transcend its needs and limitations.

Contempt for the body: Beyond the body and into the self of the Tablighis

Man may have his attachments, his instincts for self-preservation may lead him to error; and that is why, in many instances, to be objective is to die a little.[20]
Frithjof Schuon

Having given up their attachments to their families, the Tablighis are also encouraged to deny their physical needs and wants. The Tablighis are known for their scorn of creature comforts, living on a meagre diet of rice and bread and choosing only the simplest modes of communication and transport.

As Reetz (2003) has noted in his work *Keeping Busy on the Path of Allah*,[21] the Tablighis valorise strenuous effort and constant activity, pushing themselves to the limit through ritual practices such as long *tarawih* prayers.[22] The quotidian life of the ordinary Tablighi – in the confines of the Tablighi *markaz* – is a regulated one where hours are kept and time is precious. An ordinary day begins before dawn, when the Tablighis get up and prepare themselves for the dawn (*subuh*) prayers. This is followed by a quick and rudimentary breakfast, after which many Tablighis busy themselves with ordinary chores such as cooking and cleaning. Plans for future excursions are made, correspondence replied and sent out, delegations welcomed and sent. Between *zuhur* and *asr* prayers there are usually discussions and reading groups, after which more work is done. The activities peak between the *maghrib* and *isha* prayers in the evening, and in between the prayers, and after *isha*, more classes and discussions are held. Such discussions may go on for hours on end, and normally the Tablighis will also perform *tarawih* prayers en masse.[23] While most of the members will be busy with these tasks and rituals, smaller groups will meet in their respective *Shuras* to discuss matters related to the running of the *markaz*, and occasionally votes will be counted. All of this take place in the wider, open and shared space of the *markaz*'s compound, and it does lend an air of transparency to the internal workings of the Tablighi Jama'at.

There is, however, little fanfare to the work and internal organisation (*intizam*) of the Tablighi. At every single one of the *markazes* I visited and lived in, from the huge Tablighis complexes such as the Markaz Agung in Jala or Temboro to the humblest such as the *pesantrens* in Entrop or Golok, the Tablighis can be seen sitting and sleeping on the cold, hard floor with little more than a towel or a blanket to shield their bodies from the cold or the persistent menace of mosquitoes. Their requirements are minimal: plush mattresses and comfortable pillows remain alien objects in their masculine environment.

Life in these homogenous surroundings is also communal, and following the guidelines that have been set in the foundational texts of the Tablighi Jama'at, practically everything – including the necessary chores that animate these institutions – is shared. The Tablighis are constantly reminded that, as the *ansor* of Allah, they are duty-bound to live for others,

and more so for the sake of their brother Tablighis.[24] In the daily routine of life in any Tablighi centre, cooking, cleaning, washing and eating are all shared activities with not a single member left out.

In accordance to the Tablighis' chivalric code of banding together and never leaving a single brother unattended, there are rarely occasions when one can find oneself alone while living in the Tablighi environment. Such proximity also means that the loss of privacy is accompanied by the attendant risk of having one's personal possessions pried into. On one occasion while doing fieldwork in Madura, my toothbrush was unceremoniously liberated from me and used by more than a dozen young boys.[25] And during my stay at the *markaz* in Jakarta, my rucksack was looked into, my laptop opened and my towel shared by others.

The same conditions prevail when the Tablighis are on the road, going on their regular *khuruj* in the name of *dakwah*. Every burden is shared equally among all the members of the group and all resources (including money and food) pooled together as part of the common baggage that is carried by all. During these excursions, no-one is left behind. (Unless the situation necessitates the abandonment of a member of the group for reasons of ill health. And even then, the Tablighis would never consider the possibility of simply leaving a member of the group in the company of non-Tablighis, and so a *markaz* has to be located so that the ill member can be left in the care of fellow Tablighi brothers.) It goes without saying that staying in hotels or resthouses is entirely out of the question, and I was told on many occasions that such places were dens of sin and debauchery where many a couple had spent the night together, up to all sorts of wicked shenanigans. The 'veterans' of previous *khuruj* are referred to as *karkun*, but even they are rarely given any special status or concessions in subsequent forays beyond the *markaz* of the Tablighi.

I am not suggesting, however, that the Tablighi Jama'at practices a sort of primitive communism where every object is the shared property of everyone, but it does add emphasis to the argument that life among the Tablighi is such that it tests the limits of the individual's capacity to live an entirely social existence. On many occasions I observed Tablighis sharing tasks together, including some of the more intimate tasks of grooming. Tablighi brothers would assist one another while shaving and trimming their beards. And in this all-male environment where women are never seen, tasks such as cooking are no longer given a gendered status, as Metcalf[26] has noted.

The absence of women in the various *markaz* and *pesantrens* of the Tablighis is also the reason why my own research on the movement has

been largely focused on the men who make up the majority of Tablighis today. Though more and more Tablighi wives and daughters have also begun since the 1970s to take part in Tablighi activities such as the women's *mastura khuruj*, the fact that I was unmarried meant that I was never allowed to meet or interview any of them. Other female scholars (such as Amrullah) have begun to enter into that other side of Tablighi life, and no doubt in the decades to come much more will be known about the world of Tablighi women, which has hitherto remained secret to the outside world.[27] It ought to be noted, however, that this clear and strict demarcation of gendered space is not unique to the Tablighi Jama'at. During my fieldwork at the *madrasah* Dar'ul Uloom in Deoband, India in 2005, I was likewise kept confined to an all-male environment and did not meet a single woman for the duration of my stay in the *madrasah*.

In this shared masculine space, there is no time for trivial pursuits that are deemed unworthy by the Tablighi. The *markaz* of the Tablighi are free of all contaminating elements that bring with them irritating reminders and distractions from the outside world. Televisions and radios are entirely absent, and newspapers as well.[28] Living in such an environment for prolonged periods of time eventually leads one to a state of ignorance and indifference to worldly events, giving the curious sensation of being in a time warp of sorts. Although the Tablighis are naturally concerned about developments in and around the Muslim world and are deeply affected by any disaster – natural or political – that might befall their fellow Muslims elsewhere, there is practically no direct access to news in many of the Tablighi centres I have researched.

Keeping the outside world outside the Tablighi environment seems to be one of the preoccupations of the Tablighis themselves. The rules that determine what is allowed in and what is kept out are clear and communally enforced, though it should be noted that here 'policing' is likewise a communal group activity. The Tablighi Jama'at (in Southeast Asia at least) does not have anything that resembles an internal security force or moral police, and as such the disciplining of its members can only be done through the repetition of regulated ritual exercises and rituals. On one occasion I did come across members who had been given the task of guards (*pengawal*), and this was in the Markaz Agung in Jala.[29] But it was explained to us that the role of the guards was to maintain security over the building itself (as there had been instances of outsiders coming into the *markaz* to steal things, including construction material like bricks and cement) and not to police the behaviour of the members present there.

It is interesting to observe, however, that in this shared panoptic environment where every Tablighi lives in view of the eye of the other, photography is frowned upon. Photography was, and remains, a rather contentious issue among the Tablighis. In the course of my research trips to Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and India, I was told on several occasions that it was not permitted to photograph the members of the Tablighi Jama'at, though the reasons given to me were varied. On several occasions I was informed that photography was forbidden because all forms of representation were considered *haram* from an Islamic point of view – an old argument that dates back to the Muslim encounter with Hellenic thought and when Muslim philosophers took on the Socratic/Platonic critique of all representations being counterfeits of the real and the true. On other occasions I was told that the Tablighis shun photography on the grounds that the body is not important, and that photography merely encourages the baser flaw of vanity. This stance on photography is certainly not unique to the Tablighis and is found among the Deobandis as well, among other Muslim groups.[30]

Notwithstanding the fact that the Tablighi space is one where there is practically no allowance for privacy, it has to be noted that the Tablighi's system is flexible enough to accommodate contingency as it invariably arises. Though the same ground rules are at work in practically every Tablighi *markaz* – no TV, no radio, no magazines or newspapers and everything that is to be done will be done together – there were still exceptions to the rule. During my first stay at the *markaz* at Kebun Jeruk, Jakarta, I was surprised to discover that there was even a 'smoking section' reserved for diehard smokers who had not yet kicked the debilitating and expensive habit.[31] And while television and radio are strictly forbidden, in the course of my numerous fieldtrips across Java, Madura, Sulawesi, Sumatra, North Malaysia and Southern Thailand, I repeatedly encountered Tablighis who had their handphones with them and who were clearly calling their friends and relatives or even playing games.

How the Tablighi Jama'at deals with such instances of flagrant disregard for its own rules is an interesting question to consider.[32] As there are no clear and fixed rules that spell out the punishments that are to be meted out upon those who break them, the Tablighi's mode of internal discipline and control relies on peer pressure and majority consensus. (Though even when the moral pressure of the majority is exerted on the individual or minority, the Tablighis are mindful not to allow such pressure to exceed certain limits where it may lead to embarrassment or the humiliation of their fellow Tablighis instead.[33])

Peer pressure and majority consensus are in turn generated though a hierarchical system of leadership, rules and rituals that may not be clear at first glance. The seemingly casual manner in which the Tablighi carries out its daily activities has struck some observers as bordering on chaos or disorder, though as Reetz (2003) notes, this overlooks the strenuous internal discipline and meticulous preparation that goes into their work:

> Derived from the travelling practice as its main form of activity, the official arrangements for the work of the organization are kept deliberately provisional and temporary. It is part of the self-image of the movement that it is wholly based on voluntary work with little or no administrative input. Yet this self-representation carefully camouflages a different reality of a highly hierarchical leadership which exerts significant moral and social pressure for compliance, a reality that comprises a wide range of unofficial publications detailing the guidelines and the rules by which the work has to proceed, a reality that includes a differentiated and well-defined administrative structure. There is an unwritten constitution of the movement that determines in great detail what issues are confronted in what way and how the work, that is organizing the preaching tours, is to be conducted, how new members are attracted and how issues of leadership and guidance are to be solved.[34]

The apparent looseness of the Tablighis' mode of internal self-organisation (*intizam*) may lend the impression that the movement is one that is bent against the centralisation of power, akin to what scholars like Clastres (1974) have dubbed 'societies against the state'[35]. This impression, however, cannot be taken at face value. Reetz's observations on the regulated and disciplined internal order of the Tablighis is closer to the truth, for it is their 'unwritten constitution' that accounts for the apparent cohesiveness of the Tablighi Jama'at as it deals with the problem of idiosyncrasy and the potential conflicts that may arise as a result of personality clashes and differences of opinion.

As stated earlier, the Tablighi's emphasis on maintaining the outward appearance of natural order is one that irons out the possibility of contingency invading the regulated space that it wishes to create. Hence the normative rules that forbid the open discussion of politics, for instance, have a dual purpose: apart from keeping out the contaminating influence of worldly interests, they also prevent the possibility of political disputes erupting in the midst of the Tablighi fraternity. On several occasions I visited Tablighi *markazes* where it was clear (by their own admission) that

the members present belonged to different political parties or factions – in their 'other' non-Tablighi lives. And in Singapore there was at least one Tablighi of note – Sidek Saniff – who was not only involved in politics but who became a cabinet minister to boot. Yet the absence of political debate (or political news for that matter) forecloses the possibility of ideological conflict among those present, simply because politics is altogether banished from the domesticated space of the Tablighi Jama'at.

Furthermore I have also noted above that there were and are many instances where the rules and norms of the Tablighi Jama'at have been relaxed somewhat in order to accommodate differences and to ease new members into the group. Such flexibility, however, should not be taken as a sign of weakness, for whatever the Tablighi may do and however far it may go to facilitate the process of conversion, it has never compromised on matters of orthodoxy or on any of the foundational beliefs and ideas that identify the movement. The challenge of maintaining some sense of common, collective identity in the face of diversity and alterity is what I wish to address next, by posing a question.

Why hasn't the Tablighi Jama'at fragmented?

> *How can we ever break up? Can you cut water with a sword?*[36]
> Discussion with Tablighi elders at the Pesantren Al-Hamidy Banyuanyar, Madura, 2009

On 4 March 2011, an independent game designer by the name of Jason Rohrer released a rather interesting new game called Chain World at the Game Developers Conference at the Moscone Conference Center, San Francisco.[37]

Rohrer was taking part in the somewhat overstated panel entitled Game Design Challenge 2011: Bigger than Jesus. The challenge was to design a game that would evolve into something of a religion of sorts, if such a thing was indeed possible. He had designed a game where the player would be given the opportunity to create a world of his own. The cardinal rule of the game was that once it was over, the player was expected to pass it to someone else – not necessarily a friend or acquaintance – and allow the other person to re-play the game from scratch. The programme he designed was meant to re-boot the game from the beginning but retain elements of the world that had been created by the previous player. There was also the added catch that there was only one version of the game ever made, saved on a single USB thumb-drive, and Rohrer added

that no player was allowed to speak about the game to anyone else, thus maintaining an air of mystery around this game that would be played only by a chosen few.

The young designer explained that the game was developed on the basis of a simple idea: that with the passing of any person, all we are left with are the traces and memories of the departed individual. This stock of memories Rohrer defined as myth, and with the passing of time everyone becomes a myth for others. It was argued that the same effect would be felt by those who played the game, knowing that in the years to come they would be role-playing in a virtual world whose original designer had departed and was forever absent. Rohrer then announced that having played the game himself, he was now keen to let another person have a go – providing that he or she abide by the rules and pass the USB drive to the next player as soon as the game was over. This was the first link in the Chain World that he was trying to create.

Radical contingency, however, has the tendency to interrupt unannounced when least expected – it wouldn't be radically contingent otherwise – and so it happened that the next time the USB drive was passed on to the next player, the person in question decided to put it on sale on the online vending site eBay.com. Gamers were surprised to find the one and only copy of Chain World being auctioned on eBay to the highest bidder, but when the original designer was asked what he thought of it, his reaction was simple: no rule had been set to prevent any player from selling the game, so Rohrer was happy to go along with it and watch his game evolve one step further.[38]

The story of the young designer Jason Rohrer and the fate of the game he created is an interesting one for us, for it poses the question of what happens to the identity of a thing – be it an object or an idea – once the founder-designer is absent and unable to determine its destiny.

I have already touched upon this question in chapter two, when I looked at the role that the foundational texts of the Tablighi Jama'at play in the absence of what Bobby Sayyid (1997) called the original lawgiver of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad himself. As Sayyid notes, with the passing of the Prophet Muhammad, the Muslim community has struggled with the task of maintaining its sense of purpose and cohesion as it developed and spread across space and time. Yet in the absence of the founder-lawgiver himself, there is no overseeing function that can prevent such ideas from being instrumentalised, contested, re-contextualised or even radically reversed and misappropriated altogether. Jason Rohrer's Chain World might, indeed, evolve to become a sort of pseudo-religion or cult one day, com-

plete with its ranks of the faithful and deviants, heretics and apostates. But for now let us focus on one religion, namely that of the Tablighi Jama'at.

The Tablighi Jama'at, as part of the wider Muslim community, is naturally plugged into the history of that community. And the history of Muslim society is full of accounts of schisms, internal discord, dissent and civil conflict going back to the earliest of dissenters who introduced to Muslim life the practice of *takfir* – Muslims accusing other Muslims of being *kafirs*.[39]

As Islam spread across the Near East and into North Africa, Central Asia and South to Southeast Asia, so did the differences of opinion and interpretation that were part and parcel of normative Muslim life. Naturally, these differences sometimes contributed to divisions that exceeded the boundaries of scholarly debate and culminated in confrontations of a more personal (and often violent) nature as well. Among the various schools of Muslim religious thought that emerged from South Asia, almost all of them have experienced some internal division by now. The Ahmadis, for example, were formed under the leadership of their controversial leader Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in North India in 1889, who was himself accused of unbelief and heresy in his time. But by 1914 the movement was already split thanks to a succession dispute that eventually led to the creation of a splinter movement, known as the Lahori Ahmadis of Lahore. As the Ahmadis spread across the world and made contact with Southeast Asia, the differences between the Qadianis and Lahoris were never reconciled, leading to the creation of two separate and distinct movements in Indonesia – namely the Jama'ah Ahmadiyah Indonesia (Qadiani) that was formed in 1925 and the Gerakan Ahmadiyah Indonesia (Lahori) in 1957. Even the Deobandi school has not been immune to the scourge of internal conflict, and this schism is made manifest through the rise of the more scholarly and pietist faction led by the Deobandi scholar Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanwi (1863-1943) on the one hand, and the more politically-inclined Deobandis who have come under the influence of Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani (1863-1943) on the other hand.[40]

Such schisms and divisions are of course not unique to Islam – similar divisions are to be found in the history of other religions such as Christianity – and indeed they are not even unique to religious communities per se, as our example of the game designer Jason Rohrer and his game Chain World was intended to demonstrate. The question is really this: if dissension and internal division are contingent possibilities that remain forever present for all religious and political belief systems, why is it that some religio-political movements seem less affected than others?

Scholars who have studied the Tablighi Jama'at have marvelled at the manner in which the movement has managed to retain some semblance of unity in its identity despite the global dispersion of its ideas. Notwithstanding some minor touches of the local and the vernacular (which were discussed in chapters one, three and four, for instance), the Tablighi today remains by and large loyal to the aims and ambitions of its founders.

One of the reasons for this is that the Tablighi Jama'at – despite being a lay missionary movement that seeks to convert other Muslims to its cause – remains loose in terms of its membership. The rites and rituals that we have looked at in this chapter clearly set the stage for what the Tablighi hopes will be a transformation of the inner subjectivity of the new member or convert, giving birth to what may be described as a Tablighi subject. But it also has to be pointed out that despite the superficial similarities that the Tablighi may share with other hierarchical, internally disciplined and organised bodies such as the army, it is also one that does not have anything that resembles a rule of permanent membership. There is no such thing as a card-carrying Tablighi, and the Tablighi maintains only a very general roster of its members and followers at any given time. (This is also why estimates of Tablighi membership figures tend to veer wildly, and it is practically impossible for any scholar to offer a precise number.)

On several occasions I posed the question to Tablighi leaders and members and was given the same answer: one can be a member or follower of the Tablighi on one's own terms. There are those who are regarded as veteran full-timers (who are mostly elder men who have passed retirement age) who spend their lives with the Tablighi, living in the *markaz* and taking part in all the activities there. Then there are the 'part-timers' who choose to leave their work and families for weeks or months on end, taking time out to be fully active members of the Tablighi but on a short-term basis, referred to as *karkun* after the completion of their first *khuruj*. And then there are the 'irregulars' who may decide to tag along with the Tablighi for the odd *khuruj/tashkil* or to join them in their nightly *tarawih* prayers or reading sessions, as time permits. Regardless of the time that is spent and the regularity or irregularity of their involvement, all of the above are regarded as members of the wider Tablighi fraternity.

This argument can be developed even further, if we were to abandon the idea that identity has to be based on membership in the first place. The Indonesian Muslim intellectual Nurcholish Madjid was of the opinion that Muslim identity has less to do with belonging to a community and more with being in a particular state of belief or state of mind.[41] Madjid's

argument was that being a Muslim does not mean belonging to a clan or a club of any kind. Being Muslim or non-Muslim is not like being a supporter of Liverpool or Manchester United but is instead more akin to being happy or unhappy. In the same way that a person who was happy yesterday may not be happy today or tomorrow, it could also be said that a person who believed in God yesterday may question his faith today. Being a believing Muslim is therefore a process of continually affirming one's faith, which may wax and wane over time and according to circumstances. The same can also be said of the Tablighis and of being a Tablighi. One does not join the Tablighi gang or club and receive one's Tablighi membership card (with or without the perks that follow), but rather one chooses to put oneself on the Tablighi path and tries to remain on that path for as long and as sincerely as possible.

Strengthening this loose sense of identity-belonging is the Tablighis' own credo of *Ikraam-e-Muslim* (to treat fellow Muslims with honour and respect, and the norm of never embarrassing another brother Tablighi), which effectively means that they are less likely to accuse one another of not being 'Tablighi enough'.

If this is the case, then a tentative observation that can be made about the Tablighi Jama'at is that it is a mass movement of lay Muslim missionaries that has a minimalist organisation structure that remains flexible enough to accommodate internal differences, and yet is able to retain some sense of identity across time and space through a selective application of its own internally constituted rules and norms. A suit of armour and a whalebone corset may both be tight, and both intended to mould the body of the person who wears it, but a corset remains infinitely more flexible than a suit of armour and presumably lends the impression of being freer too. Life in and among the Tablighi Jama'at can be described as corseted as well, but it remains a life where the individual remains free enough to initiate and determine his own process of personal transformation.

Power – in terms of the ability to enforce rules and norms – is also less personalised among the Tablighis, and this also explains why it has not created a cult of leadership or heroes among its members. But power here is not understood merely in terms of brute coercive force. Steven Lukes (1986) has argued that power lies not only in the use of force and violence but above all in the ability to set the rules and norms where the use of force and violence can be justified and normalised.[42] In this sense there is a power structure to the Tablighi Jama'at, but it is one that is less personalised and more formalised in the norms and rules that pertain in the common Tablighi domain shared by all. (And in the course of my field-

work among the Tablighis in Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia, I have noted that this authority has seldom been abused in the Tablighi context, and the rules of the movement are abided by most, if not all, with no exceptions or special privileges accorded to any particular member.)

And even if power is to be defined as the ability to set rules and norms of conduct, it still has to be noted that in the everyday life of the Tablighis there is always some room to manoeuvre, and allowances are made for behaviour that might exceed those defined boundaries. As I have noted earlier, the Tablighis in some parts of Southeast Asia seem to be prepared to turn a blind eye to transgressions such as smoking. And though the Tablighis still take the view that all forms of modern media are *bid'ah*, it is well known that this is not a universal rule that is applied globally. In Saudi Arabia there is the figure of the media-savvy Sheikh Suleiman al-Jubeilan, who is widely regarded to be a Tablighi himself. The significant thing here is not that the Saudi authorities have given him access to the media, but that an alleged Tablighi makes use of the medium. The same holds true for Maulana Tareeq Jameel, the famous Tablighi preacher of Pakistan who has likewise used audio cassettes in his attempt to further the message of the Tablighis.

The Tablighi's image as a movement that is relatively relaxed and informal is further enhanced by the apparent invisibility of its leadership, lending the impression that it is an egalitarian assembly of equals. But as Reetz (2003) has argued, 'the middle rung of leadership is hardly visible to outside observers and not even to irregular participants, yet the movement is ruled by a clearly defined command structure at every level, being both flexible and rigid in turns. It is based on the *Shura* principle gleaned from the Quran and Hadith, led by an *emir* or a responsible person of varying designation.'[43] There remains much, however, that is kept away from the public eye and even the attention of the normal members of the movement, for 'not all business of the movement is conducted in public, if only in the presence of their own followers. There definitely is a closed or secret part of business of the movement that is kept away from the public eye.'[44]

Although some aspects of Tablighi life have been shrouded in secrecy – the Tablighis have always been cagey when discussing the matter of their internal finances and funding, for instance – the semblance of a flexible organisational structure has been maintained from the beginning. While the Tablighi does not lay emphasis on permanent, exclusive membership – one can be a Tablighi while also retaining some residual attachments to politics, for instance – the movement still has a sense of identity that

we can study and speak about. Unlike some other militarised orders and organisations like the army, entry and membership of the Tablighi does not lead one to have to make a final, exclusive choice. It is this relatively open space of choices that may also account for the attractiveness of the Tablighi Jama'at for some, and why it has managed to expand its membership to Muslims who wish to be part of it. Perhaps at this juncture we are closer to answering the other question that has been raised earlier in this book: What does it mean for a Muslim to convert to the Tablighi Jama'at?

What do change and conversion mean for the Tablighis?

Among the many questions that are raised by a study of the Tablighi Jama'at is the nature of conversion and what it entails. This is particularly important in the case of the Tablighi, which is seen as a lay missionary movement that seeks to reform and convert other Muslims to their way of life. But what exactly does conversion mean in this case?

The question arises partly because of the orientation and goals of the movement itself, which seeks to convert fellow Muslims to becoming better Muslims rather than to convert non-Muslims to Islam. (Though in the course of my research I have come across Muslims who were previously non-Muslims and who became Muslims as a result of their contact with the Tablighi Jama'at, such as Brother Bismillah mentioned at the beginning of this book.) 'Conversion' in the context of the Tablighi can and should be linked to another theme that looms large in its discourse, namely transformation. In the previous chapter we have looked at the narratives of the Tablighis themselves and how Tablighis value their (Tablighi) present while devaluing their (non-Tablighi) past. The conversion that the Tablighi Jama'at seeks to occasion is thus a transformation on a deeper level that alters the subjectivity of the individual, rendering him a Tablighi subject who is meant to be different from his former pre-Tablighi self. The ideal, therefore, is to become a different sort of Muslim altogether.

