

“I must strive to rectify myself and the people of the whole world”: Portraits of Sunni traditionalist activists in South Africa

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Abstract

From its headquarters in Karachi, the traditionalist Sunni movement, Dawate Islami, has spread to a number of other countries and in 1996 it founded a branch in South Africa. South Africa, in turn, has witnessed a mushrooming of Dawate Islami centres in various towns and cities throughout the country and has been the base for further expansion of the movement to other parts of Africa.

What drives the members to the movement? How were they inducted as members? This paper explores these questions through portraits of two senior South African activists: Mufti Abdun Nabi Hamidi and Amirudeen Kajeer. Drawing on the notions of ‘practices’ ‘virtues’ and ‘states of the self’ inspired by the work of Talal Asad, this paper also seeks to provide a framework for understanding the nature of the activists’ belonging and commitment to the movement.

Introduction

To write about a tradition is to be in a certain narrative [in] relation to it, a relation that will vary according to whether one supports or opposes the tradition, or regards it as morally neutral. The coherence that each

party finds, or fails to find, in that tradition will depend on their particular historical position.¹

With these words Talal Asad invites us to a profound awareness of our self-location in approaching the anthropological subject of enquiry, to a wary acknowledgment of the philosophical underpinnings which underlie the theoretical perspectives we employ to make sense of what we observe, and also to a need to appreciate others' worldviews as they represent themselves.

This invitation goes beyond a phenomenological exercise. It is not merely the appreciation of the other, no matter how profound this appreciation is; it also opens the possibility to be transformed through the worldviews witnessed. In his "Genealogies," Asad makes the following observation regarding ethnographic representation:

Indeed, it could be argued that translating an alien form of life, another culture, is not always best done through the representational discourse of ethnography: that under certain conditions a dramatic performance, the execution of a dance, or the playing of a piece of music might be more apt. These would all be productions of the original and not mere interpretations: transformed instances of the original, not authoritative textual representations of it ... *As such they would become part of our living heritage, not merely of our social science.*²

In 'making sense' of Islamist movements, Asad calls upon us to examine just what this 'making sense' seeks to achieve. Asad also makes reference to the configuration of power relations from which this 'making sense' emerges, and points out the need for willingness to question its assumptions and be open to new trajectories. That is, we should not treat the study of Islamist movements as 'mere social science' but should prepare ourselves to be potentially transformed by the worldview it presents.

1 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 17.

2 Asad, *Genealogies*, 193 (author's emphasis).

In an otherwise valuable empirical study of Dawate Islami in Pakistan, Thomas Gugler applies the “metaphors of religious economics”³ in his understanding of its activities. Thus, he interprets the daily recording of blessings, for example, as a form of religio-economic barter, which the writer of this paper feels misses the point. Gugler does not take the intentions of the members into consideration and his super-imposed market model (operating on its own unexplained assumptions) appears more analogous than causal.⁴ An exhaustive critique of Gugler’s application of this metaphor is not our concern here. But, following Asad, one should pose the interesting question of why he should engage in such metaphors in the first place. How do such metaphors (Gugler is certainly not alone in this) reinforce, however unwittingly, the sensibilities of the contemporary neoliberal substrate in which they are deployed? How does the employment of a framework so characteristic of late modernity keep us at a safe distance from engaging and being transformed by worldviews that appear incongruous in the light of that modernity?

It is felt that our starting point must at least be the phenomenological canards of *epoche* and *empathy*,⁵ but should go beyond that. In the case of *epoche*, the suspension of our judgment must also be theoretically open to the acceptance of the other’s. As to *empathy*, it should also be translatable, again potentially, into involvement. Understanding a discourse on its own terms should also mean taking its view of reality seriously.

The portraits of the two South African Dawate Islami members sketched in this essay have been broadly informed by these concerns. The intention in this essay has been to sketch them as they see themselves. The writer has tried to understand their location in terms that would be faithful to their understanding, and has also sought to be enlightened and perhaps transformed by what they have to tell us. In view of this, this essay is largely a descriptive one, letting the subjects

3 See Thomas Gugler, “Making Muslims fit for Faiz (God’s Grace): Spiritual and not-so-spiritual Transactions inside the Islamic missionary movement Dawat-e Islami,” *Social Compass* 58, 3, 2011, 339.

4 Gugler, “Making Muslims,” 339-345.

5 Kasomo Daniel, “The applicability of phenomenology in the study of religion,” *The International Journal of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences*, 2, 5, 2012, 130-137. See especially page 132.

tell their own stories. In ‘making sense’ of these stories in terms that would be accepted by the members themselves, the writer has employed the Asadian inspired notions of ‘practice,’ ‘virtue’ and ‘state of the self.’⁶ Dawate Islami is essentially a movement focussed on practices for the cultivation of virtues which result in new ways of selfhood. In this essay, serious attention is given to the assumptions of the worldview from which these stories emerge (the worldview of Dawate Islami) and so we leave ourselves open to its potentially transformative effects upon our own ways of looking at the world.

More specifically, this paper has addressed this task by asking two main questions: (1) How did these two activists come to be where they are? What, in other words, was the life trajectory that led them to their present location in the movement? (2) Why do they adhere to the movement in the way they do? Put differently, how do they experience the lived reality of Dawate Islami?

These questions of genealogy and texture, respectively, are substantially informed by their membership of the movement and it is to the movement itself that we first need to turn.

The Emergence of Dawate Islami⁷

Affiliation either to Sunni traditionalism, with its validation of customary practices such as *Mawlūd* (the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday) and ‘*Urs* (the annual commemoration of a saint’s death), or to Sunni reformism, with its critique of the same practices, features prominently in the landscape of South Asian Islam and its diasporic communities.⁸

6 While ‘practices’ and ‘virtues’ are explicitly discussed by Asad, the rendering ‘state of the self’ is the author’s own. The author of this essay will argue that it is a direct outcome of the virtues discussed by Asad.

7 The term ‘Dawate Islami’ is originally an Urdu phrase and when translated into English may take on a variety of spellings, including for example, ‘Dawat-e-Islami.’ There is no uniform standard for the way the phrase is spelt in English and, for the purposes of this essay, we use the variation ‘Dawate Islami.’

