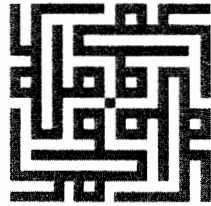


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lim world and the West. Its 1993 annual international conference in Raiwind near Lahore, Pakistan was attended by more than one million Muslims from ninety-four countries. In fact, in recent years the Raiwind annual conference has become the second largest religious congregation of the Muslim World after the *hajj*. Its annual conference in North America normally attracts about ten thousand, probably the largest gathering of Muslims in the West.

The emergence of the Tablighī Jamā'at as a movement for the reawakening of faith and reaffirmation of Muslim religio-cultural identity can be seen as a continuation of the broader trend of Islamic revival in North India in the wake of the collapse of Muslim political power and consolidation of the British rule in India in the mid-nineteenth century. In the strictly religious sphere one manifestation of this trend was the rapid growth of the *madrasahs* (religious educational institutions) in North India, which sought to reassert the authority of Islamic orthodoxy and to relink the Muslim masses with Islamic institutions. The pietistic and devotional aspects of the Tablighī Jamā'at owe their origin to the Ṣūfī teachings and practices of Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī, Shāh Walī Allāh, and the founder of the Mujaḥidīn movement, Sayyid Aḥmad Shahīd (1786–1831). These Ṣūfīs, who belonged to the Naqshbandīyah order, considered the observance of the *sharī'ah* integral to their practices. It is in this sense that the Tablighī Jamā'at has been described, at least in its initial phase, both as a reinvigorated form of Islamic orthodoxy and as a reformed Sufism.

The emergence of the Tablighī Jamā'at was also a direct response to the rise of such aggressive Hindu proselytizing movements as the Shuddhi (Purification) and Sangathan (Consolidation), which launched massive efforts in the early twentieth century to "reclaim" those "fallen-away" Hindus who had converted to Islam in the past. The special target of these revivalist movements were the so-called "borderline" Muslims who had retained most of the religious practices and social customs of their Hindu ancestors. Maulānā Ilyās, the founder of the Tablighī Jamā'at, believed that only a grassroots Islamic religious movement could counter the efforts of the Shuddhi and Sangathan, purify the borderline Muslims from their Hindu accretions, and educate them about their beliefs and rituals in order to save them from becoming easy prey to the Hindu proselytizers.

The Tablighī Jamā'at originated in Mewat, a Gangetic plateau in North India inhabited by Rajput tribes

**TABLIGHĪ JAMĀ'AT.** The Tablighī Jamā'at of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, also variously called the Jamā'at (Party), Taḥrik (Movement), Nizām (System), Tanzīm (Organization), and Taḥrik-i Īmān (Faith Movement), is one of the most important grassroots Islamic movements in the contemporary Muslim world. From a modest beginning in 1926 with *da'wah* (missionary) work in Mewat near Delhi under the leadership of the Ṣūfī scholar Maulānā Muḥammad Ilyās (1885–1944), the Jamā'at today has followers all over the Mus-

known as Meos. Historical accounts differ as to the exact time of their conversion to Islam, but most historians place it between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the formative phase of Muslim rule in India. There is also evidence to suggest, however, that there were several Meo conversions to Islam, followed by reconversion to Hinduism whenever Muslim political power declined in the region. When Ilyās started his religious movement in Mewat, most Meos were Muslims in name only. They retained many Hindu socioreligious practices; many kept their old Hindu names and even worshiped Hindu deities in their homes and celebrated Hindu religious festivals. Most could not even correctly recite the one-line *shahādah* (the Muslim profession of faith) or say their daily ritual prayers. Very few villages in Mewat had mosques of *madrasahs*. Their birth, marriage, and death rituals were all based on Hindu customs.

Maulānā Ilyās, an Islamic religious scholar in the tradition of the orthodox Deoband seminary in the United Province and a follower of the Naqshbandīyah, learned of the "dismal Islamic situation" in Mewat first through his disciples and later through his own several missionary trips there. His initial efforts toward reislamization of Mewati Muslims were essentially to establish a network of mosque-based religious schools to educate local Muslims about correct Islamic beliefs and practices. Although he was able to establish more than one hundred religious schools in a short time in the Mewat region, he soon became disillusioned with this approach, realizing that these institutions were producing "religious functionaries" but not preachers who were willing to go door to door and remind people of their religious duties. Recognizing the futility of the *madrasah* approach as a basis for reawakening religious consciousness and educating ordinary Muslims about their religion, Maulānā Ilyās decided to quit his teaching position at Madrasah Mazharul 'Ulūm in Saharanpur and moved to Bastī Nizāmuddīn in the old quarters of Delhi to begin his missionary work through itinerant preaching. The Tablighī movement was formally launched in 1926 from this place, which later became the movement's international headquarters. After the partition of India in 1947, however, Raiwind, a small railroad town near Lahore, Pakistan, replaced Bastī Nizāmuddīn as a major center of the Jamā'at's organizational and missionary activities.