It should be noted, however, that change and transformation are hardly foreign concepts to Islam. There are several instances of transformation that take place in the life cycle of Muslims. Perhaps the most well-known is the *hajj* and the transformative power that it has. Ali Shariati (1977) wrote at length about the transformative power of the pilgrimage to Mecca,[45] as did Muhammad Asad (1954), whose own journey to Mecca was pregnant with deep existential import, culminating in the symbolic birth of a new, more complete Muslim subject. At the end of his book, Asad acknowledges that he has, after his journey, become a Muslim: yet he cannot

with any degree of certitude pinpoint the exact, precise moment that he crossed the line and assumed the identity of a Muslim. This corresponds to our earlier observation that the Tablighis do not necessarily see Tablighi identity as a form of membership in the narrow sense but rather a state of being, a process of becoming.

In this process of becoming, the Tablighis aspire to a spiritual and moral rebirth. And the regime of discipline and care I have discussed in this chapter is meant to create the conditions that facilitate such a conversion-via-transformation. Falling back on Moscovici's account of how active minority groups seek to convert the majority, I would argue that the aim of the Tablighi Jama'at is conversion, and can be correctly described as such – albeit an 'internal' conversion within the same faith community rather than an attempt to actively go beyond the frontiers of that community in a search for new members. It is a conversion in the sense that it seeks to convert the individual in terms of his life choices – choosing one way of living out his Islamic identity over another – and in the process transforming him as well. This is hardly a case of persuading a Muslim to leave his faith but rather to choose a different understanding and praxis of that same faith. It is less a case of giving up entirely one belief system for another – which would be the case when trying to convert a Muslim to becoming a non-Muslim, or even a meat-eater to becoming a vegan, for instance – but more akin to converting a cola-drinker to becoming a diet-cola-drinker instead (though there is nothing 'lite' about the Tablighi's understanding of Islam, I would hasten to add).

How, then, do we know that someone has converted and transformed himself into a Tablighi? Again, the answer might lie in Wittgenstein's account of language-games and forms of life. The question can be posed against another: how do we know that someone is lying? Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* might answer such a question by inviting us to look at the behaviour of the person in question and to try to make sense of his use of language in the proper context. A person who lies uses the same vocabulary as others but abides by the rules of the lying language-game that are different from other language-games. His behaviour tells us whether he is behaving in a manner consistent with that of liars. On the same premise, we can also tell if a person is using the language-game of Islam, and more specifically if he is speaking the language of the Tablighi and behaving in a manner that accords with the Tablighi form of life. In such cases, we can help ourselves to the conclusion that such a person has become a Tablighi after all. But nothing allows us to penetrate any deeper into the subjective recesses of the other's subjectivity to excavate

any intimate, essential truths to their character. Discourse analysis can only take us so far; and as to what goes on in the private solipsistic world of the individual, our language can travel no further. Here our analytical probing comes to a halt. As the earlier Wittgenstein would have us concede, there is just so much that analytical language can do, and that which cannot be spoken about must be passed in silence.

Ultimately, as Reetz (2003) has noted, the aim of the Tablighi Jama'at seems to be the creation of an expansive pool of converts who will choose to quit the limited confines of their sedentary, domesticated lives in order to take part in a global movement for faith renewal among Muslims. As I have tried to show in this chapter, this process of transformation takes place in a rule-governed context, the setting of which has been set by a complex system of rites, norms and rules that effectively create the conditions whereby such a conversion and transformation may take place. The Tablighis I met across Southeast Asia continually referred to this process as one of tilling the land and making it fertile (*subur*) for Islam to advance further, though how exactly Islam's advance is to be accomplished is left open to question. The Tablighis have eschewed politics and regard it as a tool that may sully the hand of the user. Commerce is seen as being corrupting and leads one down the path of temptation. The media is cast as *bid'ah* and as such cannot be relied upon either. In the next chapter I will look at how the Tablighi Jama'at positions itself within the wider constellation of Muslim society and politics and how it is in turn viewed by other Islamist parties and organisations who may or may not welcome the labours of this pietist movement.

VI How We Look and What We Are

The Tablighi Jama'at Framed in the Eyes of Others

> *Pr. 340. One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to* look *at its use and learn from that. But the difficulty is to remove the prejudice which stands in the way of doing this. It is not a* stupid *prejudice.* [1]
> Ludwig Wittgenstein

Let us return to Wittgenstein for a moment and take into consideration his argument that the meaning of signifiers lies not in any private act of definition but rather in the broader context of how they are used in the public domain.

I brought up this point earlier when we argued that the meaning of the Tablighi Jama'at is not a matter of personal subjective choice on the part of the members of the movement itself. What the Tablighi is and what it means to be a Tablighi has less to do with one's subjective state and certainly nothing to do with a private language. If the signifier 'Tablighi Jama'at' means anything at all, the meaning of the signifier has to lie in the context of a public domain where signifiers mean what they do according to how they are used in that public arena. It was on this premise that I have tried to show that there *is* such a thing as the Tablighi Jama'at, and that the signifier is a *meaningful* one due to the fact that its meaning is determined according to the rules of the Tablighi language-game that makes up the discursive universe of this movement.

Proceeding from that premise, we can take the argument one step further: if the Tablighi Jama'at means what it does to the members of the movement who are in a rule-governed *'form of life'*, then it also follows that the meaning of that same signifier can be further added to as it is used by others outside that *'form of life.'* Identities are relational, and subject-positions are relative. What the Tablighi Jama'at is, is partly determined by how the movement sees itself, and this has been the focus of my study in the previous chapters. However, the Tablighi Jama'at is also the sum total of how *others* see it, and it would be worth our while to take

another glance at the Tablighi in order to have a multi-perspective view of the object of study. This chapter will therefore look at how the Tablighi Jama'at has been framed and cast by the wider Muslim and non-Muslim community, which includes those who may be indifferent to the movement and those who are opposed to it, for a host of reasons.

The view from the outside: How the Tablighi Jama'at figures in the perspective of political Islamists

> *The movement of Tableeghi Jamaat is being utilised by the enemies of Islam – to prevent the emergence of a true Islamic movement in Europe and elsewhere in the world.*[2]
> From the website of the Islamic Academy of North America

Notwithstanding its soft approach, the Tablighi Jama'at is not liked by everyone and has in fact quite a lot of enemies.

As I noted in chapters two and three, the Tablighi purports to be a lay missionary movement that distances itself from worldly concerns and has consistently presented itself as a movement that is apolitical. Politics for the Tablighis remains something that is potentially corrupting and disruptive. I have, however, noted in chapter four that there have always been politically inclined Muslims who are members of the movement, for the Tablighi does not exclude those Muslims who may still maintain some attachment to worldly affairs and politics.

Politics is therefore one of the boundary markers that demarcates the contours of the Tablighi universe, and it stands outside the discursive economy of the good and the permissible as far as the Tablighis are concerned. Having framed politics – of whatever variety or form – as standing outside the economy of the same and the familiar, politics is thus rendered the *constitutive other* to the Tablighi's sense of identity. How, then, does the Tablighi Jama'at deal with criticisms that emanate from those Islamist parties, movements and organisations that have clearly taken to the road of political struggle, and how do these political Islamists view the Tablighi Jama'at? This is the first question I shall address in this chapter.

Internationally, the Tablighi draws from a wide pool of potential allies, friends and converts. At the same time it has also been vilified and suspected by scores of Muslim groups from North America all the way to Southeast Asia. Almost always, the nature of the attacks on the Tablighi is political, or rather comes in the form of the critique that the Tablighis

have abandoned politics. The somewhat vainglorious-sounding Islamic Academy of North America, for instance, condemns the Tablighi on the following terms:

> The movement of Tableeghi Jamaat is being utilised by the enemies of Islam as an effective instrument in their struggle to prevent the emergence of a true Islamic movement in Europe and elsewhere in the world. Therefore, it is incumbent on all Muslims to disown it and discourage its activity in every way. The British were looking for ways of infiltrating and subverting Islam. They kept, through their comprehensive spy network, a very careful eye, on any new Muslim group and movement. The Tableeghi Jamaat was set up under the British Rule in India. After closely watching the Jamaat for some time, the British realised that here was exactly what they were looking for, a movement that totally absorbed the energy of its members and yet did not threaten British domination in any way, as the doctrine of Jihad was totally absent in this movement. They saw that instead of the Jamaat's directing their energies outwardly towards their legitimate Kaafir enemies, was now directed inwardly towards the rest of the Muslims. (sic) Therefore, it was a group that was allowed to flourish.[3]

Similar disputes between the Tablighi and its Muslim detractors have also erupted in other parts of the United States, in Western Europe, Africa and across much of Asia as well.

In countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia, the Tablighi Jama'at is caught in a competition for support from ordinary Muslims who are presented with a wide variety of choices. Both Malaysia and Indonesia have a history of long-term Islamist politics, and in both countries political Islam has been a factor that has shaped the development of the nation since the colonial era, throughout the anti-colonial struggle and right up to the postcolonial present. As Benda, Roff and Noor have argued, the historical role that political Islam has played in Indonesia and Malaysia is a reality that cannot be overlooked in either country.[4] Furthermore, as Bruinessen,[5] Hefner[6] and Liow[7] have argued, political Islam is not only a reality in countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, it will almost certainly also play a role in defining their future in the years to come.

In countries like Malaysia, the Tablighi Jama'at is forced to deal with a Muslim-majority government that has expanded the scope of its control over Islamic norms and teachings to a considerable degree, via the network of state-funded religious institutions and authorities that have come

under its control. There is also the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), which is the biggest opposition party in the country and which has, at different periods in Malaysian history, come to power in several states like Kelantan, Kedah and Trengganu. Then there are the Malaysian Islamist movements and NGOs that have overcrowded the political landscape of Malaysia even more. The Tablighi's arrival in Malaysia, as we have seen in chapter one, was not without some resistance from other Muslim groups and Islamist parties that may have been resentful about the ambitions of this lay missionary movement from abroad.

While the Tablighi Jama'at rejects politics as a means of solving the problems of the Muslim *Ummah*, it has tended to be more sympathetic to Islamist parties like Malaysia's PAS rather than nationalist parties such as UMNO. PAS in turn views the Tablighi Jama'at as a somewhat curious, and certainly complex, object that cannot be summarily dismissed altogether; and it is not surprising that the leaders of the Islamic party hold different opinions about the movement.

Though accepting the view that the Tablighis are ordinary Muslims and not entirely beyond the fold of the *Ummah*, the spiritual leader (*Murshid'ul Am*) of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic party PAS Tuan Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat is less inclined to sympathise with some of their ways. In particular, he chides the Tablighi for their practice of *khuruj* and the manner in which they choose to abandon all worldly attachments, preferring instead to surrender themselves to the mercy of God and to live on the march. To quote the spiritual leader of the Islamic party:

> Their orthodoxy is correct. In matters of *aqidah* and *iman* they are like us; in matters of belief they are like us too. But what I don't accept about them is that they are too influenced by their history and their origins. (The) Tablighi began in India, and I find too many Hindu ideas and practices in their way of life, like begging and staying in mosques. Begging is not something that Muslims should ever do. It is lowly, disgusting. It makes Islam and Muslims look bad and it is a nuisance to the public.
>
> I don't agree with them (the Tablighis). They preach a doctrine of poverty but this idea is disempowering. What is the point of being poor when you have to beg? That is not poverty; that is just being a nuisance to others and to society. They also stay in mosques, and that is not always good. They think this makes them pious, but they forget that if a man is not in the house then all kinds of bad things can happen. That is why the Prophet always returned to his house, no matter how busy he was.[8]

Note that for conservative *ulama* like Nik Aziz, one of the biggest faults of the Tablighi is their attachment to India and the claim that they are too readily influenced by Indian cultural norms. Nik Aziz's rejection of the Tablighi has less to do with their religious beliefs but more to do with the fact that much of what constitutes Tablighi praxis is marked by traces of Indian culture and rituals instead.

Nik Aziz is, however, the spiritual leader of an Islamist political party, and so his own stand on the question of politics in general and Muslim political activism in particular is clear and predictable. Though himself a product of the Indian Madrasah Dar'ul Uloom of Deoband, the Deobandi-educated *ulama* demonstrates his political leanings when he insists that Muslims cannot abandon politics or political engagement, even for the sake of *dakwah*:[9]

> They (the Tablighis) say things like 'Muslims should only pray and leave the world to God'. That means that Muslims should avoid politics too. That is an Indian idea, all this denial of the world. If you deny politics, give up the world, then when will Muslims ever come to power? If the *Ulama* deny politics, then there will be chaos. Because the world will be dominated by all the secular and materialist forces, and Muslims will be weak and powerless. Is that what they (the Tablighis) really want? Do they think Allah will be happy to see Muslims stepped on by every other nation in the world?[10]

On the question of the Tablighi's presence in the state of Kelantan, which has been under PAS control since 1990, and their support for the Islamist party, Nik Aziz had this to say:

> As long as they teach the boys in their schools to be good Muslims, it is acceptable. But not if they start trying to convert them to their way of thinking and living. All the time we get delegations of the Tablighi coming here to see me, from India, from Egypt. But we always say no, no, no to them. They can do what they want but we will not join them and we do not encourage any members of PAS to join them. We welcome their support but we cannot stop them either. If they choose to help us, then *Alhamdullilah*. But PAS and Tablighi are separate.[11]

Murshid'ul Am Nik Aziz's rejection of Tablighi norms and praxis is a common enough theme that pops up again in other interviews done with other prominent *ulama* in the region. In all these cases the basis of their

rejection of the Tablighi is twofold: that the Tablighi Jama'at is too heavily influenced by Indian cultural norms and practices (which are seen as Hindu-derived), and that their abandonment of politics is a self-defeating gesture that leads to the disempowerment of Muslims in the long run.

Thus it was hardly surprising to hear the same argument being articulated by the famous (some would say infamous) cleric Ustaz Abu Bakar Ba'asyir of the *Pesantren al-Mukmin* of Ngruki, Surakarta, Indonesia. In my interview with the Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, the *Ustaz* repeated the common view of the Tablighis thus:

> They (the Tablighis) are good Muslims, but I do not accept their attitude towards their families and their wives. They leave their families for months on end, to do their missionary work. That missionary work is good, but I do not accept the way they leave their wives and children for so long. Don't they see that this can cause other problems too? The man is the head of the household and he is the Caliph in the home. If the man leaves, who will run the home? The wives cannot do it, they are not men. Women should never run the home.
>
> No, I don't like the way they (the Tablighis) handle their affairs. By abandoning their families in that way they are inviting trouble. What if other men come to their homes when they are gone? If every single Muslim follows this path, accepts their model, then what will become of the Muslim community? Who will lead the Muslims if all the men are out of the house? This can only make Muslims weaker, and when they are weak they will be victimised by the enemies of Islam.[12]

While the more conservative *ulama* of Malaysia and Indonesia seem to be wary of the Tablighi, it is interesting to note that the more modernist Islamists of the region tend to take a more pragmatic view of the movement. For the activist-inclined Islamists of Malaysia and Indonesia – many of whom were educated at Western universities or modern Islamic universities – the Tablighi's alleged 'Hindu' associations seem less threatening and problematic.

For the leaders of the Malaysian Islamic party PAS who have been associated with the so-called 'reformist' faction of the party (sometimes referred to as the 'Erdogan faction'), the Tablighi Jama'at is seen as an anachronistic movement that is misunderstood and sometimes mistakenly seen as a threat by Islamists and secular Muslims alike. In the words of Dr. Dzulkefly Ahmad, head of the PAS research bureau and think tank:

> I don't see any problem with them (the Tablighi Jama'at). The Tablighis are just ordinary Muslims trying to do their best to preach Islam. All the suspicion that surrounds them has more to do with politics, because in terms of their religious beliefs, they are fine. It is a pity that others suspect them, for they are neither extremists nor fanatics. Though one cannot help the fact that they are sometimes perceived as being gullible in the eyes of the powers-that-be; though there may also be an element of truth to that.[13]

Here the flaw in the Tablighi – if it could be called that – is not that it is a movement that originates from India or is tainted by Indian or Hindu rites and rituals, but rather that it is a fundamentalist movement that is out of step with the modern age they live in, and whose members are sometimes seen as well-meaning but gullible.[14]

Other Southeast Asian Islamists seem to have taken the same dim view of the Tablighi and seem to believe that the movement is a little too naïve for the dangerous times we live in. Such a position was taken by the leader of Indonesia's *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* (PKS), Hidayat Nurwahid:

> Today there is too much speculation about the Tablighi. Are they terrorist? Are they fanatics? Or extremists? I think all of this is nonsense because the Tablighis are not political and they are not a threat to anyone. Who are the ones who are asking these questions? They are the ones in the media and politics who just want to make Islam look bad, to look for enemies among Muslims all the time. All these rumours are unfounded, not true.
>
> The Tablighi has always maintained a low profile (in Indonesia) and they have never endorsed any kind of violence against anyone. But people take advantage of them (the Tablighis), and they have been hijacked and misused by troublemakers too many times.[15]

A similar view of the Tablighi is held by Muhammadiyah leaders and intellectuals who are involved in the Muhamadiyah movement's educational activities. For some Muhamadiyah leaders, the Tablighi is simply a movement that is lagging behind on the path of progress, and though the Tablighi is respected by them for its religious commitment, it is nonetheless cast as something decidedly un-modern. Rector Bambang Setiaji of the Muhammadiyah's flagship university, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS), for instance, notes that:

> By and large the Tablighi (Jama'at) have never been a problem. For we know that they have always rejected all forms of violence and coercion; and the Tablighis are less prone to emphasising their differences with others ...
>
> This is because they avoid the question of politics (*siasah*) and *khalifiyah*, and have always focused more on the *jama'ah* and the question of *iman* instead. But we have always remained separate, for we (Muhammadiyah) are modernists and have chosen to work in the field of public education and healthcare instead.[16]

Quite apart from the country's political parties and movements, in Indonesia the official stand on Islam and all matters Islamic can be gleamed from the plethora of Islamic and other religious institutions that have been created by the Indonesian state from the 1950s to the present (Ichwan[17]). As noted in chapter one, since its arrival in Indonesia in 1952 the Tablighi Jama'at has been careful to stay on the right side of the law and to avoid any form of direct political confrontation with the authorities of the country. As a result, it has largely remained off the watch list of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and has received almost no mention in the despatches of the Menteri Koordinator Politik dan Keamanan (Menkopolkam, Coordinating Minister of Politics and Security). Even more remarkable, perhaps, is the fact that the Tablighi has scarcely elicited a mention in the numerous *fatawa* issued by the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI, Indonesian Ulama Council) which has otherwise been extremely busy, issuing *fatawa* in all directions and on every conceivable subject.

Over the past decade the Majelis Ulama Indonesia has gained a reputation as one of the bastions of conservative normative Islam in the country. Since 2000 it has issued *fatawa* on subjects as diverse as the evils of cigarette smoking, the deviationist potential of yoga, the corrupting nature of Valentine's Day and the wasteful use of Facebook. Yet the MUI has seen fit to ignore the Tablighi Jama'at and its spread across the Indonesian archipelago. When asked of the MUI's position on the Tablighi, its Deputy Secretary Ustaz Amirsyah Tambunan merely remarked that 'the MUI's position does not vary all that much from the Muhamadiyah's and NU's', and that the MUI did not see any deviancy in matters of faith and the Tablighi's understanding of the fundamentals (*al-ushuliyah*) of Islam, but only in particular interpretations (*al-ahkam al-furu'iyah*) – often in areas of *fiqhiyah*.[18]

The Indonesian MUI's stand on the Tablighi is mirrored by that of the Islamic religious authority of Singapore, the Majlis Ugama Islam Singa-

pura (MUIS). While not necessarily approving of the manner in which the Tablighis go on *khuruj* and abandon their wives and children for weeks or months on end, even the Mufti of Singapore, Ustaz Mohamed Fatris Bakaram, finds little at fault as far as their orthodoxy is concerned. On the question of the Tablighis' religious beliefs and praxis, Mufti Mohamed Bakaram noted:

> The religious beliefs and practices of the Tablighi Jama'at are still within the fold of orthodox Sunni Islam. We cannot find fault in their beliefs, for they have not deviated in any significant way, nor have they invented anything new – though we remain concerned about the condition of the families of the Tablighis when they go on their missionary work, and we constantly counsel them to take the needs of their families into account as well. It has to be said, however, that after more than twenty years of dealing with them, we (MUIS) have only received one letter of complaint from a wife of a Tablighi whose husband abandoned her. Otherwise, they really isn't much to complain about.[19]

As to the question of whether the Tablighi Jama'at is still considered a 'moderate' Muslim movement, the Mufti of Singapore stated that:

> If by 'moderate' you mean non-violent and non-militant, then yes, they are considered moderate by the Singaporean Islamic Authority (MUIS). But if moderation means to also balance your responsibilities and to take into account the needs of your families and your obligations to society, then it has to be said that some of the Tablighis have not been so moderate.[20]

In neighbouring Malaysia, the state's vast and expansive network of state-sponsored Islamic institutions have likewise largely ignored the Tablighi Jama'at and their activities in the country. The Tablighis' Grand *Ijtima* held in Sepang, Selangor in 2009 was said to have been attended by 200,000 Tablighis from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia and beyond, but it proceeded without any restrictions imposed by the state's religious authorities. And though the authorities of Malaysia's Pusat Islam (Islamic Centre) which is under the prime minister's department has issued many a ban on various Sufi *tariqas* and all sorts of Muslim schools of thought, cults and deviant sects over the past six decades, the Tablighi remains off their watch list to this day.[21]

The opinions forwarded by the Islamist politicians, activists and those who work in the respective Islamic institutions of Malaysia and Indonesia would suggest that, by and large. the Tablighi Jama'at has managed to defend its Islamic credentials and remain in the fold of the broader Muslim community. Though the more conservative voices among the Islamists tend to berate the Tablighis for their world-renouncing ways and accuse them of abandoning the path of politics due to their own indifference or fatalism, most of them would concede that the Tablighi remains a movement that is part of the wider stream of Islamic orthodoxy. While Islamist leaders like Tuan Guru Nik Aziz and Ustaz Abu Bakar Ba'asyir remain unimpressed by the Tablighi's willingness to sacrifice themselves for the sake of *dakwah*, the root of their irritation lies in their argument that the Tablighi has done precious little in terms of advancing Muslim power in the public political domain. Other, less judgemental Islamists tend to view the Tablighi as an anachronism that jars against the prevailing realities of the modern age and regard the movement's cult of renunciation as something naïve, gullible and ultimately disempowering, but none of them seem prepared to go so far as to denounce them *in toto*.

Such a view would correspond to the Tablighis' own perception of themselves, for as I have noted earlier, whatever animosity that political Islamists may have for the Tablighis is something that is reciprocated by the Tablighis as well and reflected in the way the Tablighis view politics and political Islamists in turn. If the political Islamists view the Tablighis as otherworldly, naïve and gullible, it should be added that the Tablighis conversely see political Islamists as worldly and deluded in their ambitions for power. Consequently, two mutually exclusive chains of equivalences have been forged, each presenting itself in positive terms while framing the other in the negative. (There remain, of course, those liminal figures among the Tablighis who are at the same time members of political parties, but such idiosyncrasies have, as I noted earlier, likewise been accounted for thanks to the Tablighi's own fuzzy logic.)

The relationship between the Tablighi Jama'at and political Islamists is therefore one that is framed according to an oppositional dialectics where the latter is seen as the *constitutive other*. Yet although political Islamists are cast as the constitutive other to the Tablighis, they remain within the economy of the Tablighis' discourse and are, after all, fellow Muslims.

How does the Tablighi deal with the *radical other*, then, who reside radically outside their discourse of missionary activism? Political Islamists may be seen as lost souls who are floundering on waves of worldly politics, but those who are totally outside the Tablighi's familiar zone of

piety happen to be a different category altogether. I now turn to the Tablighi's relationship with the modern postcolonial state, examining how the Tablighi is looked upon by the panoptic eye of the state security apparatus.

Enemy at the gates: The construction of the Tablighi Jama'at as a security threat in the discourse of anti-terrorism

> *In the image of hatred and of the other, the foreigner is neither the romantic victim of our clannish indolence nor the intruder responsible for all the ills of the polis ... Strangely, the foreigner lives within us, he is the hidden face of our identity.*[22]
> Julia Kristeva

While politically inclined Islamists bemoan the Tablighis' rejection of politics, those in the security community have viewed the movement with considerably more suspicion.