8 As used here, Sunni traditionalism refers to the broad-scale acceptance of (1) one of the four classical schools of law; (2) adherence to the Ash’ari or Maturidi schools in regard to creed; and, (3) a custom-laden Sufism closely tied to saints and ideas about the hierarchy of saints, to spiritual guides (*pirs* or *murshids*), to the veneration of tombs of saints, and to the set of associated rituals and beliefs. In brief, it is the broad (although not wholly uncritical) acceptance of

Typically, the Barelvi school, founded by Imam Ahmad Raza Khan (1856-1921) is seen as the scholarly vanguard for Sunni traditionalism while its rival Deobandi school, associated with names such as Mawlana Rashid Ahmad Gangohi (1829-1905) and Mawlana Ashraf Ali Thanawi (1863-1943), champions the reformist cause. While the two schools' attitudes towards customary practices may be their most obvious difference, the conflict between those schools is historically more of a doctrinal one. The Barelvi school believes that the Prophet's spirit can move about and be present at religious gatherings and followers hold this to be the orthodox position in this matter. They have also accused some leading Deobandi scholars of demeaning the status of the Prophet (SAW), although the latter refute the charge. Consequently, Barelvis see themselves as upholding true Sunni doctrine and refer to themselves as 'Sunnis' and do not see the Deobandis as truly such. Of course, the Deobandis reject this, and consider themselves, in their turn, as the 'true' champions of the Sunna or Prophetic Way. In fact, a precipitating factor behind the emergence of the Deobandi school was their view that Muslims needed to reacquire themselves with the Prophetic way and for this reason the school places a dominant focus on the study of hadith.⁹

The Deobandi school has also been closely associated with the longstanding and largely successful missionary movement, the Tablighi Jamaat, which was founded in 1926 by Muhammad Ilyas Kandhalvi (1885-1944) and which continues to act as a mass-based conduit for Deobandi teachings. The Tablighi Jamaat has proved to be an exceptionally effective vehicle in popularizing the Deobandi doctrine, responding to a seeming

the religious traditions that have been handed down through generations. On the contrary, Sunni reformism, epitomized in the Indian subcontinent by the Deobandi school, would accept (1) and (2) above, and while they would also consider the discipline of Sufism as essential, they would object to many of the custom-laden practices associated with the phenomenon. For the reformists, it is essential to reform such traditions since many are considered to be in conflict with what they regarded as the true teachings of Islam. See, for example, Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 149-150; 265-267.

9 Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 100-101; Usha Sanyal, "Generational changes in the leadership of the Ahl-e Sunnat movement in North India during the twentieth century," *Modern Asian Studies* 32, 1998, 635-656.

need among many to experience an uncomplicated, palpable Islam.¹⁰

The Bareilvi school, in contrast, lacked a missionary arm and some of its more prominent proponents in Pakistan felt the need both to counter and to match the appeal of the Tablighi Jamaat by launching a similar movement. Such considerations probably played a role when a Karachi-based Bareilvi scholar, Mawlana Ilyas Attari Qadiri (1950-), assisted by a few companions, founded Dawate Islami in 1981.¹¹

Dawate Islami describes itself as a “global non-political movement for the propagation of the Holy Quran and Sunnah”¹² in line with the Qur’anic command: “And let there be such a group among you that may call towards goodness and command what is righteous and prevent evil. And the very same attained their goals.” (Quran 3:104)¹³ The movement’s understanding of this order is explicitly predicated upon its explanation by the Sunni traditionalist Qur’anic commentator Mufti Ahmad Yaar Khan:

O Muslims! There should be one such movement amongst you, or you have to launch one such movement on [a] permanent basis that calls all the impious people towards righteousness, the unbelievers towards Islamic faith, the transgressors towards piety, the heedless towards awareness, the ignorant towards Islamic knowledge and gnosis, the reserved ones towards the pleasure of (Divine) devotion and those in oblivion towards consciousness. Similarly, this movement ought to enforce correct beliefs, good manners and good deeds by preaching, by writings, physically, forcefully, softly and (a ruler to his subjects) strictly. Further, this movement ought to prevent people

10 For a portrait that captures some of this simplicity and palpability, see Ernesto Braam, “Travelling with the Tablighi Jamaat in South Thailand,” *ISIM Review*, 17, Spring 2006, 42-43.

11 Gugler, “Making Muslims,” 340.

12 Dawat-e-Islami. *Dawat-e-Islami*. <http://www.dawateislami.net/home.do?jsessioid=25256DFFECE120E388BF749DF4F02083.as1> (accessed 4 February 2013).

13 Markazi Majlis-e-Shura, “Introduction to Dawate Islami,” *Dawat-e-Islami*. <http://data2.dawateislami.net/Data/Books/Download/en/pdf/2005/6-1.pdf> (accessed 4 February 2013), 1-2.

from false beliefs, ill manners, bad deeds, evil intentions and evil thoughts by tongue and heart, by writings and even by force (as per one's authority).¹⁴

It is in the light of this Qur'anic verse and its interpretation that Dawate Islami appears to have formulated its ubiquitous motto: "I must strive to rectify myself and the people of the whole world."¹⁵ This rectification, however, is not an amorphous one, but it is tied to a specific genealogy in Islamic thought and practice. This genealogy is described in a long passage in the booklet "Introduction to Dawate Islami." The passage begins by restating the fundamental aim of the movement as follows:

The fundamental aim of Dawat-e-Islami is to spread 'Islamism' to the people of the world in such a way that preachers promote Islamic preaching remaining steadfast in Sunnah and leaving 'debating refutation' to the scholars of Ahl-e-Sunnat who are expert in this field.¹⁶

Although there is an intriguing reference to 'Islamism' here, it is probably better not to make too much of this in the conventional sense of 'political Islam,' given that the movement describes itself as avowedly 'non-political.' A better description of its mission is provided by the next sentence in the passage which clearly understands this 'Islamism' as immersion into the Sunna, or Prophetic example:

'Islamism' here refers to the words and actions of the beloved and blessed Prophet [sallalāhu alayhi wasallam] [...]"¹⁷

This emphasis on the Sunna has led Gugler to term the activities of the movement as 'Sunnaization':

14 *Ibid.* 2.