Physically frail and intellectually unassuming, Maulānā Ilyās possessed none of the qualities attributed to many other prominent leaders of twentieth-century Is-

lam. Neither an outstanding religious scholar and author nor a good public speaker nor a charismatic leader, Maulānā Ilyās was nevertheless imbued with the enormous zeal of a dedicated missionary. His singleminded devotion and determination to reach out to the Muslim masses and touch them with the message of the Qur'ān and *sunnah* took precedence over everything else. He was persistent, untiring, and wholeheartedly devoted to what he described as "the mission of the prophets"—to call people to the path of God. His message to his coreligionists was simple and straightforward: "Ai Musalmāno Musalmān bano" (O Muslims, become good Muslims!).

The method adopted by Maulānā Ilyās to call people to Islam was equally simple. It was to organize units of at least ten persons and send them to various villages. These *tablighī* units, known as *jamā'ats* (groups), would visit a village, invite the local Muslims to assemble in the mosque or some other meetingplace, and present their message in the form of the following six demands. First, every Muslim must be able to recite the *shahādah* ("There is no God but Allāh and Muḥammad is His Prophet") correctly in Arabic and know its meaning; this asserts the unity of God, rejects all other deities, and emphasizes obedience to the prophet Muḥammad. Second, a Muslim must also learn how to say the *ṣalāt* (obligatory ritual prayer) correctly and in accordance with its prescribed rituals; this not only emphasizes the need for the ritual performance of prayer in its external form but also encourages the believer to strive for complete submission to God by bowing before him in humility and God-consciousness.

Third, a Muslim cannot claim to be a true believer unless he is knowledgeable about the fundamental beliefs and practices of Islam; he must also perform *dhikr* (ritual remembrance of God) frequently. For basic religious knowledge, Tablighī workers are required to read seven essays written by Maulānā Muḥammed Zakariyā, a reputable scholar of *ḥadīth* at Saharanpur *madrasah* and an early supporter of the movement. These essays, now compiled in a single volume under the title *Tablighī niṣāb* (Tablighi Curriculum) deal with life stories of the companions of the Prophet, and the virtues of *ṣalāt*, *dhikr*, charity, *ḥajj*, ritual salutation to the Prophet, and the Qur'ān. Written in simple and lucid Urdu and based mostly on inspirational but historically suspect traditions and anecdotes, these essays also constitute, with little change, the basic source material for the formulaic speech delivered by the Tablighī missionaries through-

out the world. In addition, every Muslim is also encouraged to learn how to read the Qur'ān in Arabic, with correct pronunciation.

Fourth, every Muslim must be respectful and polite toward fellow Muslims and show deference toward them. This idea of *ikrām-i Muslim* (respect for Muslims) is not only a religious obligation but also a basic prerequisite for effective *da'wah* work. Included in this principle is also an obligation to recognize and respect the rights of others: the rights of elders to be treated respectfully; the rights of young ones to be treated with love, care, and affection; the rights of the poor to be helped in their needs; the rights of neighbors to be shown consideration; and the rights of those with whom we may have differences. Fifth, a Muslim must always inculcate honesty and sincerity in all endeavors. Everything is to be done for the sake of seeking the pleasure of God and serving his cause, and not for any worldly benefit.

The final demand, which constitutes the most distinctive innovative aspect of the Jamā'at's approach to Islamic *da'wah* work, deals with the formation of small groups of volunteer preachers willing to donate time and travel from place to place spreading the word of God. For Maulānā Ilyās preaching is not the work of only the professional '*ulamā*'; it is the duty of every Muslim. People are usually asked to volunteer for a *chillah* (forty days of itinerant preaching), which is considered the maximum stint of outdoor missionary activity for new members. Those who cannot spare forty days may undertake forty one-day retreats in a year. Every member must preach at least four months during his lifetime. Maulānā Ilyās believed that this preaching would prepare people to endure hardships and strengthen their moral and spiritual qualities.