That the Tablighi has been seen in such a negative light is plausible enough, considering the ease with which one can join the movement, rendering it particularly vulnerable to those who wish to use it for other means and ends. In South Asia, analysts like B. Raman have argued that the movement has 'been at the forefront of Jihadi organisations' assisting radical militants in Central, South and Southeast Asia for years.[23] That alleged militants have tried to move in and across South Asia while posing as Tablighis is a fact borne out by numerous reports thus far. The Sudanese member of the Lashkar-e Taiba, Hamir Mohammad, had tried to secure for himself a visa into Pakistan as a Tablighi member; the Somalian Muhammed Sulayman Barre (accused of being an active financier of al-Qaeda) had likewise tried to enter Pakistan from India by adopting the same guise; Abu Zubair al-Haili, commander of the Mujahedeen Battalion of al-Qaeda in Bosnia-Herzegovina, travelled from Bosnia to Pakistan under the guise of being a Tablighi; while the Saudi national Abdul Bukhary who was on the watch list of numerous countries had managed to get himself into the Tablighi *markaz* in Nizamuddin, Delhi while claiming to be a Tablighi too.[24]

Furthermore it has to be added that the Tablighi's insistence on avoiding politics is in its own way a political choice of sorts, with unintended political implications. As Reetz notes, the gesture of exteriorising politics from the domain of the Tablighi world does not mean that it is entirely

uncontaminated by the political, or that its missionary labour is devoid of political repercussions or consequences:

> The movement's self-declared objective (was) the so-called internal mission, to make Muslims better Muslims, as the Tablighis say. It strongly denied having any political ambitions. Yet its efforts to 're-Islamise' large numbers of Muslims could not but have political consequences, if only by providing a fertile ground for the activities of other Islamic political parties and radical or militant groupings.[25]

The manifold potentials that the Tablighi Jama'at harbour makes it a rather complicated phenomenon for modern postcolonial nation-states that operate on the basis of territoriality and clearly-demarcated (and policed) frontiers. Reetz's observation that the Tablighi provides fertile ground for the activities of other, perhaps less pacifist, movements and actors means that it is something that draws the attention of those in the security sector in particular, cognisant of the fact that anti-state movements and individuals may use the Tablighi as a political platform or vehicle for further mobilisation.

Compounding matters further for technocrats in Southeast Asia is the fact that none of the states in the region have evolved an effective mechanism for dealing with transnational movements. Since its creation in 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been largely a multilateral intergovernmental mechanism, designed initially to foster peaceful development between the respective member states. Nearly half a century later, ASEAN has developed a number of multilateral joint-security mechanisms such as the ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF) and the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC), but these remain multilateral *state-led* initiatives that operate on the premise that the nation-state is and remains the primary actor in regional politics. ASEAN, however, does not have the tools to handle any pan-ASEAN religious network or association that seeks to foreground Islam as a common concern for the Muslim communities of the region, such as the ASEAN Muslim Secretariat (AMSEC) that was started by Malaysia's Islamic party PAS in 2001.[26] In my discussions with ASEAN diplomats and policymakers, I found that there was a recognition that ASEAN remains unprepared when it comes to dealing with transnational solidarity networks like AMSEC or fluid transnational movements like the Tablighi Jama'at.[27] When it was formed, ASEAN was more concerned about the prospects of a Soviet or Chinese-led invasion of the region rather than the possible threat of a transna-

tional movement whose members would criss-cross borders while flying on cheap budget airlines rather than on landing craft or submarines.

How the respective states of ASEAN deal with the Tablighi Jama'at, and whether they view the movement as something benign or potential dangerous, is thus determined by a range of local variable factors. In some of the predominantly non-Muslim countries of Southeast Asia, the Tablighi Jama'at has been viewed via the lens of what has been described by some as the so-called 'Muslim problem'.

In Singapore, where Muslims have been in a minority since the country's independence in 1965, the Tablighi is a *minority within a minority*, as the population of the country is dominated by Buddhists, Taoists, Hindus and Christians.[28] Surveys conducted in Singapore suggest that with regard to religious identity, the Buddhists, Taoists and 'free thinkers' are the best-received religious groups, while Muslims are the least.[29] The relatively small Muslim community in Singapore has, since 11 September 2001, come under the scrutiny of the Singaporean media and the state's security apparatus thanks to the arrest and detention of several Singaporean and foreign Muslims who were accused of being members of, or sympathetic to, the Indonesian-based Jama'ah Islamiyah radical militant movement. And the popular perception of Singaporeans towards Muslims in general has been shaped by events such as the arrest of alleged terrorists like Mas Salamat or Fajar Taslim Muhammad.[30]

Set against this background of suspicion and anxiety, it is interesting to see how the Tablighi Jama'at has been framed in the wider context of Muslim developments in the country. Today, there is a visible Tablighi presence in Singapore at their main *markaz* at Masjid Angullia on Serangoon road. Thus far the Tablighi Jama'at has not been identified as a potential security threat to Singapore, and it is still common to see members of the movement coming in and out of the country at Singapore's Changi airport on a daily basis.

One of the factors that might account for the relatively flexible manner with which the Tablighi has been dealt with in Singapore is the attitude of the state's religious authorities towards the movement. As I noted in chapter one, Singaporean society has always been diverse, and this is equally true of its Muslim community, which is plural as well. In the context of postcolonial Singapore, the Tablighis have been one of many Muslim movements, and the state's Islamic religious authority – the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) – has tended to downplay the differences between these Muslim communities for the sake of maintaining some form of social cohesion instead. It is therefore interesting to note that

MUIS does not have an official stand on the Tablighi Jama'at *per se*, and neither endorses nor condemns it.[31] Reflecting concerns that some might say are typically Singaporean, MUIS's main concern with regard to the Tablighis and their activities is to ensure that they do not disturb the peace and do not litter the mosques they stay in.[32]

Litter and the public drying of wet underpants aside, there are also other concerns of a more serious nature that have not escaped the attention of the Islamic authorities of Singapore. The Mufti added that MUIS was also worried that the Tablighi might be hijacked by potential militants, terrorists and illegal immigrants:

> Up to now the Tablighi has not been a problem in Singapore, and they constantly work with us and check upon their own members as well. But we are worried, as the movement is open and loosely organised, and so there is always the possibility that it might be infiltrated by troublemakers, radicals or illegal immigrants who want to stay in the mosques in order to escape detection.[33]

Apprehension about the Tablighi Jama'at is certainly more pronounced in Thailand, in particular in the south of the country where most of Thailand's Malay-Muslim minority reside. As we have seen in the first chapter of this book, the Tablighi's arrival in southern Thailand was not without its share of trials and tribulations, for the Tablighis had arrived in a country where Thai-Buddhist versus Malay-Muslim tension had peaked.

Following the violent security operations conducted by the Thai army and police in the mid-1970s – such as 'Operation Ramkamhaeng' and the 'Special Anti-Terrorist Campaign' which lasted nearly seven years – the situation in southern Thailand became worse rather than better. In the wake of the Iranian revolution of 1979, the Malay-Muslim resistance movements in southern Thailand experienced a shift towards a more radical Islamist register. While some of the more secular Patani liberation movements like BRN and PULO would gradually pale into insignificance (the BRN and PULO offices in Saudi Arabia were practically inoperative by the mid-1980s), other movements like the BNPP would move closer to the global current of Islamist radicalism. In 1979, the BNPP upgraded its military training programme and expanded the scope of its guerrilla activities against Thai security forces in the region. In 1985, the more radical and militant elements of the BNPP, led by its vice-chairman Wahyuddin Muhammad, broke away from the parent organisation to form the Barisan Bersatu Mujahideen Patani (BBMP, United Mujahideen Front of Patani).

Later in 1986 the BNPP renamed itself the Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani (BIPP, Islamic Liberation Front of Patani) in order to underline its stronger commitment to Islamist politics.

Since 2004, Thai-Buddhist and Malay-Muslim relations have suffered as a result of the escalation of violence in the deep south of the country. Following the killings of Muslim militants at the Kru Se mosque and the deaths of dozens of Muslim protesters at Tak Bai on the Malaysia-Thai border, the southern provinces of Jala, Satun, Patani and Narathiwat were put on a state of high alert. As I noted in chapters one and four, my field research in and around the four provinces was rendered all the more difficult as a result of the tension there, which was palpable to locals and visitors alike. One of the consequences of this state of high alert has been a drastic reduction of the number of foreign (South Asian and Arab) Tablighis to places like the Markaz Besar Jala, and during my field trip there in 2008 we encountered only two Tablighis of South Asian origin, both of whom complained of continued surveillance by Thai security forces.

The same could be said of the Philippines, a country whose Catholic present was founded upon a Muslim past that was eradicated as a result of the colonial encounter with Christian Spain in the sixteenth century.[34] Though the Spanish had managed to colonise most of the Philippines – their rule was to stretch from 1565 to 1898 – they failed to convert the Muslims of the southern island groups. Filipino Muslim hostility towards the Spanish, however, led to the heightening of religious rivalry and remained unresolved even during the American interregnum between 1901 to 1935. It was during this prolonged period of inter-religious conflict that the Christians of the Philippines began to discuss the notion of a 'Moro problem' in the southern half of the archipelago. As Banlaoi notes, 'the long-term result of the minority status experienced by the Moros was a sense of marginality, and ultimately, a rejection of the Philippine nation-state'.[35]

Compounding the problem were the policies of the Philippine government in relation to land reform and the re-settlement of mainly Christian Filipinos from the northern islands to the south, which eventually affected the ratio of Muslims and Christians in Mindanao and Sulu. Increasingly, the Muslims of southern Philippines felt that they had been reduced to a minority in their own provinces, and this in turn led to more attempts to reject the yoke of the central government in Manila. By the late 1950s, Muslim Filipino students studying abroad in places like al-Azhar in Cairo and the universities of Libya were coming under the influence of radical Islamist groups who inspired them to revolt.

As Che Man has shown, it was through these transnational links and contacts that the Moros of southern Philippines grew more radicalised over time, leading to the formation of religiously inspired anti-state Muslim movements such as the Moro National Liberation Front[36] and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front[37]. Since then, the Philippine state and its security community have grown increasingly worried about the phenomenon of transnational Islam and its capacity to create solidarity networks among Muslims who are united in a common cause – namely, the overthrow of the Philippine government and the rejection of the Philippine nation-state.

This anxiety over transnational Islam accounts for some of the more hasty generalisations that have been applied to all Muslim groups and movements operating in the Philippines. Banlaoi, for instance, refers to the Tablighi Jama'at as 'the most widely-known non-state conduit of transnational Islam to the Philippines' and goes as far as estimating their membership to be anything between 11,000 to 20,000 – a figure that is practically impossible to verify or falsify considering the loose nature of Tablighi membership that we have discussed earlier.[38] (Some journalists have even stated that there are around eighty million Tablighis in the world today, though again with little to back up such claims.[39])

Scholars like Esmula and Bandahala have noted that the Tablighi Jama'at constitutes a visible presence in some Muslim-majority areas in the southern provinces of the country.[40] In the Philippines the Tablighi came to the attention of the security and intelligence community due to the activities of some former members of the movement like Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani, who founded the violent militant group that came to be known as Abu Sayyaf (initially called the Al-Harakat al-Islamiyah, AHAI). The Abu Sayyaf group put the Philippines on the world map for all the wrong reasons when they rudely interrupted the holiday of twenty-one tourists who were vacationing on the island of Basilan in East Malaysia. Their kidnapping by the group, and the ordeal they subsequently suffered, led to a global outcry and alarm bells ringing across the ASEAN region.

The reputation of the Tablighi Jama'at was badly damaged by this incident, for it was later revealed that the radical militant Janjalani was formerly associated with the movement. However, analysts have pointed out that Janjalani's stint with the Tablighi was a relatively short one, and there is no evidence that he had managed to convert any number of Tablighis to his cause. Though it is a fact that Janjalani was a follower of the Tablighi Jama'at for a while, there is little about the Abu Sayyaf that betrays any

Tablighi ideas or leanings. The Abu Sayyaf group could hardly be called a pietist movement by any stretch of the imagination. What is clearer in the Abu Sayyaf's profile and behaviour are its links to the other, more political Islamist groups and parties that Janjalani had come in contact with while in Afghanistan and Pakistan, namely the Jama'at-e Islami (and its militant offshoot, the Hizbul Mujahideen), and the Hizb-i Islami.

To make things worse for the Tablighis of southern Philippines, the movement was infiltrated yet again by another militant who hailed from Indonesia. Julkipli Salim Salamuddin had entered Mindanao on the pretext of being a Tablighi who was doing a *khuruj* across the region. His interception by Philippine security services led to his confession that he was in fact a member of the nebulous Jama'ah Islamiyah that was operating in neighbouring Indonesia. Salamuddin's arrest and subsequent confession has brought to light the fact that the Tablighi remains a porous movement that can easily be infiltrated by all sorts of characters, and this poses an even bigger problem for the security services in countries where a majority of the population happen to be Muslims and where the Tablighi is allowed to operate with relative freedom such as Indonesia. It is to that country that I shall turn to next.

In Indonesia, similar complaints have been made – namely that the Tablighi is a movement that is too loosely organised for its own good and that it has allowed itself to be infiltrated by radical jihadis who have used it as a vehicle for movement and communication across the country. The size of Indonesia – a country that is spread across three time zones and is as wide as Western Europe – means that itinerant movements like the Tablighi Jama'at would come in handy for those who wish to travel inconspicuously. As shown earlier, Indonesian militants like Julkipli Salim Salamuddin have successfully left the country to carry out their radical activities elsewhere by pretending to be members of the Tablighi. And in January 2003 a Malaysian national by the name of Husen bin Amir was apprehended by Indonesian security forces in the coastal town of Toli-Toli in Sulawesi on the grounds that he was giving fiery sermons at the local mosque, again while assuming the avatar of a Tablighi member.[41]

It cannot be denied that the Tablighi's vast network of *markazes* and schools provides a ready-made communicative infrastructure that could be utilised by bogus members who wish to move across the country undetected. And it is equally true that radical militants have indeed infiltrated the ranks of the Tablighi and travelled across Indonesia and beyond under the guise of Tablighis on *khuruj*. But then it ought to be noted that radical jihadis in Indonesia have demonstrated some degree of creativity when it

comes to the infiltration of public institutions – in one instance, by forming a nature lovers' society in order to give them the pretext for military training in the jungle, of all things.[42]

Nevertheless, the Tablighi has appeared in several reports by the academic and intelligence community working on the problem of religious extremism and religiously inspired militancy in Indonesia. At times, the framing of the Tablighi Jama'at has been questionable to say the least. The International Crisis Group's *Indonesia Backgrounder* of 2004, for instance, identifies the Tablighi Jama'at as one of the groups that is opposed by strict Salafis in the country.[43] The same report places the Tablighi in the same ranks as the Islamist party PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera) and radical groups like the Hizb-ut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and the Darul Islam anti-state movement, despite the fact that the Tablighis have made it clear that they regard the PKS and all political parties as forms of *bid'ah* and *hizbiyah* and do not condone any form of rebellion against any state in the way that the Darul Islam movement did.

Sidney Jones, in her report on terrorism and human rights in Indonesia, gives a more balanced account of the Tablighi and their activities when she writes that:

> (The) Tablighi Jama'at is highly conservative but apolitical... Its distinctive characteristic is *khuruj*, or going forth, a practice not unlike the missionary work required of Mormons, whereby every member is encouraged to get out into the community for a specified period of the year to persuade fellow Muslims to more strictly adhere to the tenets of the faith... Because the *khuruj* brings many South Asians to Southeast Asia, there have been numerous incidents of unfounded reports of possible 'al-Qaeda' suspects in the region that almost always turn out to be harmless Tablighis. The problem is that some jihadists on occasion have pretended to be Tablighis as a way of moving from one place to another without arousing suspicion, and in some cases individual Tablighis have been recruited by less benign groups.[44]

And Jones' view is mirrored by Indonesian intellectuals like Shafei Anwar of the International Centre for Islam and Pluralism (ICIP):

> The Tabligh may be conservative and somewhat narrow in their thinking, but we should not put them in the same category as the hard-line (*garis keras*) groups that call for violence and who campaign against other Muslim and non-Muslim communities. In Indonesia they (the

> Tabligh) have never done that, for I would suggest that the Tablighis are a particular Islamic sect or movement that aims towards manifesting self-control (among their members) and work towards the moral healing of individual life.[45]

In order to fully appreciate the predicament of both the Tablighis and the technocrats of Indonesia, John Sidel's *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad*[46] is instructive reading. Sidel insists that the phenomenon of religious politics and religious violence in Indonesia needs to be studied seriously by scholars and not framed as a hive of irrational, violent militancy as it has been cast by some self-confessed 'security experts'. Responding to the hitherto somewhat narrow logic of those scholars in the 'religious violence industry', Sidel frames religious militancy against a wider backdrop of routinised (and often state-sponsored) violence that has plagued Indonesia for decades.[47]

If religiously inspired violence has grabbed the headlines in Indonesia today, it is not without historical precedent and causes. Sidel notes that many of the clandestine religious militant movements (such as the Laskar Jihad) were themselves bred and nurtured in the political laboratory of post-1965 Indonesian politics, and that they are the late descendants of the very same right-wing Islamic movements and organisations that were mobilised by Suharto and the military against the communists and leftists in Indonesia from 1965 to the 1970s.[48] The discursive, sociological and political development of jihadism in Indonesia coincided with the collapse of Suharto's power and the end of the 'Asian miracle' myth that had sustained the regime for so long.[49] In the power vacuum that emerged, radical Islam (and other forms of militant religiosity including Christian militancy) was reactivated again in various forms to serve a range of purposes: as a distraction, as a front for political manoeuvring, as a justification for extended military presence in the public domain, and so on.

It is against this background of normalised violence in Indonesia – where political gangs, right-wing nationalist militias (like the Laskar Merah-Putih) and the criminal underground operate with relative freedom – that the Tablighi Jama'at has sometimes been framed as a potential contributor to Indonesia's woes. Yet even in the studies I quoted earlier, while the Tablighi Jama'at may have been accused of allowing itself to be hijacked for other means and ends, the movement itself has never been explicitly accused of having any violent ambitions. And as I have shown in chapter one, the Tablighis' arrival and spread across the Indonesian archipelago from 1952 to today has largely been a quiet affair. By and large,

the Tablighis were tolerated by the Suharto regime (due to their apolitical stance) and a succession of post-Suharto administrations as well.

It is interesting to note that the opinions of the security community in predominantly Muslim countries like Indonesia and Malaysia are somewhat different to those of their counterparts in countries like the Philippines or Thailand, where no doubt the Malaysian and Indonesian security agencies have tried to be more sensitive to the prevailing sensibilities of the predominantly Muslim societies of Malaysia and Indonesia. If the Indonesian security services have used soft gloves in their dealings with the Tablighis, the same can be said of the Malaysian security services as well.

The Malaysian government has, over the past five decades, taken decisive steps against Islamist groups that were deemed to be a threat to national security. From as far back as the 1970s, the Malaysian security forces have launched numerous security operations against Islamist underground movements like the Krypto group that was active on the east coast of the Malaysian Peninsula. Perhaps the most spectacular display of state power against an extra-state Islamic group came in 1994, when the Malaysian government decided to act against the Darul Arqam movement and its somewhat eccentric founder-leader, Ustaz Ashaari Muhammad.[50] The Malaysian government justified its actions against the movement on the grounds that Darul Arqam was linked to a clandestine militant grouping called Asykar Badr, a force of more than 300 militia troops based somewhere in southern Thailand. (Although in the end, the state prosecutors could not prove any direct link between the two.) Arqam members were also accused of being involved in militant activities abroad, and in 1994 the Egyptian government arrested 19 Arqam members – all female students – for their association with Islamist militant cells in the country.[51]

In June 2000, the Malaysian government again used its security apparatus to deal with an arms heist at the army camp in Gerik, Perak, which was said to have been the work of an underground militant movement called Al-Maunah that was preparing for a revolution to topple the state. Also in June 2000, a second Islamist militant group was identified, called the Jihad Gang. The group was alleged to be responsible for a number of bank robberies, kidnappings and murders in the country.[52] In August 2001, the government had detained ten Islamists – many of whom were members of the Malaysian Islamic party PAS – on the grounds that they belonged to an underground militant group called the Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (Malaysian Mujahideen Movement, KMM). The group's leader was said to be Ustaz Nik Adli Nik Aziz, the 34-year-old son of the Murshid'ul Am

of PAS, Tuan Guru Nik Aziz. Though Nik Adli was then a teacher at a religious school in Kelantan, the authorities alleged that he had studied in a Pakistani *madrasah* and had spent time training with the Mujahideen in Afghanistan. Several other men arrested had also travelled to Pakistan for religious education and military training with the Mujahideen operating along the Pakistan-Afghan border.[53]

Notwithstanding the deteriorating relations between the Malaysian state and the Islamist opposition in the country, the Tablighi Jama'at has remained largely unaffected by these developments. In my interviews with members of the Malaysian security services – from the Royal Malaysian Police, Army, Intelligence and the National Security Council (NSC) – a consensus was to be found: the Tablighi Jama'at is largely seen as tolerable, as long as it does not explicitly endorse any form of illegal militant or terrorist activity.

Malaysian security officials I spoke to agreed that the Tablighi (in Malaysia at least) has not been linked to or identified with any militant organisations or terrorist groups, and as such has thus far not come under the radar of the country's security apparatus. For Dato Isa Munir of the Royal Malaysian Police force, the 'Tablighis are not a security threat per se, but somehow the members of this movement, if not properly monitored, may be used by other religious-based movements to instil their militant ideologies. Such a movement may prove to be a threat to the community at large, and will affect social cohesion or even pose a threat to the ruling government. However, as long as we have a system of checks and balances, we would be able to keep them under control.' For Brigadier General Mohamad Noor Osman of the Ministry of Defence, the problem does not arise 'unless the Tablighi Jama'at has been officially classified as a terrorist organisation, in which case it will be seen as a threat to national security'. While for the Malaysian National Security Council's Hamzah Ishak, a similar approach was evident when he noted that 'so far the Tablighi Jama'at is not seen (by the Malaysian government) as a threat, unless it is identified or linked to any known terrorist organisation'.[54]

In countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia as well as Brunei, the authorities are aware of the fact that the Tablighi Jama'at exists in a context where they are one of several Muslim groups and that the nature of the Muslim-majority populations of these countries means that it would be harder for the authorities to clamp down upon them at whim. Taking into account majority-Muslim sensibilities means having to find other ways and means of controlling the Tablighi Jama'at when necessary. As we have seen in chapter one, some states such as Malaysia and Indonesia

have taken the more pragmatic approach of accommodating the movement when its activities complement the goals of the state as well, such as the moral policing of society or dealing with the problem of drug abuse among young Muslims in the inner cities.

In this respect at least, Malaysia and Indonesia's approach to the Tablighi question has been tempered by pragmatism above all else. Cognisant of the fact that it would be difficult (and not to mention politically costly) to blacklist *all* transnational Muslim movements *in toto*, these states have tried to create political opportunity structures where they can operate with relative freedom and be monitored by the state at the same time. The same conditions prevail in some Arab countries where the Tablighi Jama'at has been regarded as borderline. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, where the Tablighi Jama'at is seen as one of the more liminal Muslim movements, there is still some space for well-known Tablighi members in the public domain, such as the popular TV personality Sheikh Suleiman al-Jubeilan, who is said to have Tablighi leanings and is known for his extensive knowledge on religious matters. In other Arab states such as Qatar where the political environment is more relaxed, the Tablighis have managed to settle in mosques where they are able to gather and welcome delegations from abroad during their *khuruj*: the Masjid Sara being one of the better-known Tablighi *markaz* in the Emirate.[55]

Worlds within worlds: The Tablighi Jama'at in the age of the war on terror

And some people arrived from the borders,
and said that there are no longer any barbarians.
And now what shall become of us without any barbarians?
Those people were some kind of solution.
Constantine P. Cavafy, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1904)

What I have tried to do in this chapter is to give a more comprehensive view of the Tablighi Jama'at as it is seen not by itself but rather by others.

The *Other* as far as the Tablighis are concerned, however, has never been a singular other but rather a range of constitutive others that are located along the fuzzy frontier of the Tablighis' discursive universe, and who in turn also frame and define the Tablighi. We have argued that understanding the Tablighi for what it *is* and what it *means* must necessarily take us outside the world of the Tablighis, and for a more nuanced view of

the movement it is just as important to look at it from an exterior vantage point. The aim of this exercise, however, was not to discover some 'hidden truth' to the Tablighis that is lost to the members themselves but rather to juxtapose the two perspectives – *inside and outside* – in order to obtain a better understanding of where the boundary line between the Tablighi and the non-Tablighi really lies.

I have, however, tried to show that the exact location of that boundary line is forever shifting. The Tablighi, seen from the perspective of political Islamists, secular politicians, technocrats and those in the security services, happens to be a hazy object whose shape and contours change as well. At any given time, however, a snapshot of the Tablighi will lend the impression of stillness and fixity, and would allow us to say that *this* is what the Tablighi is, means and seems *at this point in time*. And at this point in time, the Tablighi exists as a minority movement in the broader Muslim world that in turn exists in a world configured (though not entirely) by the logic of the War on Terror. Generations of Tablighis in the past may have had to deal with other concerns, but for the present generation of Tablighis, this is the cross that they have to bear.