15 *Ibid.* 2-3.

16 *Ibid.* 42.

17 *Ibid.*

As missionary efforts of internal conversion aim to protect Muslims from secular lifestyles, members are encouraged to Islamize – or more precisely “Sunnaize” – clothing style, speech and behaviour in their everyday lives, staging their *imitatio Muhammadi* in public spaces.¹⁸

However, a focus on external markers of the Sunna (which, incidentally, is shared by its rival movement Tablighi Jamaat) only partially conveys the essence of the movement. The passage continues and shows clearly that the movement is calling for an understanding of the Sunna *as expressed by the great scholars and saints of Islam*, which represents, in essence, the ‘traditionalism’ of Dawate Islami:

[Words and actions of the Prophet which] were firmly adopted by Sayyiduna Imam Abu Hanifah, Sayyiduna Imam Malik, Sayyiduna Imam Shafi‘i and Sayyiduna Imam Aḥmad Bin Ḥanbal, which were disseminated by Sayyiduna Imam Abul Ḥasan Ash‘ari and Sayyiduna Imam Abu Maṣṣur Maturidi, which were acted upon by the Sovereign of Baghdad, Ghauš Pak, Sayyiduna Shaykh ‘Abdul Qadir Jilani, Gharib Nawaz, Sayyiduna Khuwajah Mu‘in[uddin] Chishti, Sayyiduna Shaykh Shahab[uddin] Suharwardi and Sayyiduna Shaykh Baha[uddin] Naqshbandi, which were accepted by the scholars of the Ahl-e-Sunnat; for example, the author of Rad-dul-Mutar, Khatim-ul-Fuqaha, Sayyiduna Shaykh Sayyid Muhammad Aminuddin Ibn ‘Abidin Shami, Sayyiduna Shah Mulla Jiwan Hindi, Sayyiduna Shah ‘Abdul ‘Aziz [Muhaddis] Dihlvi and many others.¹⁹

Then, more fundamentally, the aim of Dawate Islamiis to engender a spiritual transformation among its adherents by attaching themselves to the understandings of the Sufi sages mentioned in the above passage,

18 Gugler, “Making Muslims,” 341.

19 Markazi Majlis-e-Shura, “Introduction to Dawate Islami,” 42.

which in turn also implies the scrupulous following of a *madhhab* (classical jurisprudential school) as well as adherence to correct doctrine as articulated by the Ash'ari/Maturidi theological schools.

The movement sees a crystallization of such 'correct state, correct practice, correct doctrine' in the *maslak* (Arabic term for 'path' or 'praxis') of Imam Ahmad Raza Khan, considered as the 'Reviver' [*mujaddid*] of the traditionalist Sunni perspective in the South Asian context. This is why the focus on the adoption of the Sunnas is coupled with an emphasis on the adherence to his perspective and his *maslak*:

[...] particularly [the *maslak* of] A'la Ḥazrat, Imam of Ahl-e-Sunnat, eradicator of Bid'ah, Mujaddid of Ummah, reviver of Sunnah, scholar of Shari'ah, guide of Ṭariqah, 'Allamah, Mawlana, Al-Ḥaj Al-Ḥafiz, Al-Qari Ash-Shah Imam Aḥmad Raza Khan who has clearly elaborated the doctrine (of the above saints of Islam) in his exceptionally beneficial books such as Al-Mu'tamad-ul-Mustanad, Tamhid-ul-Iman, Ḥussam-ul-Ḥaramayn etc. All Islamic brothers and sisters must firmly hold fast to the Maslak [i.e. praxis and doctrine] of A'la Ḥazrat [the honorific title for Imam Ahmad Raza]. The Maslak of A'la Ḥazrat is the very same as was that of the Prophet's companions and the saints of Islam.²⁰

In an important way, then, Dawate Islami is about more than a formal 'Sunnaization:' it is perhaps more crucially about *traditionalist Sunnaization*, partially conceived in opposition to and as a response to the 'reformist Sunnaization' advocated by the Deobandis.

The members of the movement are distinguished by their uniform: a green turban, traditional white robes and a white shawl, all of which are believed to be in conformity with the Sunna. They also use a booklet titled *Madani In'amat* (The Blessings of Medina) which acts as a handbook of the ideal Muslim life. The booklet is essentially a checklist to measure how one is acting according to the Sunna, and members are encouraged

20 *Ibid.*

regularly to record their progress in this regard.²¹ The booklet also encourages acts that will lead to further immersion in the Sunna, such as the regular reading of the movement's principal text, authored by Mawlana Ilyas, entitled *Faizan e Sunnat*.²² The intention is quite evidently to habituate members to the desired pattern of living. The awareness of the Sunna mode of living is reinforced by other important group activities. These include: daily textual reading from the works of the scholars in their tradition, particularly those of Imam Ahmad Raza and Mawlana Ilyas Attari Qadiri; the weekly Thursday night gathering of *dhikr* (devotional litanies); and, the missionary trips (*qafilahs*) of varying lengths that members are encouraged to undertake. Individual efforts and initiatives on the part of members, such as talking to non-Muslims about Islam or inviting fellow Muslims to the weekly gatherings, are also a frequently lauded quality and it appears that the success of the group as a whole is contingent upon such endeavours.²³ To a certain extent, the Dawate Islami counters the Tablighi Jamaat's success through replication. Its daily readings of texts echo the Tablighi Jamaat's 'Kitaab reading,' and Dawate's 'caravans' to communicate their message are akin to the *gash* ('patrolling'), *khurūj* ('going out') or travel that is so characteristic of the Tablighi Jamaat.²⁴

Guided by Mawlana Ilyas's teachings, Dawate has also made extensive forays into several areas. Examples include the following: female education; the setting up of educational institutes at various levels; the construction of mosques; the training of pilgrims; outreach to those with disabilities (termed 'special' members of the movement); work among prisoners; research and media services (including preparing editions of Imam Ahmad Raza's works in a way that suits 'the needs of the present age'); a *fatwa* (legal opinion) department; spiritual treatment stalls

21 Muhammad Ilyas Attari (Qadiri Rizvi), *92 Madani In'amat*, n.d: Dawate Islami, n.d.

22 Translated as "Blessings of Sunnah," Dawate Islami, Karachi, 1427AH.

23 Dawat-e-Islami. *Dawat-e-Islami*. 4 February 2013. <http://www.dawateislami.net/home.do?sessionid=25256DFFECE120E388BF749DF4F02083.as1> (accessed 4 February 2013), 6-7, 11-12, 20.