These six principles are the cornerstone of the Tablighī Jamā'at ideology and are to be strictly observed by all members. Maulānā Ilyās later added another rule asking members to abstain from wasting time in idle talk and aimless activities and protect themselves from sinful and prohibited (*ḥaram*) deeds.

The new movement met with spectacular success in a relatively short period. Thousands of Muslims joined Maulānā Ilyās to propagate the message of Islam throughout Mewat. Hundreds of new mosques were built and dozens of new *madrasahs* established for both children and adults. People began to observe obligatory rituals such as saying *ṣalāt*, paying *zākat*, fasting during Ramaḍān, and performing the *ḥajj*. The most visible change was in dress and in the customs associated with

birth, marriage, and burial rituals. There were signs of Islamic religious revival everywhere in the area.

By the time Maulānā Ilyās died in 1944 Mewat had come to be seen as the great success of this new approach to Islamic *da'wah*. The Jamā'at now started extending its activities into other parts of India. Since the Tablighī method of preaching did not require any degree of religious scholarship, formal training, or lengthy preparation, everyone who joined the Jamā'at became an instant preacher on the basis of his familiarity with the six simple principles of *da'wah*. Thus the number of itinerant preachers multiplied quickly, and the Jamā'at was able to send its Tablighī missions all over India, from Peshawar in the Northwest Frontier Province to Noakhali in East Bengal.

It is interesting that this Islamic revivalist upsurge was taking place precisely at a time when its political counterpart, the Muslim nationalist movement of the All-India Muslim League with its demand for a separate homeland for Indian Muslims, was also gaining great momentum. The fact that the Tablighī Jamā'at was able to withstand the intense pressures of the Muslim politics of the 1940s and maintain its purely religious course throughout this period of turmoil, communal riots, and eventual partition of the subcontinent emphasizes not only its firm ideological commitment and methodological rigidity but also its ability to operate in isolation from its political environment.

After the death of Maulānā Ilyās, his son Maulānā Yūsuf (1917–1965) was selected as his successor by the elders of the Jamā'at. Maulānā Yūsuf was a great organizer and an untiring worker. He spent most of his adult life traveling with preaching groups throughout the subcontinent. He extended the movement's operations beyond the northern provinces and mobilized thousands of groups to tour all over India. It was also during his tenure that the Jamā'at's activities spread to countries of Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and North America. Since Maulānā Yūsuf's death in 1965, Maulānā In'āmul Ḥasan has led the Jamā'at and has expanded its international operations enormously. Today the Jamā'at has become a truly global Islamic movement. Its influence has grown significantly over the past two decades, especially in South and Southeast Asia but also in Africa and among Muslim communities in the West; however, it has not been able to attract any significant following among Arabic-speaking Muslims. The majority of its followers in the Middle East are South Asian immigrant workers.

The success of the Jamā'at owes much to the dedicated missionary work of its members and followers, its simple, noncontroversial and nonsectarian message, and its direct, personal appeal to and contacts with individual Muslims. Instead of publishing books or addressing large gatherings, Jamā'at members go door to door and invite people to join their ranks and spread the word of God. Their program of asking Muslims to leave their families, jobs, and home towns for a time and join in a system of communal learning, worship, preaching, and other devotional activities has proved enormously effective in building a community-type structure with close personal relationships and mutual moral-psychological support. Because the basic message of the Jamā'at is simple enough to be imparted by anyone willing to volunteer, it is ideally suited for ordinary Muslims with little or no previous Islamic education. The Jamā'at's reliance on lay preachers, rather than on 'ulamā', has helped it greatly to reach and attract the Muslim masses in rural communities and small towns.

Despite its enormous expansion over the past sixty-eight years, the Jamā'at remains an informal association with no written constitution, standardized organizational rules and procedures, hierarchy of leadership, network of branches and departments, or even office records and membership registry. The *amīr* (chief) is selected for life through informal consultation among the "elders" of the Jamā'at; he in turn appoints a *shūrā* (consultative body) to advise him on important matters.

In matters of religious beliefs and practices, the Tablighī Jamā'at has consistently followed the orthodox Deoband tradition and has emphasized *taqlīd* (following the established schools of Islamic law) over *ijtihād* (independent reasoning). It rejects such popular expressions of religion as veneration of saints, visiting shrines, and observing the syncretic rituals associated with popular Sufism. The Jamā'at can thus be considered an heir to the reformist-fundamentalist tradition of Shāh Walī Allāh, with its emphasis on reformed Sufism and strict observation of the *sunnaḥ* of the Prophet. Jamā'at workers are rigid in following orthodox rituals and practices and in observing the rules of the *sharī'ah*. Unlike modernists and neofundamentalists, Tablighī workers emphasize both the form and the spirit of religious rules and practices.