In the final analysis, however, I would note that the discourse of the ASEAN security community and the narrative of the War on Terror is – like the discourse of the Tablighis – a language-game as well, complete with its own set of rules and norms, nodal points and master signifiers, as well as the discursive strategies that construct the chains of equivalences that lend cohesion to it. If *terror* or *terrorism* mark the furthermost frontier within the economy of that discourse, it has also been linked to a chain of equivalent signifiers – foremost of which happens to be Islam. That the Tablighi stands at the frontier of the discourse of the security community is therefore hardly a surprise to anyone, including the Tablighis themselves, who are cognisant of how they have been framed in the discourse of others.

Furthermore, in the same way that the Tablighis' discourse requires the existence of a materialistic, sensate and corrupt world as its constitutive other, the discourse of the security community also requires movements like the Tablighi as their constitutive other. The discourse of the postcolonial nation-state is more or less the same everywhere, positing the State as the primary actor on the stage of politics and drawing to it a host of positive signifiers that make up the chain of equivalences upon which the logic of governmentality rests. The State is seen as primary, governance and social order are emphasised as prerequisites, law and order valorised, and the panoptic vision of the State and its security apparatus deemed vi-

tal and necessary. Conversely, those who stand outside this columbarium of ideas are cast as the liminal and potentially dangerous. Ghosts spook us because they can walk through walls, and itinerant missionaries like the Tablighis spook politicians and securocrats on account of their ability to render political borders porous. Such transnational movements are summarily put together in the same ranks as smugglers, pirates, gypsies, illegal immigrants, infectious diseases, cross-border environmental disasters and contagions that undermine the sovereignty of the state and threaten the idealised political order.

The two language-games – that of the Tablighis and that of the State – do not connect or communicate with each other, yet require the other in order to complete their own sense of self-identity. Mutually dependent yet mutually exclusive, they speak *past* each other but never really *to* each other. It should hardly come as a surprise then that the securocrats and technocrats of ASEAN have never really been able to make sense of the Tablighis. And nor have the Tablighis ever appreciated the state and its technocratic gardeners and guardians. If the Tablighis regard the state as irrelevant, the state in turn regards the Tablighis as potentially dangerous for seeing it so.

And even when the Tablighis claim that they have been misunderstood by the politicians and security personnel who have framed them in terms that are negative, it cannot be denied that this negative view of the Tablighi remains a view of them nonetheless. In a world that has grown somewhat more confused and overheated since the advent of the War on Terror, perceptions abound, and they are not always complimentary. But the Tablighi, like all subjectivities, cannot deny the fact that they matter to some, including those who do not share their missionary ambitions to turn the world into a Kampung Madinah.

VII Finally, a Summing Up

The Tablighi Jama'at as the Complex Thing That It Is

> *The names of such things as affects us, that is, which please, and displease us, because all men are not like affected with the same thing, not the same man at all times, are in common discourse of men, of inconstant signification …*
> *For though the nature of what we conceive, be the same; yet the diversity of our reception of it, in respect of different constitutions of the body, of prejudices of opinion, gives everything a tincture of our different passions. And therefore in reasoning, a man must take heed of words …*[1]
> Thomas Hobbes

I end this book by revisiting the beginning. During my last visit to the humble Tablighi *markaz* in the town of Jogjakarta, Central Java, I encountered a small delegation of Tablighis who had arrived from their *khuruj* further afield. Among the new arrivals was a young man who clearly seemed out of place, and did not look the part: he was clad in tight jeans, wore a heavy metal T-shirt, had no skullcap on his head and did not sport a beard or a moustache. Instead, the expression that he wore on his face seemed to say: 'What on earth is this, and what have I gotten myself into?'

The encounter was a sentimental one for me, for it reminded me of my own confusion and uncertainty many, many years ago, when I found myself under the care of Brother Bismillah at the Tablighi *markaz* of Dewsbury. Then, like now, the question had to be asked: What on earth is the Tablighi?

The Tablighi Jama'at is a mass movement of itinerant missionaries who walk the earth, literally, in their quest to become better Muslims. And in the course of their earthly labours, they encounter real obstacles such as states and governments that are wary of people who walk around too much and too freely. As we have argued in the previous chapter, the Tablighis inhabit the same world as we do, and they live in the here and now of the global war on terror. Their image has been shaped by contemporary

concerns since the very beginning, and as such their identity is one that is also necessarily diachronic and historically determined. Try as they might to exit the world, they cannot help but have to deal with the world, for it is there that their commitment is tested.

We have suggested in this book that in order to understand the Tablighi Jama'at and to be able to speak of it as a *thing* to be spoken *about*, one has to first enter the discursive world of the Tablighis themselves, which is one that is put together and kept alive by the Tablighi *form of life* shared among the members. The Tablighi Jama'at is a movement that seeks to occasion a spiritual transformation within, which ultimately (so they hope) will trigger a transformation without as well – in the behaviour of the individual, on a societal level, and ultimately on the grandest register of all, the *Ummah*. Though its outward signifiers are there for all to see – the ubiquitous Tablighi dress, their manners and the performative staging of their piety – it remains unlike political Islamist movements, for this is a movement that does not rally to any banner or flag, notwithstanding Ustaz Zulham's claim that he will 'raise the flag of polygamy' wherever he goes.

In this respect the Tablighi is certainly less like a formal association such as a political party or a football club and more like a state of mind or state of being that is sustained through a common use and understanding of words among like-minded fellow Tablighis. And this is reflected in the language and norms of the Tablighis themselves, who recognise that the path of faith is a slippery one, and that dress and manners alone are not enough to keep one in the fold. One slip of the tongue, one wrongful act, and that yearning for piety can be compromised, though also regained.

The Tablighis are therefore perpetually in the process of *coming into being*, forever trying to re-enact the foundational moment of the first community of Muslims for whom the Prophet was a living, real presence. And this mimesis, as I have shown, is a calculated and deliberate act that requires agency and will on the part of the Tablighis themselves.

Such a characterisation of the Tablighis may be problematic for those who wish to discover some hidden essence or core to the thing they have labelled. But to take such a positivist approach to the Tablighi would be to miss the point that this is a mass movement whose identity and cohesiveness over time and space rests precisely on its ability to resist such simple reductionism or totalisation. If the Tablighi stands out as one of the biggest missionary movements on the planet that has not suffered any serious schisms among its members until today, it is partly because it has not made the mistake of sedimenting itself into something so solid as to become brittle in the long run.

Others may bemoan the Tablighi Jama'at's relatively easy and open terms of membership which, when coupled with the extensive communications network that it has created over the past few decades, makes it one of the most effective communicative architectures in the world. Again, the root of this anxiety seems to lie in the tacit recognition that there are worlds apart from our own, and that somewhere out there are thousands of itinerant Muslims roving about along trajectories that have not come under the panoptic gaze of the modern state. As I have shown earlier, while it cannot be denied that the Tablighi has indeed been used as a vehicle by some less spiritual and more radical agents, it would be wrong to dismiss the movement as a whole, for there is nothing in the textual sources or discourse of the Tablighis to suggest that they are bent on the path of confrontation. And if communicative architectures in general are to be suspected of harbouring malcontents, then one might as well suggest banning all package tours and mass holiday excursions, for they too offer any would-be terrorist a perfect cover to slip in and out of countries in disguise.

These observations combined, however, should not lead us to the equally erroneous conclusion that the Tablighi Jama'at is so complex a thing that it cannot be named or spoken about. Rather, it ought to compel us to reconsider some of our own settled assumptions about how mass movements like it are to be labelled and studied. For whenever we try to impose upon the Tablighi a simplified meaning or definition, the Tablighis themselves will throw up a host of counterfactuals that will compel us to revise our opinions. Is it true that the Tablighi is totally outside politics and rejects anything and everything that is political? If so, then how can we reconcile that with the fact that there have been Tablighis who were themselves party members or prominent politicians? Is it true that the Tablighi rejects all forms of wealth? If so, then how is it that so many wealthy Tablighis have donated their wealth to the movement and keep it going? Is it true that the Tablighi rejects fiction, poetry and the arts? If so, then how is it that in the popular literature of the Tablighis we discover traces of fictional narrative? The list goes on and on, leading us to accept that the object being discussed is truly complex and at times confounding.

And as the Tablighi continues to confound us – as it slips in and out of our epistemic grasp – it might be worth remembering that in the post-9/11 age that we live in where so much of what passes as scholarship on Islam and Muslims has been of a reductivist nature, bereft of nuance and complexity, there still remains movements like the Tablighi Jama'at that resist epistemic closure and simple, static classification. That, in itself,

reminds us that in an age of capital-driven globalisation, there remain other forms of globalisation at work that may intend to take humanity to a different destination altogether. And though it cannot be said that the Utopian goal of the Tablighi Jama'at is any less structured or regulated than the capitalist paradise of late industrial capitalism may be, it does serve to remind us that other worlds are imaginable at least.

The recognition of there being other worlds, and that alternative viewpoints and life experiences exist and are real, is perhaps the stuff that academic research is all about. The aim of this book was to give an account of just what that alternative life-world might be for the members of the Tablighi Jama'at, who pine for a (reconstructed) return to the pristine moment of Islam's foundation. Their project, however, has always been an ongoing one, with its ultimate goal projected into some misty, idealised future to come. And the Tablighi Jama'at, being the missionary movement that it is, will remain on the move until they reach that appointed destination, however long deferred. Changes to the Tablighi will certainly take place, and today we are beginning to witness developments within the movement that were deemed impossible in the recent past. For example, in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, the phenomenon of female Tablighis accompanying their husbands as they go on their *mastura khuruj* is something that will most certainly develop further in the future.[2] Yet even with these changes, the Tablighis will persist in being what they are: a literalist fundamentalist lay missionary movement, constantly moving and changing as they seek to build their idealised *Madinah* in the societies they seek to convert. They remain with us, even if they are a world apart.

Notes

Introduction

1 Muhammad Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, Max Reinhardt, London, 1954, p. 374.

I At Home Across the Sea

1 Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*, Vintage Books, New York, 2002, pp. 4-5.

2 Muhammad Khalid Masud (ed.), *Travellers in Faith: Studies of the Tablighi Jama'at as a Transnational Islamic Movement for Faith Renewal*, Brill, Leiden, 2000; Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband 1860-1900*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1982; and *Traditionalist Islamic Activism: Deoband, Tablighis and Talibs*, ISIM Papers IV, International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM), Leiden, 2002; Yoginder Sikand, The Fitna of Irtidad: Muslim Missionary Responses to the Shuddhi of the Arya Samaj in Early Twentieth Century India, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1997, and Yoginder Sikand, *Arya Shuddhi and Muslim Tabligh: Muslim Reactions to Arya Samaj Proselytisation 1923-1930*, 2004; and Dietrich Reetz, *Islam in the Public Sphere: Religious Groups in India, 1900-1947*, Oxford University Press, Delhi-Oxford, 2006; Frommigkeit in Der Moderne: die Laienprediger der Tablighi Jama'at, in: Dietrich Reetz (ed.), *Islam in Europa: Religioses Leben Heute. Ein Portrait ausgewählter islamischer Gruppen und Institutionen*, Waxmann, Munich-Berlin, 2010. pp. 19-52.

3 The Arya Samaj movement was launched by Dayananda Saraswati in 1875 with the aim of re-converting 'lost' Hindus back to Hinduism and to halt the missionary efforts of Muslims and Christians in India. It was the absence of a missionary culture among the Hindus that led to the creation of the Arya Samaj. In their tactics, organisational set-up and *modus operandi*, the Arya Samaj mirrored the more established Christian and Muslim missionary

movements that were active in India then. [See: David Smith, *Hinduism and Modernity*, Blackwell Religion in the Modern World Series, Blackwell, London, 2003; Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics 1925 to the 1990s,* Hurst, London, 1996; Yoginder Sikand, *The Origins and Development of the Tablighi Jama'at 1920-1990: A Cross Country Comparative Study*, unpublished Ph.D thesis, Department of History, University of London, 1998; Yoginder Sikand, The Fitna of Irtidad: Muslim Missionary Responses to the Shuddhi of the Arya Samaj in Early Twentieth Century India*, Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1997, and Yoginder Sikand, *Arya Shuddhi and Muslim Tabligh: Muslim Reactions to Arya Samaj Proselytisation 1923-1930*, 2004; R. K. Ghai, *The Shuddhi Movement in India: A Study of its Socio-Political Dimensions,* Commonwealth Publishers, New Delhi, 1990; J. F. Seunarine, *Reconversion to Hinduism Through Shuddhi,* Christian Literature Society, Madras, 1977.]

4 Barbara D. Metcalf, *Traditionalist Islamic Activism: Deoband, Tablighis and Talibs*, ISIM Papers IV, International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM), Leiden, 2002. p. 8.

5 Ibid, p. 9.

6 S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgita*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1948, Harper Collins India, Delhi, 1993. pp. 140-141.

7 For more on the construction of racialised stereotypes during the colonial era in Southeast Asia and the epistemic arrest of racial-ethnic signifiers, see: Syed Hussein Alatas*, The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism*, London: Frank Cass, 1977.

8 The Arab presence in Singapore has always been dominated by those who came from Yemen and who were generally known as the Hadrami Arabs (of *Hadramaut*). In 1822, the town plan of Singapore as it was laid out by Stamford Raffles demarcated a 50-acre zone for the Arab merchants in the vicinity of the Kampung Glam palace. By the 1940s, Hadrami Arabs were among the biggest landowners in Singapore. Enhancing their economic status further was the fact that the Hadrami Arabs of Singapore were part of a Southeast Asian network of Arab merchants. In keeping with their reputation for piety and patronage, prominent Hadrami Arab families like the Aljuneids and Alsagoffs built a number of mosques across Singapore, such as the Masjid Ba'alwie, the Masjid Alsagoff al-Islamiah and the Masjid Al-Juneid al-Islamiah. In 1946 they established the Arab Association of Singapore (the Al-Wehdah al-Arabiah bi Singhafura). [For more on the Arabs in Southeast Asia, see: William Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967; Kamaludeen Nasir, Alexius Pereira and Bryan Turner,

Muslims in Singapore: Piety, Politics and Policies, New York: Routledge, 2010; Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *Governing Islam and Regulating Muslims in Singapore's Secular Authoritarian State*, Asia Research Centre Working Paper no. 156, ARC, Sydney, 2009.]

9 Natalie Mobini-Kesheh, *The Hadrami Awakening: Community and Identity in the Netherlands East Indies,* 1900-1942; Ithaca, New York, Cornell Southeast Asia Programme Publications, 1999; Deliar Noer, *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia, 1900-1942*, Singapore: Oxford University Press in Asia, 1973.

10 Jews had settled all over Southeast Asia for centuries, and according to sixteenth-century Persian accounts there were large numbers of Jewish merchants in the Siamese kingdom of Ayudhaya, where they played an important role as merchants, diplomats and servants to the court of the king of Ayudhaya. Many of the Levantine Jews who came to Southeast Asia and who settled in Singapore from the eighteenth century onwards saw themselves as immigrants who had come to settle permanently in Asia in order to escape the persecution they faced in Baghdad under the rule of Dauod Pasha. As such they were referred to as Baghdadi Jews. They were so successful that in 1858 Ya'akov Saphir had visited Singapore to plead for their financial assistance to set up the state of Israel. Theodor Herzl's creation and leadership of the Zionist movement led to the creation of the Hibbat Zion and Hovevi Zion movements, and by 1903 Zionist movements were formed by immigrant Jews in Burma and China. In 1922 the Singaporean Zionist movement was formed and it was led by its first President, Sir Manasseh Meyer. By the time Singapore was given its independence, the Jewish community was well integrated into its society. One of its most prominent leaders was David Saul Marshall (1908-1995), who was born in Singapore (Tan 2008). [Joan Bieder and Aileen Lau, *The Jews of Singapore*, Singapore: Suntree Media, 2007; Eze Nathan, *The History of the Jews in Singapore*, Singapore: Herlibu, 1986; Kevin Y. L. Tan, *Marshall of Singapore*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies ISEAS, 2008.]

11 The Dawoodi Bohras, who have historically been an introverted and mutually self-supporting community, found it easy to settle in Indonesia especially during the period of Dutch colonial rule thanks to the relative freedom of religion they enjoyed under the framework of the East Indies' plural economy. The Bohras settled as merchants in many of the northern coastal port-cities of Java, and the island of Bali remains today the centre of Indonesia's Bohra community, with their base being the *Masjid Fatimi* located in Denpasar. [Interview with Imam Tahir Hussein, Head of the Bohra community of Surabaya, 18 September 2008.]

12 Malaysian Ahmadi records note that the first Ahmadi who arrived in Malaya was Sher Mohamed, an Indian Muslim who had enlisted in the British security services and who had arrived to serve as a police officer in the colonial police force in Malaya. His son Mobarak Ahmad later took up the same profession as his father, and served in the Special Branch of the Malayan security services. For his part in the anti-Communist campaign (dubbed as the Emergency, which lasted between 1948-1960), Mobarak Ahmad was awarded the Medal of the British Empire and later served as the personal aide-de-camp to four successive Malaysian kings (*Agong*).

13 Despite the difficulties they faced by 1949, the first Jama'at of the Qadianis in British Malaya was set up in Jeram, Selangor, and its President was Syed Abdul Rahman. Ismail Karsah served as its secretary and Talib Sulong as its treasurer. Soon after, the Qadianis built their first mosque in the area and in 1954 they were given their own burial ground. Also in the same year the Qadianis established their first community in Sabah, which was then under the leadership of the Indian Qadiani leader Dr. Badr 'Uddin. Dr Badr 'Uddin was a doctor of North Indian descent and he moved to Sabah to settle in the town of Jesselton (later Kota Kinabalu). In 1961 he set up the first Qadiani mosque and mission house in his own home, which he donated to the Qadiani community before he returned to Pakistan for good. In 1955 he set up the first Qadiani bilingual magazine, called *'Peace',* which appeared on a quarterly basis. In 1960 another Qaduiani community was set up in Sabah, in Sandakan, by Mohamad Dantalmura Yusop, who became its president there. Shortly after Malaya gained independence in 1957, the small Qadiani settlement in Kampung Baru, Kuala Lumpur found themselves surrounded by Malay-Muslim settlers who demanded that they be evicted on the grounds that they were not Muslims. In 1959 the newly independent Malayan government under the first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman tried to settle the dispute by awarding the Qadianis eight new lots of land in a hitherto unused and undeveloped area around Kampung Nakhoda. It was in 1963 that the Qadianis were re-located there and their first mosque set up. The Qadianis in Sabah, East Malaysia were comparatively luckier, and in 1967 their community was registered as an organisation under the name of the 'Tahrik-i-Jadid Ahmadiyya Muslim Association of Sabah'.

14 S. Ali Yasir, *Pengantar Pembaharuan Dalam Islam (Vol. I-III),* Jogjakarta: Yayasan PIRI, Gerakan Ahmadiyah Lahore Indonesia (GAI), 1978; P. K. Soedewo, *Asas-Asas dan Perkerjaan Gerakan Ahmadiyah Indonesia (Aliran Lahore),* Jogjakarta: Gerakan Ahmadiyah Lahore Indonesia (GAI), 1937.

15 The Muslim Broederschap was led by Djoyosugito and Muhammad Husni, who were deeply influenced by the reformist ideas of Ghulam Mirza Ahmad

which they had learned from Mirza Wali Ahmad. The movement had its own journal called *Correspondentie Blad*, which contained ideas that were taken almost entirely from the corpus of Ghulam Mirza Ahmad's work.

16 Moch Nur Ichwan, Differing Responses to an Ahmadi Translation and Exegesis: The Holy Qur'an in Egypt and Indonesia, *Archipel* 62, Paris, 2001.

17 T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1926, p. 29.

18 In 1952, when the Tablighis first arrived in Southeast Asia, both Burma and Indonesia had gained their independence. Malaya (as it was called then, until 1963) was still a British colony.

19 Razak, 2008, pp. 3-5, 9, 11. The Tablighi elders I interviewed could not confirm whether the Maulana Miaji Isa referred to here was Maulana Mianji Isa, the author of *Tablighi Kam*.

20 For more on the early history of Indian-Indonesian relations prior to the coming of Islam and Christianity to Southeast Asia, see George Coedes, *The Indianised States of Southeast Asia*, (Ed. Walter F. Vella, Translated by Susan Brown Cowing), University of Hawaii press, East-West Centre, Honolulu, 1968; Sylvain Levi, Les Marchands de Mer et leur role dans le Bouddhisme Primitif, in *Bulletin de l'Association Francaise des Amis de l"Orient*, Paris, October 1929; K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, The Beginnings of Intercourse Between India and China, *Indian Historical Quarterly*, Delhi, XIV, 1938; and Wang Gungwu, *The Nanhai Trade: A Study of Early Chinese Trade in Southeast Asia*, JMBRAS, XXXI, 2, Kuala Lumpur, 1958.

21 For more on this topic, see S.Q. Fatimi, *Islam Comes to Malaysia*. Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, (MSRI), Singapore, 1963; S. Hussein Alatas, On the Need for a Historical Study of Malaysian Islamisation, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 4 No. 3, Singapore, March 1963; S. Naguib Al-Attas, *Preliminary Statement on a General Theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago,* Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 1963 and Russell Jones, *Ten Conversion Myths from Indonesia*, in Nehemia Levtzion (ed.), *Conversion to Islam*, Holmes and Meier, London, 1979.

22 Razak, 2008; p. 9, 11.

23 As this was in 1955, the Sukarno-Hatta airport had obviously not yet been built.

24 Interview with Ustaz H. Attaullah, Surakarta, 12 September 2008.

25 The Tablighis had arrived at the time of the Darul Islam revolt, which was actually a series of local uprisings across the Indonesian archipelago led by local Muslim leaders who wished to see Islam play a more important role in postcolonial Indonesian politics. For more on the Darul Islam movement, see: Cees van Dijk, *Rebellion under the Banner of Islam: The Darul Islam*

in Indonesia, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981; Elisabeth F. Drexler, *Aceh, Indonesia: Securing the Insecure State,* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008; Barbara S. Harvey, *Tradition, Islam and Rebellion: South Sulawesi, 1950-1965*, PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1974.]

26 This account of the initial arrival of the Tablighi Jama'at was related to me by Ustaz Muhammad Jamil, *emir* of the Tablighi at Masjid Tanjong Anom, Surakarta; Ustaz Attaullah of Surakarta; and the son of Haji Zaristan Khan, Haji Yaakob Khan, who still lives in Jalan Industri, Jakarta. None of them could remember the name of the leader of the first Tablighi delegation to Jakarta, though Ustaz Attaullah insisted that the leader of the Jakarta delegation of 1955 was *not* Maulana Haji Miaji Isa, who led the first Tablighi delegation from India to Medan, Sumatra in 1952.

27 Interview with Ustaz H. Attaullah, Surakarta, 12 September 2008.

28 Today the Masjid Jami' Kampung Jeruk is well known as the main Tablighi centre in Jakarta. Kampung Jeruk is centrally located, at an intersection that breaks off from the important Jalan Hawam Wuruk, a major motorway that cuts vertically from the old part of Jakarta (Kota Betawi) in the north to the newer parts of Jakarta to the south. The *masjid* was built in 1786 by one of the Chinese Muslim *kapitans* or *komandors* whose name was Tamien Dosol Seeng, otherwise known simply as Pak Tschoa. Heuken (2000) notes that the walls of the mosque were once decorated with Dutch blue and white tiles imported all the way from Delft. The original structure was designed along the lines of the typical Indonesian mosque, with four main pillars and a square structure and a tiered sloping roof on top. [For more on the history of the Masjid Jami' Kampung Jeruk, see: A. Heuken S. J., *Historical Sites of Jakarta*, Cipta Loka Caraka, Jakarta, 2000. pp. 161-163.]

29 Interview with Ustaz H. Attaullah, Surakarta, 12 September 2008.

30 Interview with Ustaz H. Attaullah, Surakarta, 12 September 2008.

31 The towns of Bandung, Tasik Malaya and Cirebon were particularly important to the Tablighis due to the fact that all three were known to be important commercial centres with a visible concentration of Indian and Arab Peranakan Muslims there.

32 Razak notes that the first delegations to Bandung were sent in the 1950s and 1960s, but with little success. During this period, however, the Tablighi were successful in converting some local Indonesians to their movement, and one of them was a certain Ustaz A. Muzzakir, who was himself a retired police officer of the Indonesian Police Force (POLRI). In the 1980s, further attempts were made by the Tablighi to establish a base in Bandung, and this only came about in 1987 after a delegation led by Ustaz Muzzakir arrived for a fifteen-day *khuruj* in Bandung, bringing with them other Tablighis who had come

from Syria, India and Jakarta. The Tablighis managed to secure a place for themselves when they took over the Masjid Agung Kotamadya Bandung in the same year (1987). [Razak, 2008, pp. 68-69.]

33 Interview with Emir Ustaz Muhammad Jamil, Tanjung Anom mosque, Surakarta, 15 September 2008.

34 During the course of my interviews with Emir Ustaz Muhammad Jamil, Ustaz H. Attaullah and other leaders of the Tablighi in Surakarta between 12 to 16 September, none of them could pinpoint the exact dates of these events.