24 For the significance of travel among the Tablighi Jamaat see Muhammad Khalid Masud, "Travellers in faith," *ISIM Newsletter*, 6, 2000, 5.

involving the use of amulets (*ta'āwīdh*) authorized by Mawlana Ilyas; a vigorous internet presence; and perhaps most visibly, their own television channel, the 'Madani Channel.'²⁵

As a result, the Dawate Islami has become a complex, multi-layered organization. It now comprises sixty-three departments which address the areas mentioned above and includes a substantial administration section consisting of finance, assets, hiring and security departments.²⁶ There are *negrans* (overseers) at all levels to ensure the smooth functioning of the organization.

Such a large scale expansion can be attributed to the rapid success the movement has enjoyed in attracting new members and in spreading to different countries. While there is no official estimate of membership, newspapers provide figures of "hundreds of thousands of members"²⁷ and its annual three-day *ijtimā'* (gathering) in Multan (Punjab, Pakistan) attracts approximately 1.5 million people.²⁸

Much of the success of the movement can be attributed to Mawlana Ilyas himself, who is seen as:

a symbol of past saints in attributes like fear of Allah, deep devotion to the beloved Prophet, zeal and determination for following Quran & Sunnah, and for reviving Sunnah, piety, forgiveness, perseverance, patience, thankfulness, humility, simplicity, sincerity, asceticism, good manners, absolute disinterest in the world, concern about the protection of faith, ambition to spread religious knowledge and reforming the Muslims.²⁹

A Sufi *shaykh* in the Qādiri order, Mawlana Ilyas is a disciple of Mawlana Ziauddin Madani Qadiri (d. 1981) of Medina (Saudi Arabia), who in turn

25 See Markazi Majlis-e-Shura, "Introduction to Dawate Islami."

26 Ibid. 52-53.

27 Kamran Yousaf, "Dawat-e-Islami comes under military's radar," *The Express Tribune*, 12 September 2011.

28 CIF International Association, *Shaikh Muhammad Ilyas Atar Qadri*, 2 February 2013, <http://www.cifiaonline.com/shaikhilyasatarqadri.htm> (accessed 2 February 2013).

29 Markazi Majlis-e-Shura, "Introduction to Dawate Islami," 4.

was a deputy of Imam Ahmad Raza. Members of the movement will usually take the formal pledge of allegiance (*bay'a*) to the Qādiri order through him. His disciples see themselves as belonging to the *Rizvi Attari* branch of the Qādiri order; 'Rizvi' being a reference to Imam Ahmad Raza, and the sub-branch and 'Attari,' being a reference to Mawlana Ilyas.³⁰ Through his role as a Sufi instructor, Mawlana Ilyas is credited by the Dawate Islami with the spiritual transformation of countless lives in Pakistan, especially among the youth.³¹

The South African chapter of Dawate Islami was formed in 1996 against the backdrop of a strong contemporaneous Sunni reformist current in South Africa. While Sunni traditionalism had firm roots among the early traders and indentured labourers who settled in KwaZulu Natal and Gauteng, it gradually wilted against the rising tide of Deobandism and its missionary arm, the Tablighi Jamaat, which has come to dominate much of the Islamic landscape in these provinces, mirroring similar trends internationally.

The South African chapter has at least ten thousand members, according to information recently received by the author of this essay from the chapter's religious head Mufti Abdun Nabi Hamidi. It is gaining increasing visibility in some urban parts of South Africa, both because of the

30 CIF, *Shaykh Muhammad Ilyas*.

31 "Through the platform of Dawat-e-Islami, he has brought a Madani revolution in the lives of millions of Muslims, especially the young Islamic brothers and sisters. Many sinful youths repented of their sins, adopting a pious way of life. Those previously not offering salah not only started offering salah but also many progressed even further becoming the Imams of Masajid; disobedient and rude offspring began to respect and obey their parents; those wandering in the dark valley of Kufr (unbelief) were blessed with the light of Islam; those dreaming of the sensual beauty of European countries became anxious and desirous of beholding the beauty of the Holy Kabah and the grand green dome of beloved Madinah; those who used to get worried and grieved about their apparently serious looking worldly matters got the Madani mindset of pondering over their afterlife; those fond of reading romantic and filthy novels got attracted to reading the books and booklets of the scholars of Ahl-e-Sunnat ... those fond of excursions started travelling with Madani Qafilahs [the periodic tours of the movement] in the path of Allah; those whose aim was just to accumulate the wealth of the world adopted the Madani aim, 'I must strive to rectify myself and the people of the entire world.'" Markazi Majlis-e-Shura, "Introduction to Dawate Islami," 4-5.

distinctive dress characteristic of the movement and for the infrastructure it has set up to support its activities. To date, it has a centre in Pretoria, a three-storey mosque in Mayfair (Johannesburg), a religious seminary (*Darul Uloom*) in Lenasia South, a mosque and several Islamic schools (*madrassas*) in Durban, and a mosque that is being established in Polokwane (Limpopo). Other mosques have been made available for Dawate Islami activities in Cape Town and elsewhere, by Muslims who sympathize with its mission. South Africa has also acted as a base for further expansion to Uganda, Mozambique, Kenya, Lesotho and Mauritius.³²

Portraits of Dawate Islami Activists in South Africa

How and why are Dawate Islami members in South Africa drawn to this movement? Since we are ultimately concerned about why people attach themselves to the movement in the way they do, the more appropriate approach must be to use in-depth interviews of selected members rather than surveys of the chapter as a whole, regardless of how valuable these surveys may be in other contexts. This concern also dictates that we choose committed members, and not those who are nominal or disaffected, since the intention is to understand *attachment* and not disaffection or uninterest.