From its inception the Tablighī Jamā'at has deliberately stayed away from politics and political controversies. Maulānā Ilyās believed that the Jamā'at would not

be able to achieve its goals if it got embroiled in partisan politics. Reforming individuals for him was more important than reforming social and political institutions—a process that, he believed, could gradually come about as more and more people joined his movement and became good Muslims. His later years coincided with a great schism in the Indian Muslim religious circles: most of the Deoband 'ulamā' opposed the idea of a separate homeland for Muslims and supported the All-India National Congress in calling for a united India; other 'ulamā' joined with the Muslim League in its demand for Pakistan. Maulānā Ilyās asked his followers not to take sides with either camp and to continue their essentially nonpolitical *da'wah* work among Muslims of all political persuasions.

The Jamā'at has rigidly maintained this nonpolitical posture since. In Pakistan, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, and elsewhere in its operations, it has scrupulously observed its founder's ban on political activities and has refused to take positions on political issues. Thus, in Pakistan, the Jamā'at remained noncommittal on major national controversies involving the relationship between Islam and the state. In India too the Jamā'at has never been involved in so-called "Muslim issues" such as communal riots, Muslim family laws, the Shah Bano case, and the Babri mosque. This nonpolitical stance has helped it greatly to operate freely in societies where politically oriented religious activities are viewed with suspicion and fear by the government.

In India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkey, and, to a certain extent in the Muslim areas of Thailand and the Philippines, the Tablighī Jamā'at has been an important movement in nonpolitical Islamic revivalism and has attracted a large following from rural communities and small towns. Although members do not participate in partisan politics, they do nevertheless constitute a solid vote bank for 'ulamā'-based religio-political parties. In Pakistan they have consistently voted for the orthodox, Deobandī-oriented Jam'iyatul 'Ulāmā'-i Islām. In Malaysia, Tablighī Jamā'at followers have been a major source of support for the 'ulamā'-based Partai Islam Se-Malaysia in federal and provincial elections. [See Jam'iyatul 'Ulāmā'-i Islām; Partai Islam Se-Malaysia.]

In Europe and North America the Tablighī Jamā'at has been working among the immigrant Muslim communities, especially among Muslims of South Asian origin, for more than three decades and has established a large following among them. In addition to the propaga-

tion of its standard six-point program, the Jamā'at in the West has also been concerned with the preservation of the religious and cultural identity of Muslims in a non-Islamic environment. Thus it has been active in building mosques and Islamic centers, establishing Islamic Sunday schools for Muslim children and adults, providing *dhabīḥah* (ritually slaughtered) meat to Muslim families, and organizing Islamic training camps and retreats for Muslim youth. In North America the Jamā'at has also met with some success in gaining converts among African-Americans and Caribbean immigrants. Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Atlanta, New York, and Washington, D.C., are the major centers of the Jamā'at's activities in the United States.

Most followers of the Tablighī Jamā'at in South Asia come from the lower middle class with minimum exposure to modern Western education and from semiurban areas. It has also attracted a considerable following among lower-level government employees, paraprofessionals and schoolteachers. Its influence on college and university campuses has been minimal. Because of its nonpolitical orientation it has been easy to spread its message in the armed forces of Pakistan, where it has a considerable following among noncommissioned personnel. The Jamā'at received a great boost during the government of President Zia ul-Haq, who was concerned to develop Islamic spirit among the Pakistani military; an active member of the Jamā'at rose to the sensitive position of chief of Pakistan Military Intelligence during 1991–1993 and reportedly directed Pakistan's Afghan operation both through conventional intelligence techniques and through holding *dhikr* assemblies.

In Malaysia and Indonesia the social bases of the Jamā'at's support are more diverse than in South Asia. Its initial followers in these countries were immigrant Muslims from South Asia, but during the past two decades it has penetrated the Malay Muslim community, especially in rural areas. Today the bulk of its support comes from urban-based, well-educated youth. In Indonesia, where the Jamā'at has worked in close collaboration with such nonpolitical Islamic reform movements as the Muhammadiyah and the Nahdatul Ulama, its activities have focused on converting *abangan* (syncretic, Indic-oriented) Muslims into *santri* (purist) Muslims. Thus the Tablighī Jamā'at in Indonesia, unlike India and Pakistan, has been associated both with the 'ulamā' and with urban-based, modern-educated Muslim youth.

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