35 By 2000, the Masjid An-Nimah of Tanjung Anom was the most important centre and transit point for the Tablighi network in Central Java, though in terms of its size it has hardly expanded over the years since it was first built. Then in 2005 the Jogjakarta earthquake made its impact across much of Central Java, causing damage to the Masjid Tanjung Anom as well. The mosque no longer has a minaret but now has an added compound for a communal kitchen and rooms as well as toilets. Today the mosque is flanked by shops and service centres that cater to the primary needs of the Tablighi community: transport and logistics as well as information and education. Along the front façade of the mosque is a travel agency – Wisata Ceria Tours, which also runs the Nur Ramadan Haji Plus service – while on its southern flank is a small bookshop, the Khutub Khana 'Nimah, which sells mainly books related to the teachings and beliefs of the Tablighi Jama'at.

36 Interview with Emir Ustaz Muhammad Jamil, Tanjung Anom mosque, Surakarta, 15 September 2008; and Ustaz H. Attaullah, Surakarta, 12 September 2008.

37 Interview with Emir Ustaz Muhammad Jamil, Tanjung Anom mosque, Surakarta, 14 September 2008; Ustaz Abdul Hadi and Ustaz Abdullah Mubarak, Surakarta, 15 September 2008.

38 The Tablighi Jama'at had been sending delegations to Purwokerto in the western half of Central Java since the late 1960s, but with little success. Most of the delegations were forced to vacate the mosques and *madrasahs* they stayed in by local residents who were already affiliated to local Islamist movements. It was only in 1995 that the Tablighi managed to gain a foothold in a mosque that was originally built by Soni Harsono, who was then Minister of Agriculture. Soon after taking over the Masjid Makam Banjar Mulya, the first group of Tablighis established a modest *pesantren* that was named Pesantren Ubay ibn Ka'ab (in Jalan Pahlawan Gang 6, RT 02, RW 04, Kelurahan Tanjung, Pecematan Purwokerto). Both the mosque and the *pesantren* were subsequently amalgamated to serve as the first *markaz* of the Tablighi in Purwokerto. [Interview with Imam Muhammad Khurdri and Ustaz Haji Hendra, Purwokerto, 30 August 2008.]

39 Interview with Imam Muhammad Khurdri and Ustaz Haji Hendra, Purwokerto, 30 August 2008.

40 Interview with Emir Ustaz Muhammad Jamil, Tanjung Anom mosque, Surakarta, 15 September 2008; and Ustaz H. Attaullah, Surakarta, 12 September 2008.

41 In the words of Ustaz Attaullah: 'In many of the East Javanese mosques, we (the Tablighi) were not given a warm welcome at all. When my father's delegation tried to sleep in the mosques, they were chased out. If they tried to cook, the locals would also cook and take up their space. If they tried to sleep, the locals would stay in the mosque and talk all night long to keep them awake. They really made us feel unwelcome, and treated us very badly then.' [Interview with Ustaz H. Attaullah, Surakarta, 12 September 2008.]

42 Ustaz Attaullah recounted this episode thus: 'When we sent out members to the police station to get our brothers out of the detention centre, the police were bemused. They said to us, "your friends don't want to leave the detention centre because their visas are about to expire anyway in two weeks, and they would rather remain in the detention centre to do their *dakwah* work among the prisoners". This made us realise how committed our brothers from India and Pakistan were, and instead of feeling sorry for them, we were even more proud of their faith and commitment.' [Interview with Ustaz H. Attaullah, Surakarta, 12 September 2008.]

43 The Masjid Serang is located in Jalan Panggung (Theatre Street) in downtown Surabaya, which covers the intersection between the Indian and Chinese quarters.

44 The Shia-dominated Masjid al-Fatimi is located at no. 16 Jalan Kalimasmadya, Surabaya.

45 The Ahmadi-controlled Masjid an-Nur is located on Jalan Kawatan in the Bubutan district of Surabaya.

46 Taher Hussein is the leader of the Bohra community in Surabaya and was born in Indonesia in 1951, in the city of Surabaya itself. His father, Husseini Abdul Ali Khambati, was of Gujarati origin and had migrated to Indonesia in the 1930s. [Interview with Taher Hussein, Toko Saleh Bhai, Surabaya, 21 September 2008.]

47 Interview with Taher Hussein, Toko Saleh Bhai, Surabaya, 21 September 2008.

48 In the words of Ustaz Abdul Wahad, the (then) *emir* of the Tablighi in Surabaya: 'At that time we were floating around like anchovies (*ikan bilis*), and the locals really didn't like us at all! Wherever we went we were told to leave within a couple of days. They really hounded us out of their neighbourhoods because they thought we were strange. Especially when they saw our Indian

brothers from abroad, who couldn't speak Javanese or *Bahasa Indonesia*, they thought we were criminals on the run!' [Interview with the *emir* of the Tablighi Jama'at of Surabaya, Ustaz Abdul Wahab at the Masjid Nur Hidayat, Pekan Barat, Surabaya, 22-23 September 2008.]

49 While the *markaz* at the Masjid Nur Hidayat is officially the main centre for Tablighi activities for all of East Java, in its form and appearance it compares poorly to the other centres in Jakarta and Surakarta. The mosque has been expanded by breaking down the walls of two residential homes and is still too small to house a major gathering of the Tablighis at any given time. The mosque can take in as many as five hundred Tablighis, though these large gatherings are often regarded with some degree of suspicion by the locals, who remain clueless about what takes place in the mosque. In the words of the current Emir Ustaz Abdul Wahab: 'That has been our fate here in Surabaya. God has favoured us by giving us this mosque, but we know that they (the locals and the authorities) can kick us out anytime. That is the irony: Surabaya was one of our first bases in East Java, but it is the slowest to develop.' [Interview with the Emir of the Tablighi Jama'at of Surabaya, Ustaz Abdul Wahab at the Masjid Nur Hidayat, Pekan Barat, Surabaya, 22 September 2008.]

50 Ustaz A. Fazaldin was among the first members of the Tablighi Jama'at in the small commercial town of Magetan. Of Pathan origin, he was born in 1949 in Indonesia but his family hailed from Rawalpindi, Pakistan. [Interview with Ustaz A. Fazaldin, Toko Murah Baru, Magetan, 17 September 2008.]

51 Interview with Ustaz A. Fazaldin, Toko Murah Baru, Magetan, 17 September 2008.

52 Interview with Ustaz Tantowi Jauhari, Secondary Emir at the Pesantren and Markaz al-Fatah, Temboro, 19-20 September 2008.

53 Ustaz Tantowi described Ustaz Abdusubor as follows: 'He was a big man with a prominent head and you could see that he was a great professor. But Kyai Uzairon was most impressed by his manners because the Professor was so gentle and kind, he was the nicest man you ever could meet. He spoke from the heart, and his piety was clear for all to see. Speaking as he did, we knew that this man had come to speak the truth. Kyai Uzairon was also an educated man who had studied in Mecca, and this meeting between the two was a meeting of two hearts. So it was blessed and that is why it was so easy for Kyai Uzairon to be won over by Ustaz Abdusubor.' [Interview with Ustaz Tantowi Jauhari, Secondary Emir at the Pesantren and Markaz al-Fatah, Temboro, 19-20 September 2008.]

54 During my stay there, I shared accommodation with a group of twelve Malaysian Tablighis who had just arrived ahead of the *Eid* holidays. They were all

students in their late teens and early twenties and had come from different states of the Malaysian Peninsula.

55 Interview with Kyai Lutfi Khaozin at the Pesantren Islam (LPI) Al-Hamidy Banyuanyar. Poto'an Daya Pelengaan, Pemekasan, Madura, 12 April 2009.

56 Madura has always been a cosmopolitan environment exposed to external cultural and religious influences. Among the Indian Muslim families of Sumenep, there were many instances of Indians that had married into Arab families, the latter of Hadrami (Yemeni) origin. Among the more well-known Indian-Arab families was that of Ali Abdullah Syamlan, who trace their origins back to India as well as Hadramaut. The founder of the family was Ali ibn Awad ibn Ahmad ibn Abdullah Muhammad Syamlan, who was a Hadrami Arab of the Bani Thamin clan claiming direct ancestry to the family of the Prophet Muhammad. Ali Abdullah Syamlan's wife was an Indian Muslim woman by the name of Fatimah binti Abdullah, whose family hailed from Madras (Chennai), Tamil Nadu, southern India. [Interview with Adi Hussein, Pemekasan, 17 April 2009.]

57 Madura had long been a stronghold of the traditionalist NU, and on this island that is reputed to have more than four thousand mosques, *musholla* and *pondok pesantrens*, the presence of the NU is significant in the way that almost all of the senior Kyai of Madura were either members of the NU or affiliated to the movement in one way or another. Following the Tablighi's successful entry into Madura in 1992-93, it managed to win over the support of prominent local Kyai who were themselves already affiliated to, or supportive of, the NU. In short, the Tablighi in Madura have insinuated themselves into the local cultural landscape by totally adapting themselves to the local cultural practices and norms of Madurese society.

58 Farish A. Noor, *Mapping the Religious and Secular Parties in South Sulawesi and Tanah Toraja, Sulawesi, Indonesia,* RSIS Working Paper no. 213, S Rajaratnam School of International Studies RSIS, Nanyang Technological University Singapore, November 2010.

59 Farish A. Noor, *The Arrival and Spread of the Tablighi Jama'at in West Papua (Irian Jaya), Indonesia Today*, Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) Working papers series No 191, Nanyang Technical University, Singapore, February 2010.

60 Sebastian and Iisgindarsah (2011) have noted that the Indonesian National Army (TNI) is present across the country and its organisational structure is a hierarchical one that operates from the national level all the way down to provincial, sub-provincial and even village-level commands. As part of its 'total peoples' defence and security doctrine', the TNI has developed a command structure that parallels the civilian bureaucracy and goes all the way

down to the village level. Within this pan-Indonesian command structure, the TNI is divided into ten Regional Military Commands (Komando Daerah Militer, KODAM). Each KODAM is then divided into several levels of command, from Resort Military Command (KOREM), headed by a colonel, to District Military Command (KODIM), headed by a lieutenant-colonel, all the way to the level of Sub-District Military Command, headed by a major. This chain of command trickles down to the village level where the TNI assigns non-commissioned officers (*babinsa*) the role of supervising security matters at the village level. This has allowed the Indonesian army to play an effective role in maintaining security across the country while working in tandem with the civilian bureaucracy. It also accounts for the visible presence of the armed forces in local and national politics during the Suharto era (when the TNI was then called the Indonesian Armed Forces, ABRI). [Leonard Sebastian and Iisgindarsah, *Assessing the Twelve-Year Military Reform in Indonesia: Major Strategic Gaps and the Next Stage for Reform*, RSIS Working Papers No. 227, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, RSIS, Nanyang Technological University, 6 April 2011.]

61 Sebastian and Iisgindarsah, 2011, p. 32.

62 Singapore's Mufti Ustaz Fatris Bakaram noted that by the 1990s, the Tablighis had become a visible presence in many parts of Singapore but was largely ignored by the state's security forces due to their passive and non-political nature. Having prominent members like Sidek Saniff meant that the movement was better represented and able to forward requests to the authorities. When the Tablighi requested to host its first major *Ijtima* gathering at the Tampenies mosque, its leaders negotiated with the local authorities and assured the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) that the mosque would not be damaged or dirtied by the Tablighis during and after their gathering. [Interview with the Mufti of Singapore, Mohamed Fatris Bakaram, *Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura* MUIS, 20 May 2010.]

63 See: Chandra Muzaffar, Islamic Resurgence: A Global View. In *Islam and Society in Southeast Asia*, Taufik Abdullah and Sharon Siddique (eds.), Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore. 1986; Chandra Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia*, Fajar Bakti Press, Petaling Jaya, 1987; and Judith Nagata, *The Reflowering of Malaysian Islam*, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, 1984.

64 Indonesian Muslim intellectuals and activists whom I spoke to during my fieldwork in Java between August-September 2003 were shocked when the country's Anti-Terror Agency and security forces rounded up and arrested a number of Tablighis on the island of Bali in the wake of the Bali bombings of October 2002. They insisted that the Tablighi Jama'at had always

maintained a low profile and claimed that the movement did not endorse any form of violent or revolutionary politics in Indonsia. [Interviews with Hidayat Nurwahid, President of the *Parti Keadilan Sejahtera* (PKS), Jakarta, 17 September 2003; Dr. Shafi' Anwar, International Centre for Islam and Pluralism, (ICIP), Jakarta; Dr. Shafiq Hasyim, ICIP, Jakarta; Dr. Ulil Abshar Abdallah, Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL), Jakarta; Hidayat Nurwahid, President, Parti Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS), Jakarta, 14, 16, 17, 21 September 2003.]

65 The spread of the Tablighi Jama'at in Indonesia coincided with the ascendancy of the Suharto regime, which was backed up by the Indonesian armed forces. From 1968 to 1998, President Suharto presided over the reconstruction of Indonesian society in the wake of the turbulent Sukarno era and the bloody anti-communist purges of 1965. Led by officers like General Benny Moerdani, General Ali Murtopo, General A. M. Hendropriyono and others, the Indonesian military elite sought to control and eventually eliminate what they regarded as an increasingly dangerous security threat to the country: the rise of political Islam. The Suharto era witnessed the de-politicisation of Indonesian society. It was during this period that the Tablighi Jama'at began to make its presence felt in the urban space of Indonesia. During the 1970s the Tablighi Jama'at began to engage with the members of Indonesia's urban under-classes, hoping to win the support and membership of the urban poor. Its primary constituency, as was the case in Malaysia, was the urban poor and underrepresented. Coming as it did at a time when Java's cities were the hotbeds of social unrest, the Tablighi's claim to control its members via rigorous personal discipline and routinised faith practices seemed to lend support to the Suharto regime's efforts to depoliticise society and keep the resurgent forces of political Islam at bay.

66 For more information on the close historical links between Kelantan and Patani, see Ibrahim Syukri, *Sejarah Kerajaan Melayu Patani*, University Kebangsaan Malaysia University Press, Bangi, 2002; Haji Abdul Halim Bashah, *Raja Champa dan Dinasti Jembal dalam Patani Besar*, Pustaka Reka, Kubang Krian, 1994; and Abdul Razak Mahmud, *Ikhtisar Sejarah Kelantan*, Pustaka Aman Press, Kota Bharu, 2002.

67 For more on the history of PAS, see Farish A. Noor, *Islam Embedded: The Historical Development of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party PAS, 1951-2003*, Malaysian Sociological Research Institute MSRI, Kuala Lumpur, 2004.

68 Interview with Ustaz Dr. Murshid Ali Khan, Dusun Raja, Kelantan, 21 April 2004.

69 Interview with Ustaz Dr. Murshid Ali Khan and his brothers, Jamal Ali and Kasseem Ali, at the Markaz Tablighi Dusun Raja, Kelantan, 21 April 2004.

70 The *khuruj* to southern Thailand was not an easy task to perform owing to the fact that the southern provinces of Thailand were in a state of alert then, due to the rise of Muslim militancy and the demands of several Malay-Muslim separatist movements, which was met by force on the part of the Thai army. For a full account of the historical development of the *markaz* and the Tablighi network in Golok, see Farish A. Noor, 'Pathans to the East! The Historical Development of the Tablighi Jama'at Movement in Kelantan, Trengganu and Patani and Its Transnational Links with the South Asia and the Global Islamist Revivalist Movement', *Journal of Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* vol. 27, no. 1 (2007), pp. 7-25.

71 Alexander Horstmann, 'The Inculturation of a Transnational Islamic Missionary Movement: Tablighi Jamaat al-Dawa and Muslim Society in Southern Thailand.' *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* vol. 22, no. 1 (April 2007), pp. 107-130.

72 Che Man has written about the formation and development of the Malay-Muslim autonomy and resistance movements of the south such as the Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani (BNPP), Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) and Pertubuhan Perpaduan Pembebasan Patani (PULO). Crucially, he has noted that from the 1970s to the mid-1980s, many of these Malay-Muslim autonomy movements had undergone a change from being nationalist organisations to Islamist ones that were inspired by the Islamic revolution of Iran that took place in 1979. Thus the arrival of the Tablighi in southern Thailand came at a time when the insurgency was in full swing across the south; as a result, travel for the Tablighis was difficult, as security checks were common then. The Thai army's 'Operation Ramkamhaeng' and the 'Special Anti-Terrorist Campaign' that lasted nearly seven years (from 1968 to 1975) had resulted in 385 violent armed clashes between Thai security forces and Patani militant groups. A total of 1,208 detentions and arrests were made, while 329 Patani fighters were killed. Two hundred and fifty militia camps were destroyed and 1,451 weapons were captured. But despite the scale of the counter-insurgency programmes and operations, the Patani region remained tense. [W.K. Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand*. Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1990.]

73 Farish A. Noor, *The Tablighi Jama'at in the Southern Provinces of Thailand Today: Networks and Modalities*. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Working papers series no. 174, Nanyang Technical University, Singapore, March 2009.

74 Interview with Cikgu Kamaruddin Fatani and members of the Masjid Shura committee, 10 and 11 May 2008. During the course of my interviews there,

I was informed that the total cost of the mosque complex – which includes the main mosque, the residence complex adjacent to it, the grounds and walls around the complex – was approximately twenty million Malaysian Ringgit. (USD 5 million). The architect Abdul Mukif, who was a follower of the Tablighi during his lifetime, designed the mosque for free. Likewise, the building was done by construction workers who were members of the Tablighi and who worked for free.

75 Interview with Cikgu Rushdi, 10 May 2008.

76 Ronald E. Hassner, *War on Sacred Grounds*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009.

77 The enormous size of the Markaz Besar Jala allows it to accommodate a large congregation both in the mosque complex and the open ground in front of the *markaz* that doubles as a car park. I was informed that during the grand *Ijtima*, the entire complex is able to accommodate around eight to ten thousand members of the Tablighi in all. The main problem faced by the residents, however, are food, transportation and sanitation facilities, as the only functioning toilets were located in the residents' block next to the mosque. In 2008 there was running water in the main mosque where the residents may take their ablution before prayers, but no toilet facilities.

78 Reetz, 2011, p. 12.

79 Reetz notes that in 2005 the Tablighis in Malaysia had planned to build at least one Deobandi school in every *markaz* under Tablighi control, across the Malaysian Peninsula. By 2010, however, the plans had not been fully materialised for a host of reasons, even though the number of Malaysian Tablighi students enrolled in the Malaysian Deobandi schools that did exist had doubled in number. [Reetz 2011, p. 12.]

80 The *madrasah's* first head was Ustaz Abdul Hamid Chin, who graduated from the Deobandi *madrasah* in Hardoi, India. [Reetz 2011.]

81 Reetz, 2011, p. 15.

82 Reetz, 2011, p. 17.

83 See Dietrich Reetz, *Frommigkeit in Der Moderne: die Laienprediger der Tablighi Jama'at*, in: Dietrich Reetz (ed.), *Islam in Europa: Religioses Leben Heute. Ein Portrait ausgewahlter islamischer Gruppen und Institutionen*, Waxmann, Munich-Berlin, 2010. p. 48. It is interesting to note that though the Tablighi Jama'at had sent several delegations to Britain and other countries since the 1950s, they only began to have permanent bases of their own from the late 1960s onwards, a pattern that is mimicked by the Tablighi experience in Southeast Asia. In Europe, the first Tablighi bases were in France (1972, through the Association Foi et Pratique, Paris), Belgium (1975, based at the Masjid An-Nur in Brussels), Great Britain (in 1978 at the Maskaz of Dews-

bury mosque, Dewsbury), Spain (through the Asociacion Annur Mosque, Barcelona) and Germany (2000) (Reetz, 2010, p. 39).

84 In the final chapter of this book I will examine how the religious and secular authorities view the movement in the respective countries they have settled in.

85 The East London Abbey Hills *markaz* and mosque was initially intended to be large enough to accommodate seventy thousand Tablighis upon its completion, but as soon as the plans were made public, a general outcry from nearby residents led to controversy in the media. Right-wing commentators decried the fact that it would be the biggest mosque in all of Western Europe, while British nationalists used it in their campaign to curb immigration into the country. Ultimately the Tablighis relented and the *markaz* was downsized considerably, in the end able to accommodate around twelve thousand worshippers only. [*The Times*, 'Video threat to opponent of mega-mosque,' 14 January 2008.]

86 In early 2011 this was precisely the tactic advocated by Purnomo, the Defence Minister of Indonesia, when he encouraged troops from the Siliwangi Division of West Java to move into and occupy Ahmadi mosques in the province. This was part of Ops Sajadah (Operation Prayer Mat), which was ostensibly meant to 'protect' the Ahmadis whose mosques were being attacked by radical conservative Sunni Muslim groups like the Fron Pembela Islam.

II Learning to Be

1 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book three, Chapter X: *Of the Abuse of Words*, 30. 1690, William Collins, London, 1984, p. 311.

2 W.V.O. Quine, *Word and Object*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960 (Chapter Two, on *Radical Translation*).

3 Bobby Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Rise of Islamism*, London: Zed Books, 1997, pp. 54-55.

4 The foundational texts that are part of the *Tablighi Nisaab* are: the *Hayatus Sahabah*, *Fazail-e-Amaal*, *Fazail-e-Sadqaat* and the *Muntakhab-e-Ahadis*.

5 See: Maulana Muhammad Zakariya al-Khandalawi, *Himpunan Fadhilah Amal,* Ash-Shaff, Jogjakarta, 2003; Maulana Muhammad Zakariya al-Khandalawi, *Hadits Pilihan: Dalil-Dali Enam Sifat Para Sahabat*, Pustaka Ramadan, Bandung, 2004; Maulana Muhammad Zakariya al-Khandalawi, *Kehidupan Para Sahabat*, Pustaka Zaadul Maad, Bandung, 2004; and Maulana Muhammad Zakariya al-Khandalawi, *Fadhilah Sedekah*, Pustaka Ramadan, Bandung, 2004.

6 See: Ustaz Abdurrahman Ahmad, Ustaz Ali Mahfudzi and Ustaz Harun Ar-Rasyid, (editors and translators), *Himpunan Fadhilah Amal Maulana Muhammad Zakariya al-Khandalawi*, Ash-Shaff Publishers, Jogjakarta, 2003. There are at least two versions of this complete compilation of the *Fadhilah Amal,* and though the contents are exactly similar, the only difference happens to be the size of the books themselves: one comes in the larger format measuring 18 by 32 centimetres, while the smaller version measures 14 by 21 centimetres.

7 Abdurrahman, Mahfudzi and Ar-Rasyid's (eds.), *Fadhilah Amal* (2003), Book I, pp. 7-11.

8 Ibid, Book I, pp. 11-58.

9 Ibid, Book I, pp. 69-82.

10 Ibid, Book II, pp. 91-129.

11 Ibid, Book II, pp. 112-129.

12 Ibid, Book II, pp. 130-145.

13 Ibid, Book II, pp. 130, 131, 133-134, 135, 137-139. The second half of the chapter also refers to numerous sayings of the Prophet that warn Muslims not to neglect their communal prayers.

14 Ibid, Book III, pp. 181-241.

15 The acceptance of Sufi practices such as *dzikir* as part of orthodox Muslim religious rituals was never a given fact, for several orthodox Muslim scholars had taken the view that some Sufi practices were contaminated by un-Islamic ideas and beliefs, and as such were deemed unorthodox. Among the foremost Muslim *ulama* who eventually accepted *dzikir* and other rituals as part of acceptable Muslim ritual practice was al-Ghazali (Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali, 1058-1111) who only came to Sufi practices after his eventual disappointment with logical deduction. [See: Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1966; M. E. Marmura, 'Ghazalian Causes and Intermediaries', In *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115, 1995 pp. 89-100; Kojiro Nakamura 'An Approach to Ghazali's Conversion', In *Orient* 21: 1985, pp. 46-59; W. Montgomery Watt, *Muslim Intellectual: A Study of al-Ghazali*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1963.]

16 Ibid, Book III, pp. 232, 236, 238, 239.

17 Ibid, Book III, pp. 232, 233, 238.

18 Ibid, Book III, p. 236. sc. 40.

19 Ibid, Book III, p. 238, sc. 57, 58, 59, 60.

20 Ibid, Book III, p. 236, sc. 36-37.

21 By the term *Kalimat Thayyibah* what is meant are the various *ayats* and *Surahs* of the Quran that are explicitly or indirectly concerned with the concept of the Unity and Oneness of God, otherwise referred to as the *Kali-*

mat Tauhid or the *Kalimat Taqwa* (Book III, pp. 243-244). The *kalimah* in question are listed in no particular order and include the following: Surah Ibrahim: 24-26; Surah Faathir: 10; Surah Al-An'aam: 115; Surah Ibrahim: 27; Surah Ar-Ra'd:14; Surah Imran: 64; Surah Imran: 110; Surah Huud: 114; Surah An-Nahl: 90; Surah Al-Ahzab: 70-71; Surah As-Zumar: 17-18; Surah As-Zumar: 33-35; Surah Fushshilat: 30-32; Surah Fushshilat: 33; Surah Ar-Rahman: 60; Surah Al-Fath: 26; Surah Al-Al'aa: 14; Surah Al-Lail, 5-7; Surah Al-An'aam: 160; Surah Al-Mu'min: 1-3; and the ayat from Surah Al-Baqarah: 256. Ibid, Book III, pp. 242-253.