For this reason two senior, active members of the movement have been chosen. These are: Abdun Nabi Hamidi (widely known as Mufti Hamidi) and Amirudeen Kajee (better known as Kajee Saheb). Pakistani born and trained Mufti Hamidi is a traditional Islamic scholar and has been the religious head of the South African chapter of Dawate Islami from its inception in 2003; in that position he has overseen and guided its membership and various projects in the country. South African born and bred Kajee Saheb joined the movement in 2001. A chemist by training, he now works in that profession only part-time in order to devote himself more fully to the movement. The following sections sketch how the two members, from different backgrounds, trace and experience their involvement in Dawate Islami.

32 The numbers mentioned are based on information provided to the author by Mufti Hamidi.

Mufti Abdun Nabi Hamidi:³³ Activism as a Practice

Abdun Nabi Hamidi was born in 1966 in the traditionalist Sunni stronghold of Chistia Sharif in Punjab province, Pakistan.³⁴ His father was a religious scholar (*‘ālim*) who graduated from ‘Bareilly Sharif,’ the Darul Uloom *Manzar-e-Islam* in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, which had been founded by Imam Ahmad Raza in 1904. He considers himself blessed to have been born into a scholarly Sunni atmosphere: “I opened my eyes in a proper, practical academic Sunni environment where there were not just mere practices but backing up [of] knowledge [with] academic issues always being discussed around us.”³⁵

His father taught him Persian but passed away while Mufti Hamidi was still quite young. He memorized the Quran and began his study of Islamic disciplines with other local scholars. In 1984 he went to Jamia Naeemia in Lahore for further instruction and completed his *‘Alim fadil* course in 1987.³⁶

In 1988, Abdun Nabi Hamidi came to South Africa, working for the Anwari Mustafa Islamic Society in Newcastle (KwaZulu-Natal) for a year before proceeding to Damascus where he attended a special year-long course in spoken Arabic. While in Damascus, he was repeatedly requested

33 The information for the following section is based on two interviews the author conducted with Mufti Hamidi on 2 May and 29 August 2012.

34 Chistia Sharif is named after Baba Tajuddin Sarwar Chisti, a grandson of the famous Chisti luminary, Baba Fariduddin Ganj Shahr (1173/1188-1266/1280). Baba Fariduddin sent Baba Tajuddin to the area to fight against Sikhs who, Mufti Hamidi states: “were trying to prevent the growth of Islam.” Baba Tajuddin was killed in the battle and was buried in what is now Chistia Sharif, “the centre of the Chistis”, says Mufti Hamidi in explaining its name. Interview with Mufti Abdun Nabi Hamidi, Lenasia, 2 May 2012.

35 Interview, Mufti Hamidi, 2 May 2012.

36 His title ‘Mufti’ was not acquired through any formal *iftā’* programme. In his view, there is really no ‘special study’ for *iftā’* and the title is acquired by spending more time with teachers and picking up ‘extra points’ on how to give *fatāwā*. A potential mufti has to be well-versed in *fiqh* and *uṣūl al-fiqh* and certain rules and regulations on how to give *fatāwā*; not many people meet these requirements. These rules are contained in books such as *Rasm al-Muftī* by ‘Allāmah Shāmī but the main issue is ‘all about experience in the field of Islamic jurisprudence.’ A mufti has a mind that understands an issue and that looks at its solution from all angles, keeping in mind the Qur’ān, hadīth and the *juz’iyāt* [particulars] of *fiqh*. He believes that this comes from experience, not from special study or a special degree. A mufti is a person

to take up another offer of employment at the Society. Although he had planned to return to Pakistan, he felt that the persistent offer was God's way of giving him an opportunity to 'serve the *dīn* (religion)' and that, if refused, it might anger God. He consequently settled in South Africa in 1990. In South Africa, he took up a number of consecutive posts: "When I complete something [...] I somehow go on to another place to complete something else. The reasons are ... the causes are always natural."³⁷

He initially worked in Newcastle with the Anwar-e Mustafa Islamic society for three years, until their mosque was completed. He then took up a post in Benoni (Gauteng) for another two years where he was also involved in building a mosque. Subsequently, he became imam at the Sultan Bahu centre in Mayfair, Johannesburg where he spent eight years. Since 2003, he has been engaged as the full-time religious head of Dawate Islami's South African chapter and has been instrumental in setting up its institutions and being a teacher and guide to its members.

During this time, he became prominent in traditionalist Sunni circles as a debater, writer and speaker. He has debated with South African Deobandi scholars on issues that fuel the Barelvi-Deobandi divide³⁸ and has written short works on loud *dhikr* (repetitive remembrance of God),³⁹

who is 'practically' in Darul Iftā' and who "is doing the work. If he is not doing the work after a while then he is no more [a] mufti. And if after that he again decides to undertake iftā' duties he goes back to being a mufti- it's a 'practical title.'" While he studied all that was needed, he did not introduce himself as a mufti. He was called a "Mawlana" originally and was issuing fatāwā under this title. When he joined Dawate Islami, its founder Mawlāna Ilyās Qādīri invited him to join a discussion among muftis on rulings relating to the use of alcohol in perfume, the wearing of jewellery and similar topics. The muftis had come 'prepared' and Mufti Hamidi was there as a guest. He offered his input where he could, pleasing Mawlāna Ilyās Qādīri who told him "You are a mufti." He then became known by this title.

37 Interview, Mufti Hamidi, 2 May 2012.

38 The debate with Mawlana Sema in 1990 was on whether Deobandis admit that there are insults directed at the Prophet in the works of the prominent Deobandi scholar, Mawlānā Ashraf Ali Thanawi. The debate with Mawlānā Abdul Razack concerned the issue of "*imkān al-Kidhb*;" that is, whether it is possible for Allah to lie, a position the Barelwis accuse the Deobandis of holding.

39 "The permissibility of loud Zikr in the masjid and elsewhere and a reply to Mufti Elias," <http://www.nooremadinah.net/EnglishBooks/LoudZikar/Loud-ZikarPrint.asp>(Last accessed 14 May 2014)

three-in-one *ṭalāq* (divorce),⁴⁰ *mawḷūd* (Prophet's birth celebration),⁴¹ and Sufi ethics.⁴² He is especially well-known as a speaker, frequently giving lectures and lessons at national and international levels. He also features regularly on Madani Channel, Dawate Islami's satellite television station.

In explaining the reasons for his activism, Mufti Hamidi says that while growing up, everybody in his environment was automatically assumed to be a traditionalist Sunni. Non-traditionalist Sunnis posed no real threat and there was no need for activism at that stage:

You become activist when you see that there is a threat to your identity, to your recognition, to your rights. And then you put extra effort and try to make people understand what we stand for and what are our viewpoints on different issues. [...] In many areas where we are misunderstood we need to remove this misunderstanding.⁴³

When he moved to South Africa in 1990, Mufti Hamidi felt that in that country, the traditionalist Sunni worldview was indeed under threat. This drew him to the type of activist conduct that has characterized his stay in that country. This conduct involved educating people in the "[traditionalist] Sunni 'aqā'id [beliefs] and practices"⁴⁴ and countering the allegations raised by reformist opponents. In particular, he has sought to reassure his audiences that traditionalist Sunni beliefs and practices were based on sound proofs grounded in the Qur'an, hadith and the ways of the elders: specifically, the scholars and Sufi sages mentioned above. According to Mufti Hamidi, these are elders who are recognized by Muslim society as a whole 'for their piety.'

40 "The question of three divorces," <http://www.trueislam.info/Bookslibrary/EnglishBooks/27ThreeDivorces/index.htm>

41 "Yes, Milad celebration is commendable (point by point reply to Majlis-il-Ulema)" (Last accessed 14 May 2014) <http://www.nooremadinah.net/Documents/YaMohammad/MiladCelebrationisCommendable/MiladCelebrationisCommendable6.asp> (Last accessed 14 May 2014)

42 "The spiritual guide (Murshid) and the seeker (mureed)" http://www.raza.org.za/publications_murshid_and_mureed.html (Last accessed 14 May 2014)

43 Interview, Mufti Hamidi, 2 May 2012.

44 *Ibid.*

His activism is aimed at both those who subscribe to Sunni traditionalism and those who do not. He believes that in addressing both these groups he is following the approach of the religious scholars (*'ulāmā'*):⁴⁵

This is my well-known characteristic in this country. As much as I have attacked the outsiders, I have attacked the insiders as well. The purpose of attacking is not the people, but the wrong things. [...] They feel they are being attacked. If somebody is doing something wrong in the name of *taṣawwuf* (Sufism), I will condemn it. [...] My fight is with evil: whether the evil is in my home or whether the evil is outside my home, I'm going to fight that, *in sha' Allāh* [so God will].⁴⁶

As examples of Mufti Hamidi's criticism of his fellow Sunni traditionalists, one can mention the fact that he perceives traditionalist Sunni Muslims in South Africa as being innately generous, but also capable of being duped. Having been isolated internationally during the days of Apartheid, they are susceptible to some Sufi leaders (*pirs* and *shaykhs*) who 'play with their emotions and rip them off.' In contrast, he has sought to steer them in making their contributions to mosques, Islamic schools and religious causes generally. Many traditionalist Sunnis, in his view, had only understood one type of charity, which is to help contribute food to a religious festivity in honour of a Saint (*'urs*), or during the month of Ramadan, for example. However, "people eat, and they go on and they forget."⁴⁷ Rather, he has advised potential donors to spend 'that hundred thousand rand' on a library or on scholarships for students. People who have become close to him "now think along the same lines."⁴⁸

45 In this regard he draws inspiration from Imam Ahmad Raza Khan who, in a poetic verse (as quoted by Mufti Hamidi) says to God that on one side are the enemies of Islam and on the other are the 'jealous' ones (the latter being from within the house) and that between the two he (Imam Ahmad Raza) is alone and needs Allah's help.

46 Interview, Mufti Hamidi, 2 May 2012.

47 *Ibid.*

48 *Ibid.*

When he was younger, he tended to be confrontational and combative, seeking to debate and challenge the opposition. But as he grew “older and wiser”⁴⁹, he realized that this is not ‘really helping.’ Winning debates provided a temporary good feeling but had no lasting consequences. In any event, he also realized that people’s mind-sets are not really changed through debate, as they tend to hold onto their preconceived notions.⁵⁰

It dawned upon him that what was really needed was ‘more work;’ that is, building more mosques, religious seminaries (*Darul Uloom*) and madrasas (Arabic for schools, here intended as ‘religious schools’), as well as making more people involved. The intention was to create more awareness regarding traditionalist Sunni tenets of faith and Sunni personalities such as Imam Ahmad Raza: “When I started thinking along these lines, Dawate Islami made perfect sense to me.” This approach worked constructively rather than retroactively in promoting Sunni beliefs. It also did not make opponents ‘famous’ by criticising them. Ever since adopting this perspective, Mufti Hamidi has actively sought to “avoid confrontation and debates.”⁵¹

He describes his entry into Dawate Islami as the response to a ‘pain’ he felt within him when he was at Sultan Bahu: that painful feeling was growing out of the awareness that the traditionalist Sunnis were not doing much to grow and defend themselves. They would just become involved once a year with activities such as the *mawlūd* or an ‘urs; furthermore, even these activities “were not happening under the

49 *Ibid.*

50 This applies to those from within the Sunni perspective as well. Mufti Hamidi quotes an incident when posters were put up, claiming that he had won a debate prior to the actual occurrence of the event! Interview, Mufti Hamidi, 2 May 2012.

51 While his approach might have changed, his views have not changed towards the Tablighis and Deobandis, the main opponents of the traditionalist Sunnis. For him, the theological ‘insults’ directed by the Deobandi scholars at the tenets of what he believes to be Orthodox Islam are still there and these have not been retracted. If anything, he has indeed become ‘harder’ towards these groups. He may have tolerated ‘get-togethers’ in the past with regard to issues of mutual concern but he will not do so readily anymore since he believes they are not sincere. He adds that they ‘use you’ at such occasions but their ‘inside[s] cannot be reached.’ Interview, Mufti Hamidi, 2 May 2012.

correct guidance.”⁵² Many traditionalist Sunni resources “were also being wasted.”⁵³ There was no outreach programme or plan for going from house to house, calling on people and personally speaking to them: “Many innocent, naïve people who belong nowhere”⁵⁴ become easily susceptible to invitations by ‘Wahhabis and Deobandis,’ while traditionalist Sunnis are not active in the missionary outreach. Mufti Hamidi wondered at the time whether traditionalist Sunnis should not start something similar but was discouraged because this would require a movement. He was also discouraged because many traditionalist Sunnis believe that the Tablighi mode of propagation is wrong, whereas he believes that it is really their tenets of faith that are incorrect, not their methodology. He was also concerned that other Muslim scholars would believe that he was simply copying the Tablighis.