22 The *Kalimat Tasbihat* (or sometimes referred to as the *Tasbihat Fathimah*, as they were recounted first to Fatimah, wife of the Prophet, p. 306) are those *ayats* from *Surahs* that begin with or include the phrase *Subhanallah*, and which, through *dzikir*, are said to purify the heart of the believer, and which implore God's mercy and forgiveness. They include the following *ayats*: Surah Al-Baqarah: 30; 32; Surah Al-Imran: 41; 191; Surah An-Nisaa: 171; Surah Al-Maa'Idah: 116; Surah Al-An'aam: 100; Surah Al-Ar'aaf: 143; 206; Surah At-Taubah: 31; Surah Yunus: 10; 18; 68; Surah Yusuf: 108; Surah Ar-R'ad: 13; Surah Al-Hijr: 97-99; Surah An-Nahl: 1; 57; Surah Al-Israa: 1; 43-44; 93; 108; Surah Maryam: 11; 35; Surah Thaahaa: 130; Surah Al-Anbiyaa: 20; 22; 26; 79; 87; Surah Al-Mu'minuun: 91; Surah An-Nuur: 16; 36-37; 41; Surah Al-Furqaan: 18; 58; Surah An-Naml: 8; Surah Al-Qashash: 68; Surah Ar-Ruum: 17-18; 40; Surah As-Sajdah: 15; Surah Al-Ahzab: 41-42; Surah Saba: 41; Surah Yaa Sin: 36; 83; Surah Ash-Shaaffaat: 143-144; 159; 166; 180-182; Surah Shaad: 18-19; Surah As-Zumar: 4; 67; 75; Surah al-Mu'min: 7; 55; Surah Fushshilat: 38; Surah Asy-Syuura: 5; Surah Az-Zukhruf: 13-14; 82; Surah Al-Fath: 9; Surah Qaaf: 39-40; Surah Ath-Thur: 43; 48-49; Surah Al-Waaqi'ah: 74; 96; Surah Al-Hadiid: 1; Surah Al-Hayr: 1; 23; 24; Surah Ash-Shaaf: 1; Surah Al-Jumu'ah: 1; Surah At-Taghabuun: 1; Surah Al-Qalaam: 28-29; Surah Al-Haaqqah: 52; Surah Al-Insaan: 25-26; Surah Al-Alaa: 1; Surah Al-Nashr: 3; Surah Al-Fatehah: 1; Surah Al-An'aam: 1; 45; Surah Al-Ar'aaf: 43; 157; Surah At-Taubah: 112; Surah Yunus 10; Surah Ibrahim 39; Surah An-Nahl: 75; Surah Al-Isr'aa: 52; 111; Surah Al-Kahfi: 1; Surah Al-Mu'minuun: 28; Surah Al-Naml: 15; 59; 93; Surah Al-Qashash: 70; Surah Al-Ankabuut: 63; Surah Luqman: 12; 26; 29; Surah Saba: 1; Surah Faathir: 1; 15; 34-35; Surah Ash-Shaaffaat: 181-182; Surah Az-Zumar: 29; 74; Surah Al-Jaatsiyah: 36 and Surah Al-Buruuj: 8-9. Ibid, Book III, pp. 307-325.

23 These includes the *ayats* from the following *Surahs* of the *Quran*: Surah Fushshilat: 33; Surah Adz-Dzariyat: 55; Surah Thaha: 132; Surah Luqman: 17; Surah Ali Imran: 104; 110; and Surah An-Nisaa: 114. Ibid, Book IV, chapter 1, pp. 380-384.

24 Ibid, Book IV, chapter 2, pp. 385-398.
25 Ibid, Book IV, pp. 400-401.
26 Ibid, Book IV, pp. 398-399.
27 Ibid, Book IV, pp. 402-403, 404.
28 Ibid, Book IV, pp. 405-407.
29 Ibid, Book IV, pp. 409-413.
30 Ibid, pp. 410-412.
31 Ibid, Book V, pp. 417-418.
32 Ibid, Book V, pp. 419-421.
33 Ibid, Book V, p. 458.
34 Ibid, Book V, p. 455. On the Prophet's rejection of a 'mountain of fortune', the book recounts the *Hadith* recorded by Tirmidzi where the Prophet is said to have stated that God had offered to turn the mountains around Mecca into mountains of gold. But the Prophet declared that he preferred to eat one day and starve the next, for *'when I am starving then I shall be thinking of you oh God, and when I am full I shall be thankful to you.'*
35 Ibid, Book V, pp. 464-466.
36 Ibid, Book V, p. 469.
37 Ibid, Book V, p. 461.
38 Ibid, Book V, pp. 440-442.
39 Ibid, Book V, pp. 438-439.
40 Ibid, Book V, pp. 424-425. In the story of Bilal's visit to the grave of the Prophet, it is recounted that Bilal was greeted by the Prophet in his dream, whereupon the Prophet said *'how cruel you are Bilal, for in the midst of your work you have neglected to visit me'* (p. 425). Upon Bilal's arrival in Medina, he was asked by Hassan and Hussein, the Prophet's nephews, to sound the call to prayer (*azan*), which he did. Miraculously Bilal recovered his voice, and the book notes that Bilal's call to prayer was as sweet as it was when the Prophet was still alive. It is interesting that in this story the theme of travel and return is repeated on two registers: Bilal's physical journey of returning to the grave of the Prophet, and the return of his voice which signifies the return to the original pristine state of Islam, during its foundational moment – epitomised by the melodic voice of Bilal, which was the same voice he had when he first converted to Islam.
41 The Tablighis' veneration of the graves of their elders is not a practice that is unique to them, despite the fact that the Tablighis have, on occasion, been accused of deviating from the proper path of Islam (*bid'ah*) because of this ritual practice. Even in the case of radically politicised Muslim groups and militant movements, a similar phenomenon has been evidenced in the behaviour of their members. Following the execution of the members of the

Jama'ah Islamiyah Amrozi, Mukhlas and Imam Samudra who were allegedly responsible for the Bali bombings in 2002, it was noted that their graves were visited by many Muslims who came to offer their prayers, including those from the Jama'ah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT). The Malaysian authorities were likewise concerned by the fact that the grave of the alleged Malaysian terrorist Nordin M. Top – who was part of the splinter group from the Jama'ah Islamiyyah called the Tandzim al-Qoidah and who was finally killed by Indonesian security forces – was likewise turned into a pilgrimage site by many Muslims in Pontian, Malaysia. [*Malaysian Insider*, 'Hundreds gather for the burial of Nordin M. Top,' 3 October 2009.]

42 Ibid, Book V, p. 421.

43 Ibid, Book V, pp. 466, 467.

44 Ibid, Book V, p. 471, 489.

45 Ibid, Book V, p. 481, 493.

46 Ibid, Book V, p. 489.

47 Ibid, Book V, pp. 496-498.

48 Ibid, Book V, p. 535.

49 Ibid, Book V, p. 500.

50 Ibid, Book V, p. 501.

51 Ibid, Book V, pp. 501-502.

52 Ibid, Book V, pp. 503-504.

53 Ibid, Book V, pp. 505-506, 507.

54 There is, in fact, an entire chapter devoted to Muslim women at the time of the Prophet (Chapter X), and Maulana Zakaria recounts in some detail the lives of the wives of the Prophet and some other prominent Muslim women: Fatimah (pp. 543-545); Aisyah (pp. 545-546; 547); Umi Salamah and her *hijra* (pp. 547-549); Umi Ziyad (pp. 549-550); Ummu Haram (pp. 550-551); Ummu Sulaim (p. 551); Ummu Habibah (pp. 552-553); Zainab (pp. 553-555); Khansa and her four children (pp. 555-556); Syafiyah and the Jew (pp. 556-557); Asma and the virtuous women (pp. 557-559); Ummu Amarah at war (pp. 559-561); Ummu Hakim (p. 561); the martyrdom of Sumayyah Ummu Ammar (p. 562); the poverty of Asma binti Abu Bakar (pp. 562-564) and her pilgrimage with Abu Bakar (p. 564), and her charity to others (p. 565); the pilgrimage of Zainab (pp. 565-566); and the selfless devotion and faith of Rubayyi' Binti Mu'awidz (pp. 566-567).

55 Ibid, Book VI, pp. 637-646; 648-649.

56 By the term *nodal point*, Laclau and Mouffe are referring to those signs that are selectively appropriated and rendered crucial to a particular discourse by its enunciators. Laclau and Mouffe accept, however, that no particular signifier is essentially imbued with any special qualities that recommend

them to such uses, but that signifiers only become nodal points as a result of the discursive strategies that render them special and fixed in any discursive economy. [Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics,* London: Verso Press, 1985, p. 112.]

57 Razak, 2008, pp. 106-108.

58 Razak, 2008, p. 102. Razak notes for instance that almost all of the foundational texts that are used by the Tablighis in their teachings are those of the Salafi tradition, written by Salafi authors. These include traditional texts such as the *Riyadth al-Shalihin,* the *Ihya 'Ulum al-Din,* the *Siraj al-Wahhajj,* the *Fath al-Mu'in* and others. (Razak, 2008, p. 112.)

59 Razak, 2008, pp. 115-123.

60 Razak, 2008, p. 115.

61 In an interview with the Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, he stated his position on the question of pluralism in a manner that echoes the stand of the Tablighis: 'Pluralism has to be understood in two ways: pluralism is a natural phenomenon in life (*'dunia ini plural, sifat duniawi itu plural'*), but there is and will be no pluralism in the afterlife (*'di akhirat nanti tidak ada yang plural'*). Why? Because in the afterlife, heaven is reserved only for the Muslim believers and hell is for the non-believers. So our stand in this world is like this: if you (non-Muslims) want to remain in darkness, so be it (*'orang kafir kalau mahu hidup kafir sila tinggal kafir'*). We cannot force them to become Muslims, but we can make them submit to Muslim power and rule. That is as far as we can accommodate pluralism. If other people want to remain non-Muslims, then leave them be (*'jangan dipaksa'*). As long as they submit to Muslim rule, that is all right. But pluralism doesn't mean accepting their *kafir* beliefs as legitimate or correct. There is only one God, one religion, one law, one path, and that is Islam. All the rest are wrong and our duty is to show them (non-Muslims) that we are the ones who are right. Here we refer to the *Surah al-Mumtahanah* (60:4), where it is written that *'verily there is wisdom in the story of the Prophet Abraham, who said to the unbelievers, "We reject your beliefs and there will always be a gulf between us." "When will we meet" they asked. "When you return to your faith" the Prophet replied.'* [Interview with Ustaz Abu Bakar Baasyir, at Pondok Pesantren al-Mukmin, Ngruki, Surakarta, 20-22 May 2007.]

62 This emphasis on a total understanding and emulation of the lifestyle of the Prophet is systematically codified in the corpus of Tablighi teachings, where the manners and norms (*Sunnah*) of the Prophet have been differentiated into three categories: that of the level of *Surah* (the physical aspect of the Prophet, which includes the scrupulous detail and attention paid to the exact physical features of the Prophet, including the length of his beard, hair, etc.);

Sirah (the close observation and emulation of the lifestyle patterns and daily rituals of the Prophet, which includes the emulation of the Prophet's mode of dress, eating, diet, rest and performance of ritual, etc.) and *Sarirah* (the emulation of the Prophet's mode of thinking and verbal conduct).

63 S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgita*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1948. Radhakrishnan notes that 'Spinoza distinguishes between the historical Jesus and the ideal Christ. The divinity of Christ is a dogma that has grown in Christian conscience. Christological doctrine is the theological explanation of the historical fact' (p. 33, fn. 77).

64 Frithjof Schuon, *Sufism, Veil and Quintessence*, Bloomington, World Wisdom Books, 1981.

65 Schuon, 1981, p. 104, fn. 12. Schuon's largely positive appraisal of the Sufi tradition in Islam is a qualified one, where he argues that some of the excesses common among Muslim mystics are due to this over-personal approach in the mimesis of the ideal Prophetic type. He notes that 'the argument that the way of multiple observances and their mystical accentuation is the exclusive way of the Prophet is perfectly abusive, for every founder of a religion invariably provides an example of all kinds of attitudes and ways of behaving, without this having to constitute his message properly so-called; and the fact that these manifestations can contradict one another proves precisely that they constitute a choice, and that no single one of them totally or exclusively involves the authority of the messenger' (p. 106).

66 The Tablighi's insistence on the unique ontological status of the Prophet is and has been consistently demonstrated by their criticism of other Muslim communities or belief systems such as that of the Qadiyani Ahmadis, for instance, whom they regard as heretics and deviants due to the latter's claim that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was also the Prophet of his age. Like some Salafi groups, the Tablighi Jama'at regards the finality of the Prophet as an article of faith that cannot be questioned or challenged by any Muslim.

67 Razak, 2008. pp. 123-127.

68 Razak, 2008, p. 123. Razak notes that the manifold postures and positions assumed by the Tablighis are symbolic of the stages of faith and piety of the individual (kneeling, bowing, prostrating oneself, etc.) and are thus symbolically loaded gestures pregnant with meaning for the Tablighis. The proper conduct of prayer is therefore a necessity, which again leads the Tablighis to turn to the Prophetic ideal type for models and examples of right conduct.

69 The Tablighis' stand on this matter is determined by their interpretation of the Quranic verses *Surah al-Ma'un:* 4-6 and *Surah al-Munafiqun:* 9. See: Maulana Zakaria, *Kitab Fadhilah Shalat*, Book II of *Himpunan Fadhilah Amal*, pp. 130, 131, 133-134, 135, 137-139.

70 As Razak (2008) notes, the Tablighi often falls back on numerous Quranic and Prophetic traditions that state that to abandon the act of prayer (or to perform it with neglect) is tantamount to leaving the presence of the Prophet. Razak, 2008. p. 125.

71 Razak, 2008. p. 132.

72 Quoted in al-Sulami, *Kitab al-Futuwwah*, translated by al-Jerrahi (1983), p. 39.

73 This view of the Tablighi as a movement that has been 'contaminated' by Hindu ideas, values and practices was echoed by the Spiritual Leader (*Murshid'ul Am*) of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), Tuan Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat, during my interview with him in 2008. [See: Farish A. Noor, *There Can Be No Dialogue Between PAS and UMNO*: Interview with Tuan Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat, Spiritual Leader of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), RSIS Malaysia Undate, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, RSIS, Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore, January 2009, pp. 9-10.]

74 In an interview with the Indonesian cleric Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, he repeated the view that the Tablighi Jama'at had disempowered Muslims by advocating a retreat from the world of politics. [Interview with Ustaz Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, Pesantren al-Mukmin Ngruki, Surakarta, 27 May 2007.]

75 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics,* Verso Press, London, 1985, p. 112.

III Learning on the March

1 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso Press, 1983, p. 80.

2 One little-known press in North Malaysia is the Madrasatul Quran Batu Enam Kedai Mulong, Jalan Kuala Kerai, Tumpat in Kelantan, which has been publishing Tablighi pamphlets and books written by both local and foreign Tablighis for local consumption. In the course of my field research I also came across samples of locally produced Tablighi literature that were literally homemade, in some cases not even printed but rather photocopied and crudely stapled together. The common denominator of all of these is the fact that such material is cheap, easy to produce and easy to disseminate.

3 See, for instance: Maulana Muhammad Zakaria al-Kandhalawi, *Fadhilah Tabligh*, Jakarta: Pustaka Ramadan, 2006 (77 pages); and Mamat Djunaidi al Hafidz Abdul Haq, *Enam Sifat versi Dua Bahasa Indonesia-English,* Jakarta: Assajadah Press, 2008 (64 pages).

4 This drastically reduced version of the tract was found at the Markaz Besar Tabligh in Golok, Southern Thailand, and was written in the Malay language using *Jawi* script. I was informed that it was produced at the *markaz* itself.

5 Ustaz Abdurrahman Ahmad As-Sirbuny, *Untung Jadi Miskin,* Cirebon: Pustaka Nabawi, 2006, p. 3. In the original *Bahasa Indonesia*: *'Rasulullah SAW nyuruh kita memperbaiki diri jangan sampai kafir. Dan inilah seruan yang benar, yaitu: Jangan sampai kafir walaupun harus jadi fakir!'*

6 Ibid, p. 3. In the original: *'Kerana tahu kelemahan umat Islam itu adalah harta, maka Yahudi dan Nasrani jor-joran menggunakan hadits untuk mengelabui kaum Muslimin agar jangan mau jadi orang miskin. Mesti jadi orang kaya. Apapun caranya. Dengan berbagai cara dan promosi dalam media, orang Islam dipacu agar menghabiskan waktu dengan melulu mencari harta dan harta; harta dan harta, sehingga agama dicuekin. Si Yahudi dan Nasrani nyuruh kita memperbaiki diri jangan sampai fakir. Ditakuti-takuti kemiskinan. Persis seperti kerjaan Syaitan, sehingga seruan mereka ialah: Jangan jadi fakir, walaupun harus jadi kafir!'*

7 Ibid, p. 7.

8 Ibid, p. 9. In the original: *'Harta bisa jadi Tuhan yang disembah. Itu yang dilakukan oleh orang-orang gila, maka mereka disebut orang gila harta. Kalau sudah jadi orang yang gila harta, urat-sarafnya akan jadi error. Rusak berat. Ia tidak pandang lagi namanya saudara, teman, bapak, ibu; semua akan menjadi musuh-musuhnya kerana pundi hartanya terancam. Harta akan mengikat tangan kakinya, sehingga tidak dapat bergerak kecuali memberikan kerusakan dan kerusakan.'*

9 Ibid, pp. 18-23.

10 Ibid, pp. 23-25.

11 Ibid, p. 23.

12 Schuon writes: 'If there is a poor richness, then there is also, and not less paradoxically, a rich poverty; and it is this that predisposed the Arabs to Islam and, along with it, a mysticism of holy poverty: For the saint, in Islam, is the one who is poor, the *faqir*; and the spiritual virtue par excellence which coincides with sincerity (*sidq*) is poverty (*faqr*) ... Those who accuse Islam of sterility do not understand that for Islam it is one of the greatest claims to glory that it was able to impress upon a whole civilization a certain character of the desert; of holy poverty.' [Frithjof Schuon, *Sufism, Veil and Quintessence*, Bloomington, World Wisdom Books, 1981, p. 37.]

13 See Farish A. Noor, *Islam Embedded: The Historical Development of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party PAS: 1951-2003*, Malaysian Sociological Research Institute (MSRI), Kuala Lumpur, 2004, Volume II, pp. 473-484, 547-554.

14 Ibid, p. 25.

15 Ibid, p. 27.
16 Ibid, p. 28.
17 Ibid, pp. 29-32.
18 Ibid, p. 41.
19 Quoted in al-Sulami, *Kitab al-Futuwwah*, translated by al-Jerrahi (1983), p. 70.
20 Ibid, pp. 67-80.
21 Ustaz Husein al-Bama, *Dialog Fiktif Salafy vs Jamaah Tabligh,* 2008. p. 1. In the original: *'Orang Tabligh gak mahu berdebat dan gak mahu diundang di forum apapun untuk debat tentang kebenaran usaha Dakwah yang mereka buat, kerana menurut mereka debat cuma menghasilkan dua perkara, yakni sombong jika menang, dan sakit hati jika kalah.'*
22 Ustaz Husein al-Bama, *Dialog Fiktif Salafy vs Jamaah Tabligh,* (Place of publication unknown): Assalam Press, 2008.
23 Al-Bama, 2008, pp. 2-5.
24 Ibid, p. 1. In the original: *'Orang Salafy gak mahu kalah dan merasa benar sendiri merasa diatas al-Quran dan Sunnah kerana memang kajiannya yang dibahas al-Quran dan Sunnah dan mereka sudah termakan dengan issu internet, fitnah orang-orang bodoh ikut-ikutan dalam menyalahkan Tabligh, yang seolah sudah trademark dengan ahli Bid'ah sehingga jika duduk di suatu majlis dengan Tabligh mereka maunya omong dan tidak mahu mendengar penjelesan apapun.'*
25 Ibid, p. 8.
26 Ibid, pp. 12-14.
27 Ibid, p. 18.
28 Ibid, pp. 27-30.
29 Ibid, pp. 30, 49-50, 57.
30 Ibid, p. 54.
31 Ibid, pp. 63-64.
32 Ibid, p. 10. In the original: *'Alloh beri modal kita sama dengan orang Kafir kan sama yakni harta, diri dan waktu. Hanya orang Kafir gunakan ikut nafsunya sedangkan kita siapa yang lebih banyak mengembalikan hartanya dan diri untuk Alloh SWT maka dialah yang beruntung.'*
33 Ibid, pp. 15-16. In the original: *'Kalau tuan mau dalil, lihatlah Dakwah Rasulullo SAW, Nabi tak pernah hancurkan berhala yang ada di ka'abah saat masih lemah, tapi Nabi hancurkan berhala yang ada di hati Sahabat sehingga mereka sendiri yang akan menghancurkan berhala mereka!'*
34 Ibid, pp. 18-19.
35 Ibid, pp. 21-22.
36 Ibid, p. 30.

37 There then follows an exposition on the fundamental norms and praxis of the Tablighis' missionary work and an explanation of the different forms of *dakwah, Ta'lim, Ibadah* and *Khidmat* (between pages 35 and 45).

38 Ibid, pp. 57-59.

39 Ustaz Haji Musa al-Enjoy, *Raport Merah Jamaah Tabligh Menjadi Hitam,* edited by Abu Al-Enjoy. Kemayoran, Jakarta: Al-Enjoy publishers, 2009.

40 Al-Enjoy, 2009, pp. 1-7.

41 Ibid, pp. 5-6. In the original: *'Banyak Sepanduk, selebaran berkenaan dengan kutukan terhadap Israel kerana menyerang Palestin atau Masjidil Aqsa. Kutuk Israel!!!...dsb; bahkan orang Islam jika bicara Fir'aun ditambah dengan kata La'natulloh alaihi/laknat Alloh SWT keatasnya. Tak ada yang menyadari bahwa dengan meninggalkan Dakwah ummat Islam pun kini dalam keadaan dilaknat Alloh SWT.'*

42 Ibid, pp. 14-15. In the original: *'Ada juga yang senang Khidmad, bangun universiti Islam, bank Islam, rumah sakit Islam, bantu anak yatim, santuni jandajanda, bantu bencana alam dan sebagainya; tetapi bila disuruh berdakwah menganggap sudah cukup berjuang agama. Sebagaimana yang terjadi kepada seorang permain kriket di Pakistan yang bernama Imran, ia datang kepada Sheikh Sa'ad Khandalavi saat Ijtimad di Raiwind. Maulana telah ajak dia untuk tashkil keluar di jalan Alloh, maka Imran berkata: Sheikh, saya telah berjuang juga untuk membantu anak yatim, bangun masjid, santuni janda, bikin pesantren, dll; bukankah saya sudah membantu agama? Sheikh Saad katakan: Wahai Imran, Engkau baru membantu orang Islam dan belum membantu agama Islam. Imran kaget, baru dia dengar ada Ulama berkata demikian bahawa hal yang dia kerjakan kini bukan untuk agama Islam tapi hanya untuk orang Islam! Maulana bagitahu bahawa: membantu orang Islam beda dengan membantu agama Islam. Jika dengan Khidmad kita membantu orang Islam, tapi dengan dakwah kita membantu agama Islam.'*

43 Ibid, p. 8.

44 Ibid, pp. 26-32.

45 Ibid, p. 32.

46 Ibid, pp. 37-38.

47 Ibid, pp. 72-74.

48 Abu Muhammad Fahim, *Bahayanya Jama'ah Tabligh Bagi Dunia Iblis dan Sekutunya,* p. 67. In the original: *'Usaha Syetan untuk menjadikan orang Islam bodoh mendapat kegagalan yang besar. Kerana mereka keluar khuruj berjamaah.'*

49 Ustaz Abu Muhammad Fahim, *Bahayanya Jama'ah Tabligh Bagi Dunia Iblis dan Sekutunya*, Edited by Eddy Cikuning, distributed by Arief-Mukhtar-Yadie, (place of publication unknown), 2008.

50 Ustaz Abu Salami, *Dajjal vs Kerja Tabligh*, Kemayoran, Jakarta: Al-Enjoy publishers, 2008.
51 Ustaz Aboe Istiqomah, *Kerja Tabligh Kalahkan Iblis Syaitan dan Sekutu-Sekutunya*, Kemayoran, Jakarta: Al-Enjoy publishers, 2009.
52 Ibid, pp. 5-9.
53 Ibid, p. 10.
54 Ibid, p. 10.
55 Ibid, p. 11.
56 Ibid, p. 11.
57 Ibid, p. 11.
58 Ibid, p. 12.
59 Ibid, pp. 12-42.
60 Ibid, p. 37.
61 Ibid, pp. 42-44.
62 Ibid, pp. 53-56.
63 Ibid, pp. 62-66.
64 Ibid, pp. 64-65.
65 Yudha al-Hidayah, *Ada Apa Ke India? Negeri Yang Enjoy*. 2008, pg 23. In the original: *Gerakan Tabligh adalah gerakan yang menggerakkan penduduk langit untuk membantu penduduk bumi.*
66 Ustaz Yudha al-Hidayah, *Ada Apa Ke India? Negeri Yang Enjoy*. Edited by Ustaz Abu Kisty, Addai press (Place of publication unknown), 2008.
67 P. 10. In the original: *'Kok belajar agama ke India, bukankah pusat agama ada di Arab kerana Rasulullah SAW berasal dari sana? Ada juga orang yang berkata: Orang orang Tabligh hajinya di India? Orang Tabligh dihubung dengan aliran sesat dan agama yang ada di India yakni dengan Ahmadiyyah dan dengan Hindu, dsb.'*
68 Ibid, p. 13.
69 Ibid, p. 14.
70 P. 15. In the original: *'Jadi sejak dahulu tidak harus belajar agama di Arab. Mitos belajar agama di Arab (Makkah dan Madinah) sebenarnya tak betul, kerana untuk menjadi Qori yang terbaik, lebih bagus belajar di Mesir. Seorang Ulama di Yaman yakni Sheikh Sulaiman telah katakan: Jika pingin belajar mahdzab/fiqih datanglah ke Hadramaut atau di Tarim, sedangkan kalau mau belajar Hadis yang terbaik ini ialah di Saharanpur, India.'*
71 P. 49. In the original: *'India adalah awal kehidupan manusia ... Pahamlah kita bahawa Nabi Adam AS adalah manusia pertama di dunia sehingga beliau diturunkan di India maka India adalah negeri pertama kali ada kehidupan manusia.'*

72 Ibid, pp. 66-67.

73 Ibid, pp. 53-55.

74 Ibid, pp. 70, 73-74.

75 Pp. 16, 21. In the original: *'Sebelum orang India sebarkan kerja dakwah kaum Muslimin tak ada dakwah ijtima'iat ... India telah merubah cara perjuangan umat Islam sebagaimana cara Rasulullah SAW menegakkan agama yakni dengan cara dakwah ... India membangkitkan semangat dakwah ummat Islam yang telah mati, kerana ajakan ajakan para Muballigh yang hanya kepada ibadah sahaja.'*

76 P. 41. In the original: *'India negeri yang cocok dengan perjuangan haq, disana makanannya sangat sederhana dengan satu model saja. Jika makan briani, makan briani saja. Jika salen hanya salen dengan satu jenis sayur. Jika dhal, hanya dhal dengan roti. Berbeda dengan negara Arab yang sudah datang kemewahan padanya.'*

77 Frithjof Schuon, *Sufism, Veil and Quintessence*, London: World Wisdom Books, 1979 (1981), p. 35, fn. 12.

78 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, London: William Collins, 1984, p. 313.

79 Of course there are some exceptions to the rule, and one such exception is Abdurrahman Ahmad As-Sirbuny's *Untung Jadi Miskin* (Cirebon 2006), which happens to be double the size of the other booklets I have discussed here.

80 The copyright notice at the beginning of Ustaz Haji Musa al-Enjoy's *Raport Merah Jamaah Tabligh Menjadi Hitam* (2009) reads thus: 'It is wrong for a Muslim to take the things of another Muslim without his permission. It is forbidden to copy or reproduce any part of this book without the permission of the author.' (In the original: *'Tidak patut seorang Muslim mengambil hak saudaranya tampa seizinnya. Dilarang memperbanyakkan isi buku ini tampa izin penulis dari penerbit.'*)

81 At the very most, some of the pamphlets may have covers that feature photographs of buildings or landscapes, but with no living things in the image. The cover of Ustaz Yudha al-Hidayah's *Ada Apa Ke India* for instance features a photo of the Markaz Nizamuddin in New Delhi, India – and a rather drab photo it is, too.

82 Ustaz Haydar Ali Tajuddin bin Fateh Muhammad (trans.), *Sepuluh Perkara Yang Biasa Dibangkitkan oleh Mubaligh Kristian untuk Menentang Islam*, Malay translation of Zakir Naik's *The Ten Most Common Questions Asked by Christian Missionaries Against Islam.* Madrasatul Quran Batu Enam Kedai Mulong, Jalan Kuala Kerai, Tumpat. English version published by Islamic Research Foundation, Mumbai, India (date unknown).

83 It has to be noted that the signifier 'Salafi' is also found in the writings and speeches of progressive and 'liberal' Muslims, and in many instances is equally vague as well.

84 See, for instance, Jonathan Dancy, *Contemporary Epistemology*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985, p. 101.

85 From the premise of this argument it also follows that the criticisms that have been leveled against the Tablighis by other Muslim groups and schools of thought often fail to hit their mark. It is quite futile for a Salafi to dispute whether the Tablighis' practice of *jihad* is truly Islamic, for instance, for what the concept signifies in the context of the Tablighi universe is often quite different from what it signifies in the context of the Salafis' universe.

86 In explaining how language-games come together and have the rule-governed cohesion they exhibit, Wittgenstein argues that: 'Pr. 19. To imagine a language means imagining a form of life.' Later he reiterates the point thus: 'Pr. 23. New types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence and others become obsolete and forgotten. Here the term "language-game" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that *speaking* a language is part of an activity, a form of life'. A 'form of life' in this sense refers to a particular mode of activity that people may be engaged in. Different modes of social activity will give rise to different sets of rules that govern the meaning and sense of the language we use, according to context. [Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (1945) Basil Blackwell, London, 1958.]

IV The Stories We Tell

1 Muhammad Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954.

2 Serge Moscovici, *Psychologie des minorités actives,* University Presses of France, 1979.

3 Interview with Ustaz Talib Zulham, Markaz Agung Tabligh Temboro Karas Magetan, 29 August 2008, and during the *khuruj* from Temboro to Surabaya via Malang, 29-30 August 2008.

4 In the words of Uztaz Zulham: 'My family first came from India, but I was born in Indonesia and this is the only country I know. I was born in Indonesia in Bangil and I have yet to travel abroad, so this is the country I call my home and I regard myself as an Indonesian. My father was an active member of Muhamadiyah and later he went into politics and became the Assemblyman for Pasuruan, so we were well off, I have to say. It was not difficult for my family then, because in Bangil there were already a number of Indian Muslims who were well integrated. We were mostly business people and we worked

in small shops as suppliers and distributors. My father was a businessman too, and he was selling construction material like steel rods, cement, etc. to the construction companies. Because we were Muslim, and because we spoke *Bahasa Indonesia* from birth, nobody ever questioned our identity or loyalty to Indonesia. Why should they? I am not an Indian and I have never even been to India all my life.' [Interview with Ustaz Talib Zulham, 29 August 2008.]

5 Interview with Ustaz Talib Zulham, 29 August 2008.

6 Quote: 'When I worked in the DVD shop, there was one thing I didn't really like. Because when I was a farmer I had to work with people I knew, *our people* – whom I trusted because they were Muslims. But at the DVD shop there were infidels (*kafirs*) all around me, all the time. I don't know why, but this made me so uneasy. I didn't like the way they talked, the food they ate – it was all dirty and I felt I became dirty as a result as well. All day long I had to do business with these *kafirs*, and that was something I wasn't really used to and I really didn't like it. I wanted to get out of it, but how? Where should I go?'

7 Interview with Ustaz Talib Zulham, 29 August 2008.

8 Interview with Ustaz Talib Zulham, 29 August 2008.

9 Quote: 'Joining the Tablighi was the best thing for me. I am now going into the traditional healing business and I run my own clinic here in Temboro. I use only the traditional herbs and medicines used by the Prophet, and I import them direct from Mecca and Medina. How happy I am that I have given up the ways of my past, that was so useless, unhappy and sinful. Now I can live as a true Muslim here, with my big family and my clinic, following the path of the Prophet and without wasting my life running after material things. I'm still learning though and I admit that sometimes I still smoke – which is a bad habit of my past life – and I do like to see fast cars. But in time even that will go away I know. Because Allah has chosen to save my soul and given me a second chance again. Only the most stupid fool would throw away a golden chance like that.'

10 Interview with Ustaz Talib Zulham, 29 August 2008.

11 Interview with Ustaz Talib Zulham, 29 August 2008.

12 Interview with Ustaz Haji Ataullah Muhammad Ramzan, at his home and shop Gedung Bola Dunia, Jalan Ronggowarsito, Surakarta, 20 and 22 August 2008.

13 Interview with Ustaz Haji Ataullah, Surakarta, 20 and 22 August 2008.

14 Interview with Ustaz Haji Ataullah, Surakarta, 20 and 22 August 2008.

15 Interview with Ustaz Haji Ataullah, Surakarta, 20 and 22 August 2008.

16 Interview with Ustaz Haji Ataullah, Surakarta, 20 and 22 August 2008.

17 Ustaz Ataullah notes that he was moved by the words of Emir Fakir Gul as never before: 'I was struck by the way he spoke, because he was not strict or

harsh. In fact he was very smooth and clever in his *dakwah* (*dia sanggat halus dan cerdik dalam dakwahnya*) and he knew how to speak to people like me. He never judged me, but was always encouraging. That's when I decided to join them, and in 1982 I went along with them on my first *khuruj.* We travelled across Indonesia but until today I have never done the *tashkil* overseas.'

18 Interview with Ustaz Haji Ataullah, Surakarta, 20 and 22 August 2008.

19 *Dulu Sakti Sheila on Seven, sekaran Salman al-Jogjawy: Dari Chord Gitar ke Chord Allah*. In DalamDakwah, Jogjakarta, 15 January 2009.

20 Quote: 'Today I am also active in politics, because that is what Allah wants us to do. So in 1998 I decided to work with the Partai Amanah Negara of Amien Rais. After Suharto's fall it became easier for us Muslims to organise politically, and PAN was looking for men who could speak and act in public. Again, my acting career helped. So I volunteered and they took me in, and not only that, I was put in the Majlis Pertimbangan Partai (MPP, Consultation Council) of PAN. So since 1998, I try my best to speak to people about Amien Rais and our party, and to spread the news about both PAN and the Tablighi at the same time.'

21 Interview with Ustaz Haji Ataullah, Surakarta, 20 and 22 August 2008.

22 Jalan Ronggowarsito, Surakarta, 25 August 2008.

23 Interview with Ustaz Dr. Murshid Ali Khan and his brothers, Jamal Ali and Kasseem Ali, at the Markaz Tabligh Dusun Raja, Kelantan, 21 April 2004.

24 Interview with Ustaz Dr. Murshid Ali Khan, Dusun Raja, Kelantan, 21 April 2004.

25 Interview with Ustaz Dr. Murshid Ali Khan, Dusun Raja, Kelantan, 21 April 2004.

26 Interview with Ustaz Dr. Murshid Ali Khan, Dusun Raja, Kelantan, 21 April 2004.

27 Interview with Ustaz Dr. Murshid Ali Khan, Dusun Raja, Kelantan, 21 April 2004.

28 The story of the miraculous healing of the founder-leader of the Tablighi in Trengganu was related to me by Dr. Murshid in the company of his brothers Kasseem and Jamal: 'The Tablighi Jama'at arrived in Trengganu between 1967 and 1968 thanks to one man: Ustaz Haji Musa. He was the first to bring the Tablighi to Trengganu. Haji Musa was a rich man. He was a timber merchant and he made his money from the timber industry. Everyone knew that he was rich by the way he lived. But despite his riches, he was not a happy man and in fact he suffered from health problems. Due to his poor health, he found it difficult to eat and he was always constipated. He went to the doctors and they could not do anything for him. One day he met the members of the Tablighi who were visiting and he began to follow them. Then his life began to change:

he didn't worry so much, his health improved and he could eat normally. Soon after, he joined the Tablighi and it was he who brought the ideas of the Tablighi to Trengganu. This was around 1967-68. Haji Musa built the first *markaz* of the Tablighi Jama'at in Trengganu at Kubang Bujuk. This was done soon after he joined the movement and it was certainly before we introduced the Tablighi to Kelantan (before 1974).' [Interview with Ustaz Dr. Murshid Ali Khan, Dusun Raja, Kelantan, 21 April 2004.]

29 Ustaz Yudha al-Hidayah, *Ada Apa Ke India? Negeri Yang Enjoy*. Edited by Ustaz Abu Kisty, Addai press (place of publication unknown), 2008.

30 Interview with Ustaz Imam Abdullah Suparsono, *Markaz Besar Tabligh*, *Masjid Serambi Mekah*, Jalan Sekoci Kelapa 2, Entrop, West Papua, 23 December 2009.

31 Interview with Ustaz Imam Abdullah Suparsono, Entrop, West Papua, 23 December 2009.

32 Interview with Ustaz Imam Abdullah Suparsono, Entrop, West Papua, 23 December 2009.

33 Interview with Ustaz Imam Abdullah Suparsono, Entrop, West Papua, 23 December 2009.

34 Interview with Ustaz Imam Abdullah Suparsono, Entrop, West Papua, 23 December 2009.

35 Ustaz Suparsono notes that the second Tablighi delegation to Papua (in 1989) was made up of Indonesian as well as Indian Tablighis, with Maulana Imam Nuruddin as one of their leaders. Maulana Imam Nuruddin was of Indian origin, and the Ustaz complimented him on account of his bravery and willingness to sacrifice his time and energy for the Tablighi cause. Another Tablighi who receives honourable mention is Haji Baduh Taufik, who came from Hujung Padang, and who, in 1998, left behind the *waqaf* land that would later be the plot where the Tablighi *markaz* of Entrop would be built. [Interview with Ustaz Imam Abdullah Suparsono, Entrop, West Papua, 23 December 2009.]

36 Interview with Ustaz Imam Abdullah Suparsono, Entrop, West Papua, 23 December 2009.

37 Interview with Ustaz Imam Abdullah Suparsono, Entrop, West Papua, 23 December 2009.

38 Interview with Cikgu Sidek Saniff, MES Environment Services Corporate Office, Lower Delta Road, Singapore, 10 October 2011.

39 Interview with Cikgu Sidek Saniff, 10 October 2011.

40 Interview with Cikgu Sidek Saniff, 10 October 2011.

41 Interview with Cikgu Sidek Saniff, 10 October 2011.

42 Interview with Cikgu Sidek Saniff, 10 October 2011.

43 Interview with Cikgu Sidek Saniff, 10 October 2011.

44 Interview with Cikgu Sidek Saniff, 10 October 2011.

45 Interview with Cikgu Sidek Saniff, 10 October 2011.

46 The theme of poverty and sacrifice, which as we have seen in the previous chapter ranks highly in Tablighi discourse, appears in the narrative of Kyai Lutfi Khaozin, head of the Tablighis in Pemekasan, Madura as well. As he puts it: 'I thought that the Tablighis were exemplary Muslims and we were amazed by the stories they told us, about their commitment and how far they would go and how much they would sacrifice for Islam and their love for God. They were truly good, honest people. Later I met some of the Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis who came to Madura and Surabaya. When I met the Bangladeshis, I was amazed by how poor they were. They came with no money! No money at all! You know what the Bangladeshis had with them? Before they came they cooked rice. Then they dried the rice outside their homes and left them to dry until they were crisp. Then they pounded the rice, added salt and sugar, and packed the rice powder in plastic bags and tins. That's all they carried with them for the rest of the journey. So all they needed wherever they went was some hot water, and they would eat rice porridge when they were hungry. They didn't need food or other luxuries. We were so impressed, how tough and dedicated they were. That convinced me that these were the real Muslims, the true Muslims, beloved by Allah. How could anyone do that? Allah must be helping them, I thought. Truly they were blessed by God and truly they were in love with God.' [Interview with Kyai Lutfi Khaozin at the Pesantren Islam (LPI) Al-Hamidy Banyuanyar. Poto'an Daya Pelengaan, Pemekasan, Madura, 12 April 2009.]

47 Muhammad Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, London: Max Reinhardt, 1954, p. 375.

48 In his *Problems of the Self*, Bernard Williams, via recourse to Strawlson, raises the hypothetical scenario of someone who is radically transformed after consenting to an experiment where he is put into a *'self-altering machine'*. Williams invites us to consider the question of how we can relate to someone whose personality has changed so radically after such a process: 'A' may have a set of anxieties and fears – x, y, z – and choose to undergo such a process of change in order to be rid of those fears permanently. After emerging from the machine, A is asked about x, y and z, and replies with incredulity that he doesn't know what the interrogator is talking about. Williams suggests that in such an instance all we have is bodily continuity, but not a continuity of the Self. In which case he concludes that 'the philosophical arguments designed to show that bodily continuity was at least a necessary condition for personal identity seem to be mistaken'. [Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge, 1973, pp. 45-64, 51.]

V Learning to Be Tablighi

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, London: Basil Blackwell, 1958, Pr. 241, p. 88.

2 For Wittgenstein, the rules of language use are normative and customary (in his sense of 'customary'): i.e., they require the consistent repetition of a set of conditions whereby a rule is to be followed and applied. As he puts it in *Philosophical Investigations*: 'Pr. 199. It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which someone obeyed a rule. It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which a report was made, an order given or understood, and so on. To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are customs (uses, institutions). To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique.' But rule-following in Wittgenstein's sense here is not a case of wilful agency. It is, on his account, something we simply do as a result of being trained to do so: 'Pr. 201 ... what this shows is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation, but which is exhibited in what we call "obeying a rule" and "going against it" in actual cases.' Rule-following in this sense is something impersonal (intentionality has nothing to do with it, he asserts, Pr. 205), regulated and performed in public, akin to following orders.

3 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Pr. 293, pp. 99-100.

4 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, London: Penguin, 1975 (1977 edition), p. 29.

5 Darius Rejali, *Torture and Modernity: Self, Society and State in Modern Iran*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994.

6 During the course of my fieldwork at the Maskaz Besar Masjid al-Nur in Jala, Southern Thailand between 9-13 May 2008, I recorded a short introductory lesson given by one of the Tablighi teachers named Cikgu Rushdi where he explained to a group of new Tablighis why the *serban* (turban) was obligatory for Muslims. In his words: 'You are not forced to wear it (a turban). But when you wear a *serban* you are actually following the *Sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad, and the companions of the Prophet. Why do you think the Prophet Muhammad wore a *serban*? To look good and handsome? Why did the other companions of the Prophet wear it too? Was it fashion? No. Think about it and you will see the wisdom of the Prophet. When you wear it for the first time, you immediately feel different. You feel like a real man, with honour and respect. That is the difference when you wear a *serban*. When we see people in the streets or in the shops or on the bus who don't wear the *serban*, he can be anyone. He can be a shopkeeper, a student, a teacher, a farmer. But

when you wear the *serban*, people recognise you and they will know you. Do you know why? Because when you wear the *serban*, your body changes too.' [Farish A. Noor, 'The Tablighi Jama'at in the Southern Provinces of Thailand Today: Networks and Modalities.' Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Working papers series no. 174, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, March 2009.]

7 In the same discussion that was led by Cikgu Rushdi, he argued that Western clothes were not the most appropriate form of dress for Muslims: 'Western clothes are not *haram*, but why do you need them? We Muslims are not like anyone else. We can live simply because that follows the *Sunnah* of the Prophet as well. When I started, I was young like you and my friends were asking me, 'hey, why don't you dress like us anymore, why do you wear the *serban* (turban) now, why don't you wear jeans anymore?' I said to them my life was now simpler and I was happy. At first my friends laughed at me, they thought I was crazy! But then they came to accept it and soon one by one they began to see things my way too and they began to change. [Farish A. Noor, 'The Tablighi Jama'at in the Southern Provinces of Thailand Today: Networks and Modalities.' Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Working papers series no. 174, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, March 2009.]

8 Ustaz Haji Musa al-Enjoy, *Raport Merah Jamaah Tabligh Menjadi Hitam*; edited by Abu Al-Enjoy. Kemayoran, Jakarta: Al-Enjoy publishers, 2009, pp. 37-38.

9 Frithjof Schuon, *Sufism, Veil and Quintessence*, Bloomington, World Wisdom Books, 1981, p. 102, fn. 9.

10 Often I observed that the Tablighis would put on their right shoe first and take off their left shoe first; so that the right foot is the first to be covered and the last to be uncovered; this is in keeping with the *Sunnah* of the Prophet as recorded by Abu Hurairah.

11 My fieldwork at the Tablighi *markaz* Masjid Jami' Kampung Jeruk took place between 11 and 13 September 2003. The administrator (*pengurus*) of the *markaz* then was Imam Pak Cecep Firdaus, who happened to be the head (*emir*) of the Tablighis and who was in charge of all the events and gatherings that took place in the establishment. Second to him was the imam, Ustaz Arif Salleh.

12 Ustaz Abu Muhammad Fahim, *Bahayanya Jama'ah Tabligh Bagi Dunia Iblis dan Sekutunya*, 2008, p. 10.

13 Among the questions I attempted to raise while living with and interviewing the Tablighis I met, the one on homosexuality proved to be one of the most thorny and complicated, as it was seen as a taboo subject. However, it

cannot be denied that in the exclusively homosocial space of the Tablighis, such acts were more than likely to happen, and it remained unclear what the Tablighis would do if such acts were discovered in their midst. Like many conservative Muslims, the Tablighis regard homosexuality and masturbation as sinful acts. I attended several discussions where the latter was brought up as an example of devilish practices that Muslims are meant to avoid. It ought to be noted, however, that the Tablighi's stand on homosexuality was hardly different from the prevailing mores of the society around them. In 2011, the Malaysian government went so far as to suggest that 'effeminate men' and 'sissies' should be sent to army boot camps so that their behaviour could be 'corrected' through a manly military regime of discipline and punishment. [*The Malaysian Insider*, '"Sissy boot camp" violates law, says minister', 20 April 2011.]

14 This incident occurred in August 2003 and was, in fact, the only time when I was denied the right to photograph or interview any Tablighis. No further interviews or photo sessions were granted to me or my assistant Nik Rashidee Nik Hussein thereafter.

15 Operation performed by Ustaz Talib Zulham of the Markaz Tabligh Temboro Magetan, in the town of Malang, 30 August 2008, in the company of Mokhamad Toha Rudin of UMS Solo and Ustaz Zulham's younger brother.

16 The other benefit of the operation was that it provided me with ample opportunities to impress colleagues and students alike upon my return to Singapore soon after.

17 Ustaz Zulham regularly performs *bekam* accompanied by bleeding and suction at his own residence and clinic in the Tablighi settlement of Temboro, East Java. He insisted however that he only performs the operation on Muslim men and never on women or non-Muslims. [Interview with Ustaz Talib Zulham, Malang, East Java, 30 August 2008.]

18 While insisting upon medication that conformed to Islamic and Prophetic norms, Ustaz Zulham did acknowledge that Hellenic medicine (*perubatan Yunani*) was also acceptable to Muslims, as they were used during the time of the Prophet too. This would conform with the opinion of other Indian-based Muslim schools such as the Dar'ul Uloom of Deoband and Nadwat'ul Uloom of Lucknow, for the two *madrasahs* of North India have likewise accepted, and even encouraged, the study of Greek medicine.

19 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 'Docile Bodies', p. 135

20 Frithjof Schuon, *Sufism, Veil and Quintessence*, Bloomington, World Wisdom Books, (1979) 1981, p. 3.

21 Dietrich Reetz, 'Keeping Busy on the Path of Allah: The Self-Organisation (*Intizam*) of the Tablighi Jama'at.' *Oriente Moderno* no. 2 (2003).

22 Pushing the limits of one's endurance was a topic discussed during my field research at the Markaz Besar Jala, Southern Thailand. When asked about the merits of long Tarawikh prayers, the leader of the group Ustaz Meng (Sulaiman) answered thus: 'Tarawikh prayers are not obligatory (*wajib*), but they are part of the *Sunnah* laid down by the Prophet Muhammad and that is why we follow them as well. It is recorded in one of the *Hadith* that has been passed down by Aishah, wife of the beloved Prophet Muhammad himself. According to the *Hadith*, the Prophet stayed awake every night to perform prayers, even when everyone else was asleep. All the *Sahaba* were asleep, and even Aishah was asleep at the time. The Prophet was by her side and the Prophet let her fall asleep first. Then in the middle of the night, Aishah woke up but it was dark in the house. She looked around her, and her hand reached out into the darkness until she touched the robe of the Prophet. She felt him standing next to her, and could hear him praying silently, standing alone. Aishah then fell asleep but later woke up again. In the darkness she looked for the Prophet and again she reached out to touch him. Again her hand touched his robe and she found him standing next to her, praying silently. After that Aishah fell asleep again, and again she woke up. She reached out to touch the Prophet and again she felt him standing next to her. His feet were wet with his tears for he had been praying silently for the safety of all the Muslims of the community. So strong was his faith that the Prophet hardly slept, and he kept awake all night, every night, to pray for others while the others were asleep. This is our model. Our Prophet has shown that this is how the real Muslim, he who upholds the *kalimah* and who loves Allah almighty with all his heart, should be. Why? Because sleep is for the weak and sleep is temptation. Our bodies are for us to use, and we should not let our bodies use us. Who governs your body? Did the Prophet Muhammad have a holiday? Did he go on vacation? Did he ever say to any of his *Sahaba* "I want to rest today, you take over from me for a day"? Never! That is our model. If our Prophet could have done so much, sacrificed so much, worked so hard to bring the light of Islam to the world, then we should be ashamed of ourselves. I am ashamed of myself, because I should have started sooner on the path of the *kalimah*.'