While his thoughts were moving in this direction, ‘these visitors from Pakistan came to Sultan Bahu.’ They were Dawate Islami members. Mufti Hamidi looked at their plans, programme and method of working and saw that this was what he needed. Thus, it was traditionalist Sunni, had a large following in a number of countries, and was a wheel that was already moving; not one that he would have to reinvent. He came to the realization that he had to jump off his ‘boat’ onto the ‘ship’ of the Dawate Islami.

The fact that the extremely busy Mawlana Ilyas Attari Qadiri phoned and personally thanked him for opening the doors of the Sultan Bahu mosque to Dawate Islami made a deep impression and drew him even closer to the movement. He eventually met Mawlana Ilyas and reports he was overwhelmed by his personality and the intense love and devotion he commanded from multitudes of people.⁵⁵

Although now part of the movement, he did not become a spiritual disciple (*murīd*) of Mawlana Ilyas since he considered himself to be a disciple of his *shaykh*, Mawlana Fazlu Rahman Madani, who had

52 Interview, Mufti Hamidi, 2 May 2012.

53 *Ibid.*

54 *Ibid.*

55 *Ibid.*

inducted and trained him in Sufism and in the *tariqa* Qadiriyya.⁵⁶ Mufti Hamidi regards his spiritual training under his previous *shaykh* and his subsequent association with Dawate Islami as a ‘natural progression’: he had become a disciple for personal spiritual growth,⁵⁷ while his turning to Dawate Islami was for its ‘work’.

On the subject of the factors that sustain his activism, Mufti Hamidi believes that everybody should do the work of inviting others to Islamic ‘renewal’ (*tajdid*). He holds that one cannot simply leave people to do whatever they wish in the name of free will. One feature that attracts him to Dawate Islami, in particular, is that this work is done in a very organized way with many people involved, together with training programmes and back-up support. The work relies on a system, not on personalities:

Personalities can change. They can become corrupt. They can get sick. They can die. They can migrate. What happens

56 Mufti Hamidi is a disciple of Mawlana Fazlu Rahman Madani of Madinah, the son of Mawlana Ziauddin Madani. As was noted, Mawlana Ilyas Qadiri is a disciple and deputy of Mawlana Ziauddin Madani, who in turn was a disciple of Mawlānā Ahmad Raza Khan. Mawlana Fazlur Rahman Madani is a disciple and deputy of Imam Ahmad Raza Khan’s son, Mufti Mustafa Raza Khan (known popularly as “Mufti-e-Azam”). “In this way we belong to the same family,” says Mufti Hamidi in regard to his connection with Mawlana Ilyas. He has also been given permission by Mawlana Ilyas to initiate disciples on behalf of the latter. And although he was given permission by his own Shaykh (Fazlu Rahman Madani) to initiate disciples, he now mostly does initiation on behalf of Mawlana Ilyas.

57 These are some of Mufti Hamidi’s views on *ruhaniyat* or spirituality: “*Ruhaniyat* is not about miracles and things happening in the unseen world. *Ruhaniyat* is the consciousness of the presence of your Lord in your actions. It’s got to do with intentions. It is that connection that makes you aware that Allah is watching you. . [...] As far as unseen help is concerned, it is a fact of the seen world. We see in this world the unseen help. For example, as at the Battle of Badr. Miracles are a reality: for a *walī* (saint) to see his *murīd* (disciple) from afar, for example, as also shown by ‘Umar (*radiya Allah ‘anhu*) when he called Sariyah. The danger is that a lot of ignorant people live in a fantasy world as far as *ruhaniyat* is concerned. *Ruhaniyat* to them is concerned with jinn and black magic and they try to excite and mesmerize people with these. This is a distortion of *ruhaniyat*. *Ruhaniyat* is to be a practical Muslim, to do your *ibadat* (acts of worship) with good intentions, to have control over your *nafs* (self), to ensure that from the beginning to the end of an act of worship your intention does not change and to reach people’s consciences about the presence of Allah. One cannot separate *ruhaniyat* from Islam. It is the type of Islam that the Prophet, the Salutations and Peace of Allah be upon him, gave us.” Interview, Mufti Hamidi, 2 May 2012.

to the work that has been established in that area? [...]
 When the personality is gone, the work is gone. I feel that if
 I make a contribution, it must be sustainable. I am positive
 that whatever effort I put in the work of Dawate Islami,
 that [contribution] would remain for a very long time. And
inshā' Allah, I will gain reward for it.⁵⁸

While his faith and his certitude are both an intrinsic part of his being a Muslim, he feels he needs to acquire 'lots of rewards' through performing good deeds for these will help "on the Day everybody will be in trouble."⁵⁹ This feeling is what motivates him in his day-to-day work with Dawate Islami.

Fundamentally, Muft Hamidi believes that a Muslim's faith should be based on certainty regarding the matters of creed of the afterlife such as the Day of Judgment, the Scale of Deeds, and accountability. It is this certainty that makes one a 'responsible, practical Muslim.' Conversely, irresponsibility as a Muslim correlates with a lack of certainty in one's beliefs.

He is confident that the path of faith that he follows is correct because it tallies with faith as understood and practised 'by the vast majority of Muslims.' Dawate Islami is not promoting anything new: he feels that 'it is the old mainstream faith that has always existed,' although the methodology of the movement appears to be new. This path of faith finds its affirmation in "a standard of consensus, [...] a standard of mainstream thinking that has been guaranteed by the founder of this religion."⁶⁰ That standard is the statement of the Prophet: "*Ittabi'ū sawād al-a'zam*" which Mufti Hamidi translates and explains as: "Follow the mainstream when there is a dispute." He declares that if one applies this standard, one will find that most Muslims throughout the ages were the followers of the *Ahl al-Sunna wa'l-Jamā'a*:

58 Interview with Mufti Abdun Nabi Hamidi, Lenasia, 29 August 2012.

59 *Ibid.* By the "Day" Mufti Hamidi here means the Day of Judgment.