23 It is important to note, however, that such a routine is not unique to the Tablighi Jama'at. Between July and August 2005, I conducted field research at the Madrasah Dar'ul Uloom of Deoband, Uttar Pradesh, India and noted that the Deobandi's daily routine was very similar to that of the Tablighis as well.

24 On 23 August 2008, I recorded a talk that was given by Ustaz Abdullah Trimono, son of the Imam of the Masjid Tanjung Anom. A group of Tablighis were asked to volunteer as assistants to welcome a group of Tablighis from

Bangladesh who were scheduled to visit Surakarta in a week's time. Ustaz Abdullah's lecture was all about the virtue of self-sacrifice in Allah's name. In his words: 'My brothers and friends, I am so happy and I am so thankful to Allah almighty that all of you have volunteered to help us welcome our brothers from India who will be here soon. When you volunteered thus, you have become the *ansor* (*ansar*, lit. helpers) of the Tablighi, and there is nothing better, nothing higher than being an *ansor* in the Tablighi because the *ansor* are favoured by Allah as his best and most beloved Muslims. Why are the *ansor* blessed? I tell you that the *ansor* are special, and their lives are blessed because Allah will make your lives so easy from now. Allah has described the *ansor* in the Quran: they are the ones who have given up the lies of the world and its useless temptations. For three months a year, the *ansor* give themselves totally to our cause, they give up everything for Allah, and Allah will give them everything they need. Imagine a poor farmer who has to toil on his land all by himself. Imagine how hard he has to work to till his field and to plant his rice. Then some kind person lends him a tractor. How soon will his work be done, how quick. Now what are we, the *ansor*? We are the tractor of the Allah.'

25 Needless to say, by the time I recovered my toothbrush, it was a toothbrush only in the nominal sense of the word.

26 Barbara D. Metcalf, *Traditionalist Islamic Activism: Deoband, Tablighis and Talibs*, ISIM Papers IV. Leiden: International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM), 2002.

27 Eva Fachrunissa Amrullah, 'Searching for Shelter in the Age of Disorder: Contemporary Women in the Tablighi Jama'at' (paper presented at the Third Singapore Graduate Forum on Southeast Asian Studies, Asia Research Institute ARI, National University of Singapore. 29 July 2008).

28 The Tablighis' scorn for television stems from their belief that it is fundamentally a useless and corrupting influence on the minds of Muslims. But there are also Tablighis who suspect that television and other forms of entertainment serve even more insidious ends and do the work of the enemies of Islam who wish to weaken the resolve of Muslims the world over. Such a view was expressed by Dr. Murshid Ali Khan of Kelantan, Malaysia when he argued: 'The TV is a useless thing and it doesn't bring anything to the home but nonsense, sin and filth. And on top of that the TV is full of Christian missionary propaganda, which we need to be careful about. The TV is how the missionaries try to convert the young Muslims to becoming Christians. First they entertain you, then they make you weak and stupid. Then once you are weak they can try to convert you.' [Interview with Ustaz Dr. Murshid Ali Khan, Dusun Raja, Kelantan, 21 April 2004.]

29 There was little to distinguish the Tablighi *pengawal* from the rest of the crowd at the *markaz*, save for the fact that they were assigned to patrol the parameter and were 'armed' with little more than crudely fashioned staffs.

30 During my stay at the Madrasah Dar'ul Uloom in Deoband, Uttar Pradesh, India in July-August 2005, I was told that photographing the students and teachers of the *madrasah* was not allowed under any circumstances. This official stance, however, was rendered somewhat vague by the actions of the members of staff themselves. On several occasions I was told that all forms of photography were not allowed, which led to me being asked to leave the library of the *madrasah* after I was seen photographing the books in the building. On another occasion, however, I was asked by the *madrasah's* faculty members why my photos of the *madrasah* did not feature any of the staff or students studying there. Attempts to photograph the students in their classes were made, but my efforts were stalled when one of the teachers warned his students that any student who was photographed would spend eternity in hell as a result.

31 The 'smoking area' in the *markaz* was located at the top of the mosque, next to the tiered sloping roof of the mosque itself facing the main road (Jalan Hayam Wuruk) in front. Here there were a number of Tablighis who were puffing away at their *kreteks* (clove cigarettes that are common throughout Indonesia) while squatting in their sarongs. The Tablighi leader Uztaz Arif informed me that these were the 'Singaporean brothers' who were 'still on their way to finding the right path'. The members of the Indian delegation who were then living in the *markaz* were apparently appalled by the lax behaviour of the Indonesian Tablighis who were puffing away on the roof. Since 2003, the *markaz* at Kebun Jeruk has undergone extensive renovation and expansion, and it is not certain if the 'smoking lounge' is still there.

32 Throughout the course of my field research in the various Tablighi *markaz* of Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia, I did not observe anything that resembled a disciplinary meeting or a tribunal of any kind. This does not, however, suggest that such arrangements do not exist among the Tablighis.

33 In the same lecture given by Ustaz Abdullah Trimono at the Tablighi markaz in Surakarta on 23 August 2003, he asked his fellow Tablighis to be patient when dealing with their fellow Indian Tablighis who were about to visit them, and not to allow any of their guests to be embarrassed: 'Now I know some of you are worried because this is going to be your first time and you have never met an Indian before. Let me tell you that some of them can be difficult. They don't speak our language and they don't understand some of our ways and the way we do things here. Some of them can be demand-

ing. Some can be a little harsh. I can tell you it was difficult at first. So, my brothers, I tell you we need to be patient. Let us pray to Allah that he will send us guests who are nice and easy to take care of. And even if they make any mistakes, if they are rude or demanding, let us pray to Allah, "Oh Allah, please hide the faults of our brothers so they will not be seen by others." If we pray for this, Allah will give us what we ask because Allah does not want to embarrass his guests or his hosts. Allah will conceal the faults of those who are less than perfect (*Allah akan menutupkan aib-nya mereka yang kurang*) because Allah loves them too.'

34 Reetz, 2003, p. 3.

35 Pierre Clastres, *Society Against The State: Essays in Political Antropology* (*La Société contre l'État*, 1974), London: Zone Books, 1989.

36 Interview with Kyai Lutfi Khaozin and other Tablighi elders at the Pesantren Islam (LPI) Al-Hamidy Banyuanyar. Poto'an Daya Pelengaan, Pemekasan, Madura. 12 April 2009.

37 Games Design Convention (GDC): Chain World: Crafting a Religion (http://pc.ign.com), see: http://pc.ign.com/articles/115/1154096p1.html

38 I am thankful to Oleg Korovin for pointing me to this story, for it helps me set the premise for the next step of my argument and also lends the impression that I am younger than I actually am.

39 The term *takfir* refers to the practice of Muslims accusing other Muslims of being *kafirs* (unbelievers), *munafik* (hypocrites) or *murtad* (apostates). Fazlur Rahman (1979) notes that 'the characteristic of intolerance, fanaticism and exclusivism issuing in a policy, raised to an almost creedal status, and of effecting political change through desperate methods of violence distinguishes the earliest Islamic sect of the *khawarij*' (p. 167) who were the first to engage in the practice of *takfir*. The kharajites were the first Muslims to make use of *takfir* as part of their political identity and religious practice. The kharajites were themselves a loose assembly of different groups. Among them were the Muhakimmah, the Azraqites (Azariqah), the Najdites ('excusers'), the Bayhasiyyah, the Ajariyah, the Tha'alibah and the Ibadiyyah. [For a further discussion on the historical origins of the practice of *takfir* and its consequences on Muslim thought, see Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1979.]

40 Reetz 2010.

41 See Farish A. Noor, 'Democracy and the Universalism of Islam: Interview with Nurcholish Madjid,' in *New Voices of Islam* by Farish A. Noor. Leiden: International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM), 2002, pp. 35-41.

42 Steven Lukes, Power: *A Radical View*, London: Basil Blackwell, 1986.

43 Ibid, p. 5.
44 Ibid, p. 5.
45 Ali Shariati, Hajj (translated by Ali A. Behzadnia and Najla Denny), Texas, Islamic Literatures House, 1977.

VI How We Look and What We Are

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Pr. 340, p. 109 (italics in original).
2 http://www.islamicacademy.org.html/Articles/English/Tableeghee%20Jma%27at.htm.
3 The Islamic Academy of North America is based in Plano, Texas in the USA and claims that its aim is 'to increase Islamic knowledge to the Muslims all over the world'. Supported by scholars like Maulana Abdul Hafeez Saheb, (then Dean of the Al-Jamiatul Ashrafia, Mubarakpur), its goal was to set up its own Dar'ul Uloom (the Dar'ul Uloom Azizia) in Texas, drawing on the support of Muslims in the state. http://www.islamicacademy.org.html/Articles/English/Tableeghee%20Jma%27at.htm
4 Harry J. Benda, *The Crescent and the Rising Sun: Indonesian Islam under Japanese Occupation 1942-1945*, Leiden: Fouris, 1983 (orig. publ. 1958); William Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967; Farish A. Noor, *Islam Embedded*, Malaysian Sociological Research Institute (MSRI), Kuala Lumpur, 2004.
5 Martin van Bruinessen, *NU: Tradisi, Relasi-relasi Kuasa dan Mencari Wacana Baru*, Jogjakarta: Lembaga Kajian Islam dan Sosial LKIS, 1994; Martin van Bruinessen, 'Islamic state or state Islam? Fifty years of state-Islam relations in Indonesia.' In *Indonesien am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts*, edited by Ingrid Wessel, Hamburg: Abera-Verlag, 1996, pp. 19-34; Martin van Bruinessen, 'Genealogies of Islamic radicalism in Indonesia,' *South East Asia Research* 10 no. 2 (2002), pp. 117-154; Farish A Noor, Martin van Bruinessen and Yoginder Sikand (eds.), *The Madrasah in Asia: Political Activism and Transnational Linkages,* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008.
6 Robert Hefner and Patricia Horvatich (eds.), *Islam in an Era of Nation-States*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997; and Robert Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
7 Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Piety and Politics: Islamism in Contemporary Malaysia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

8 See: Farish A Noor, 'Interview with Tuan Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat, Spiritual Leader of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party PAS,' Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), RSIS Malaysian Update, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, January 2009.

9 It ought to be noted, however, that the Madrasah Dar'ul Uloom Deoband has had a longstanding and close relationship with the Tablighi Jama'at that dates back to the late 1920s. During my research trips to Deoband in 2005, I noted that many of the students there chose to join the Tablighi and participate in the *khuruj* with other Tablighi members during the four-week break during the month of Ramadan. The *madrasah* in Deoband is also on the itinerary of many Tablighi groups and receives regular visits from Tablighi delegations as they perform the *khuruj* across Northern India. During my interview with Nik Aziz, I probed the *Murshid'ul Am* of PAS further and asked if he had ever been a member of the Tablighi when he was a student at the *madrasah* of Deoband in the 1960s. His response was as follows: 'Let me be clear: I have never been a member of the Tablighi. It is true that the Tablighis are very active at Deoband, but I never joined them.' [Farish A Noor, 'Interview with Tuan Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat, Spiritual Leader of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party PAS,' Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), RSIS Malaysian Update, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, January 2009.]

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Interview with Ustaz Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, Pesantren al-Mukmin Ngruki, Surakarta, May 27 2007.

13 Interview with Dr. Dzulkefly Ahmad, PAS Research Bureau, Kuala Lumpur, 3 March 2008 and 11 April 2011.

14 It ought to be noted that the view that the Tablighi represents a potential threat to gullible Muslims is certainly not unique to political Islamists. Jenny Taylor, writing for *The Guardian* in 2009, comes to the same conclusion when she wrote that 'the Tablighi Jamaat is a revivalist group – interested only in other Muslims and therefore particularly inward-looking – which accounts for their danger to gullible young men' (*The Guardian*, 9 September 2009).

15 Interview with Hidayat Nurwahid, President, Parti Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS), at the International Centre for Islam and Pluralism (ICIP), Jakarta, 17 September 2003.

16 Interview with Rector Bambang Setiaji, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Surakarta, Java, 26 March 2011.

17 The best study on the vast network of state-created and state-funded official religious institutions in Indonesia remains that of Moch Nur Ichwan, 'Official

Reform of Islam: State Islam and the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Contemporary Indonesia, 1966-2004', Ph.D. dissertation, University of Tilburg, 2006.

18 Interview with Amirsyah Tambunan, Deputy Secretary of the Majelis Ulama Indonesia, via Moch Nur Ichwan, 6 May 2011.

19 Interview with the Mufti of Singapore, Mohamed Fatris Bakaram, Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura MUIS, 20 May 2010.

20 Interview with Mufti Mohamed Fatris Bakaram, 20 May 2010.

21 Since the late 1960s, the Malaysian government has been steadily widening its sphere of control over Islamic matters in the country. In 1968, the government took one of its first steps towards controlling Islamic affairs by establishing the National Council for Muslim Affairs in Kuala Lumpur. The council, headed by the prime minister, came under the control of the Pusat Islam (Islamic Centre) and the prime minister's department. In 1981, the Pusat Islam began identifying various sects and groups said to be guilty of deviationist teachings (*ajaran sesat*), and in 1982 the Ahmadis in the country were declared non-Muslims and stripped of their Malay/Bumiputera status (Nair, *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy*, p. 36).

22 Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, New York: Colombia University Press, 1991, p. 1.

23 In his *Jakarta Diary*, the Indian analyst and former secretary to the Cabinet Secretariat of the Government of India, B. Raman, notes that the Indonesian government has imposed stricter visa regulations for Indian and Pakistani nationals since the 2000s but argues that this was a necessary measure, as 'one should not forget that the Pakistani branch of the Tablighi Jama'at and the Lashkar-e Toiba, which have been at the forefront of assisting jihadi organizations, is active in India too'. [B. Raman, *Jakarta Diary*, from South Asia Analysis Group (SAAG), www.southasiaanlysis.org.]

24 Abantika Ghosh, 'Qaida members posed as Tablighi Jamaat activists to get Pak visas', in *The Times of India*, 10 May 2011.

25 Reetz, 2003, p. 42.

26 On 16 November 2001, the ASEAN Muslim Secretariat (AMSEC) was set up under the auspices of the Malaysian Islamic party PAS and based in Kota Bharu, Kelantan, Malaysia. AMSEC was meant to be an umbrella organisation that covered the entire ASEAN region, bringing together Islamist parties and movements that were united in a common cause then – namely opposition to the US-led campaign against Iraq and Afghanistan. [Re: Nyza Ayob, *'Amerika Ketua Pengganas Antarabangsa – Resolusi'*, Harakah, 16 November 2001.]

27 Discussion with Ambassador Hazairin Pohan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Indonesia; Ambassador Hussin Nayan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malay-

sia; Suriya Chindawongse, Political-Security Department of ASEAN Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand; and Tran Viet Thai, Centre for Regional Policy Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam. (Singapore, 25 April 2011.) It was noted by the respondents that at present, ASEAN's primary security concerns were focused on the issues of joint maritime development in the South China Sea and the prevention of armed conflict between the member states of ASEAN.

28 Eddie C.Y. Kuo and Tong Chee Kiong, *Religion in Singapore: Census of Population 1990*, Monograph no. 2, Census Board of Singapore, 1990. The 1990 census of Singapore noted that the Muslim population in Singapore then was 14.4 per cent of the total, which was a reduction compared to the 1980 census which showed that Muslims made up 16.2 per cent of the population (p. 5).

29 Yolanda Chin and Norman Vasu, *The Ties that Bind and Blind: A Report on Inter-Racial and Inter-Religious Relations in Singapore*, Centre for Excellence for National Security, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, RSIS, Nanyang Technological University of Singapore, 2009 (p. 1). The same report noted that among Singaporean Buddhists and Taoists, perceptions towards Singaporean Muslims and Hindus were generally positive, though 11 per cent of them disapproved of the idea of a Muslim becoming prime minister of the country (pp. 19-20). The area where Muslim and non-Muslim relations was weak was the private domain of marriages and relationships, where many non-Muslims stated that it would be relatively difficult for them to marry a Muslim on account of having to convert to Islam (pp. 20, 26, 28).

30 Fajar Taslim Muhammad was a Singaporean citizen of Indian-Muslim background who was arrested by Indonesian security services in Palembang, South Sumatra. He was accused of being a member of a radical Islamic group that had conducted several attacks on Christians in the area, including the murder of a Sumatran-Christian schoolteacher. He remains in custody (in 2012) in Indonesia.

31 Interview with the Mufti of Singapore, Mohamed Fatris Bakaram, Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura MUIS, 20 May 2010.

32 In my interview with the Mufti of Singapore, Ustaz Mohamed Fatris Bakaram (20 May 2010), he noted that 'They (the Tablighis) were already in Singapore (since 1952) before we (MUIS) were established, and so it would be hard to deny them the right to exist. Our concern, however, has always been to maintain the welfare of our Muslim community and the reputation of Muslims here. So it is imperative that whenever they stay in the mosques of Singapore, they must keep it clean and safe.'

33 Interview with Mufti Mohamed Fatris Bakaram, 20 May 2010.

34 Historians are generally in agreement over the claim that prior to the coming of Catholicism to the Philippines many parts of the Philippine archipelago were already under some form of local or foreign Muslim rule. One of the more prominent figures in this story is Sheikh Tuan Mashaika, whose marriage to the daughter of Rajah Sipad led to the formation of the first Muslim community in Sulu in the fourteenth century. The extent to which Islam had truly altered the social norms of Filipino society remains in question, but historians note that by the fifteenth century there were already nominally Muslim kingdoms across the archipelago. The Sulu Sultanate was created by the Arab trader Syed (later Sultan) Abubakar, who originated from the Arabian Peninsula. The Maguindanao Sultanate was formed in the sixteenth century by Sharif Muhammad Kabungsuan; the Manila Sultanate was formed by Rajah Solaiman; while the Cebu Sultanate was founded by Rajah Humabon and Rajah Lapu-Lapu.

35 Rommel C. Banlaoi, *Transnational Islam in the Philippines*, The National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Project Report, April 2009, p. 169.

36 The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) emerged at a time when the Moro Liberation movement in southern Philippines was in a state of crisis and turmoil. The MNLF was formed in 1969 and its leader was Nur Misuari, a leftist Moro activist and academic who was previously a leader of the radical Marxist Kabataan Makabayan (Patriotic Youth) movement based in Manila. The other MNLF leaders like Abdul Khayr Alonto, Otto Salahuddin and Ali Alibon were also student radicals who had grown to become committed activists and militants. At first the MNLF did not have institutional support or any kind of assistance from external sources. But in 1970 the Moro Congressman Raschid Lucman formed the Bangsa Moro Liberation Organisation (BMLO) by bringing together the first batch of Moro guerrillas who had been trained abroad. With the help of political leaders like Raschid Lucman, Nur Misuari was able to travel overseas to meet with other Muslim leaders like Muammar Ghadafi of Libya. [W.K. Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand*, Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1990, pp. 77-81.]

37 The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was formed in 1984 after a split among the leadership of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). The MILF's leader was Salamat Hashim, an al-Azhar-educated Filipino Muslim student who had joined the MNLF in 1969. In Cairo, Salamat Hashim was one of the leaders of the Moro student movement at al-Azhar university. In 1970 he returned to the Philippines with the intension of promoting *daw'ah* among the Moros. Salamat Hashim rejected the leadership of Nur Misuari on

the grounds that the latter was too secular and leftist and that the MNLF was too open to other groups like the Christians of Moroland. Unlike the MNLF, the MILF received much of its funding and support from Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The MILF also regarded its struggle as a *jihad* rather than a war of national liberation, and it drew most of its leadership from the non-traditional Moro elite and religious leaders (Che Wan 1990, pp. 90-93).

38 Banlaoi, 2009, pp. 177-178.

39 See for instance: Jenny Taylor, 'What is the Tablighi Jama'at?' *The Guardian*, 8 September 2009.

40 Hadja Eleonor Esmula, 'The Impact of the Tabligh and Da'wah in the Socio-Religious Transformation of Jolo', Master's thesis, University of Philippines, Institute of Islamic Studies, 1994; Basher Balla Bandahala, 'The Tabligh in a Muslim Community: A Case Study of the Tabligh in Campo Islam, Zamboanga City', Master's thesis, University of Philippines, Institute of Islamic Studies, 1994.

41 Openg Onn, 'Member of Jemaah Tabligh to be deported', Bernama. 27 January 2003.

42 This was the ploy used by the radical militant Ustaz Aman Abdurrahman of Cimalaka, West Java. After his arrest and conviction as a member of the radical Jama'ah Islamiyah group, Aman confessed that he had no prior military or combat training. His handlers in the Jama'ah Islamiyah struck upon the idea of forming the Al-Azhar Nature Lovers Society in order to give him the pretext to take part in combat training not far from the campus of University Indonesia, near Depok. [International Crisis Group, *Indonesia Backgrounder: Why Salafism and Terrorism Mostly Don't Mix,* ICG Asia Report no. 83, Brussels, 13 September 2004, p. 28.]

43 International Crisis Group, *Indonesia Backgrounder,* 13 September 2004, p. ii.

44 Sidney Jones, 'Terrorism, Human Rights and Advocacy Strategies' (paper presented to the International Council on Human Rights Policy, Eighth Annual International Council Meeting, Lahore, 20-22 May 2005, p. 3).

45 Interview with Shafei Anwar of the International Centre for Islam and Pluralism (ICIP), Jakarta, 27 March 2011.

46 John Sidel, *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006.

47 Sidel notes that one cannot write on violence in Indonesia by simply focusing on *'one riot here, one bombing there'* (p. 6).

48 Sidel, 2006, pp. 206-210.

49 Sidel, 2006, pp. 211-217.

50 Nair, p. 197.
51 Anthony T. H. Tan, 'The Rise of Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia: An Emerging Security Challenge', *Panorama*, no. 1/2001, Manila: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2001, p. 86.
52 The Jihad Gang group was also accused of attacks on non-Muslim places of worship and on business premises they regarded as *haram* (unlawful) in Islam, and the murder of an Indian member of parliament, Joe Fernandez of the MIC party.
53 Those arrested included Zainon Ismail (founder of KMM), Mohamad Lutfi Arrifin (member of PAS Youth Wing, Kedah), Nor Ashid Sakip (head of PAS Youth, Sungai Benut), Ahmad Tajudin Abu Bakar (head of PAS Youth, Larut), Salehan Abdul Ghafar, Abu Bakar Che Doi, Alias Ghah, Ahmad Fauzi Daraman and Asfawani Abdullah. Most were active PAS members and religious schoolteachers.
54 Interviews with Brigadier General Mohamad Noor Osman (Ministry of Defence), Dato Isa Munir (Royal Malaysian Police force) and Hamzah Ishak of the Malaysian National Security Council (NSC), 20-23 April 2011.
55 I would like to thank Tareq al-Saei for providing me with this information.

VII Finally, a Summing Up

1 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapter 4: *Of Speech.*
2 Eva Fachrunissa Amrullah, 'Searching for Shelter in the Age of Disorder: Contemporary Women in the Tablighi Jama'at' (paper presented at the Third Singapore Graduate Forum on Southeast Asian Studies, Asia Research Institute ARI, National University of Singapore, 29 July 2008).

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Much nuance and variability have been lost in the process of the reductivist analysis of Islam post-9/11 and, as this study amply demonstrates, we are all the poorer as a result. This exhaustive examination of the rise and spread of the Tablighi Jama'at, arguably the world's largest Islamic missionary movement, locates it in the larger perspective of global Islam and developments in the Muslim societies. Combining an overview of the history and current socio-political perception of the Tablighi Jama'at with a more analytical and philosophical approach to fundamental questions of identity, subject-positioning and representation, the author creates a comprehensive resource of interest to all scholars and students of Islam.

"This is an excellent, original study of an important transnational Islamic movement, based on a long-term acquaintance with the movement and a considerable period of participating observation in Indonesia, Malaysia and South Thailand."
— Martin van Bruinessen, Chair for the Comparative Study of Contemporary Muslim Societies, Utrecht University

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"Farish Ahmad Noor is an extraordinary thinker: cosmopolitan, Asian, Muslim, humanist, truth-teller. Here we get him at his best, looking at the rise and spread of one of the most important missionary Muslim organizations, the Tablighis."
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