60 *Ibid.*

Any scholar you name ... any *walī* (Sufi saint) you name ... any pious personality you name ... they were of [this] ‘*aqīdah*’ (belief). This is the guarantee of the path. So you tally your faith with the *ṣaḥāba kirām* (the noble companions), the *tābī’in* (the second generation of Muslims), the *tābī’ī t-tābī’in*, with [...] Imām al-Ghazālī, [...] with Imām Rāzī, Imām Jalāluddīn Suyūṭī, [...] with Imām Bukhārī, with Shaykh Abdul Ḥaqq Muḥaddith Dihlawī, with Imam Ahmad Raza Bareilvi, with ‘Allāmah Yūsuf Nabahānī – these are heroes.⁶¹

Within this community established on the consensus of the above-mentioned ‘*ulamā*’, Mufti Hamidi acknowledges that personal spiritual experiences such as dreams and visions of the Holy Prophet, and of pious people, play a significant role in validating and strengthening one’s personal faith and in preparing one’s self for a ‘good end’ and ‘successful hereafter.’ He believes that many ‘pious elders’ had experienced faith in this personal way and because of this they were ‘very strong people’ who could not be changed or swayed by worldly threats and challenges. Of course, for Mufti Hamidi and Dawate Islami such palpable faith and spiritual resolve is achieved by attaching one’s self to a qualified Sufi *shaykh*.

While Mufti Hamidi finds the recitation of litanies (*wazā’if*) and intimate conversations with God (*munājāt*) to be effective spiritual resources, ‘what works like a bullet’ is, according to him, spiritual companionship (*suḥbah*). He says: “There is nothing stronger than the *ṣuḥba* of a person who is awake, who is conscious, who has learnt the art of how to use his tongue, how to use his eyes, how to use his ears, how to be human ...” Such company, he continues, is very seldom found but when it is, it must be seized. He has actively sought such company and sees himself as being blessed in having found it. Such company should be sought with one who is a qualified ‘*ālim*’ (religious scholar) and who is a true ‘*āshiq*’ (lover) of the Prophet. “You see in his sitting and standing, in his eating and drinking, talking and every movement he makes, [that] the Sunna of the beloved

61 *Ibid*.

nabī (Prophet) – *ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* – is being practised. That’s the person who will open your heart.”⁶²

Reflecting on Mufti Hamidi’s Journey

How do we make sense of Mufti Hamidi’s journey in terms that would be faithful to his worldview? Talal Asad’s notions of ‘tradition,’ ‘discourse’ and ‘practice’ might be quite pertinent in this regard. Asad describes the interconnection between these three concepts as follows:

A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. These discourses relate conceptually to a past (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and a future (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through a present (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions).⁶³

Quite clearly, Mufti Hamidi locates himself within a specific genealogy of Sunni tradition. It is his commitment to this genealogy, located in the teachings of Imam Ahmed Raza Khan, which shapes, for instance, his particular views on the Deobandi School. He has aligned himself to Dawate Islami, which is a discourse within that same genealogy. In Asad’s view a discourse is a form of traditional reasoning and argument as it seeks to win people over to its worldview; Mufti Hamidi was ‘won over’ to the methods, spirit and founder of Dawate Islami. He is particularly attracted to their emphasis on ‘doing,’ thereby helping to cultivate the conditions for traditionalist Sunni practice. This ‘doing’ emerges from the

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Talal Asad, “The idea of an anthropology in Islam,” (Washington: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, March 1986), 14.

tradition and is seen as being in conformity with the methods of the pious forebears. But it is also an integral part of a discursive argument enacted by Dawate Islami members that responds to the perceived enervation within contemporary Sunni traditionalism. In other words, it is a current form of traditional reasoning that seeks to ‘secure’ traditionalist Sunni practices in the short and long term. Having been persuaded by this argument, Mufti Hamidi has now become a conduit for its propagation. And, of course, this emphasis on doing –namely, the emphasis on the adherent’s need to show his commitment in a practical way- must also be considered a practice – a practice or series of practices that secures other practices. Going on a *qafila* becomes as much part of the Dawate Islami identity as hosting a *mawlūd*.

To summarize: Mufti Hamidi was attracted by Dawate Islami’s discursive attitude towards practices. Dawate Islami, in Mufti Hamidi’s view, calls for a renewed, argued-for application of the Sunna (a collection of normative practices) in one’s individual and communal life. In Asad’s terms, it offers a discourse, or argument, centred around a set of structured practices. However this discourse and its associated practices are ultimately generated by a location within the tradition. They are, in other words, located within a history. Therefore, because this history reaches to what are considered to be the great scholars and saints of Islam, it is this location within tradition that validates this discourse and its associated practices as well as simultaneously proving, in the eyes of adherents, their efficacy.

Asad does not stop at his overview of practices. Thus, he states that practices are not done for their own sake, but are the means by which one cultivates virtues.⁶⁴ Likewise, the goal of Dawate Islami is to cultivate virtues such as “forgiveness, perseverance, patience, thankfulness, humility, simplicity”⁶⁵ that are seen to be embodied in people such as Mawlana Ilyas, and that are believed to be an outcome of their scrupulous practice of the Sunna. While Mufti Hamidi does speak of virtues that have been reinforced after joining Dawate Islami, he was clearly attracted

64 Asad, *Genealogies*, 64.

65 Markazi Majlis-e-Shura, “Introduction to Dawate Islami,” 4.

to the movement because of its activism or practices. In the case of Amirudeen Kajee, however, it appears that it was Dawate Islami's virtues that attracted him and subsequently led to his greater, and now almost full-time, practical involvement in that movement.

Kajee Saheb: Cultivating the Virtuous Self⁶⁶

Amirudeen Kajee (better known as Kajee Saheb) was born in 1953 in Tongaat, KwaZulu Natal, into a family with a traditionalist Sunni background. He was drawn to the recitation of *naat sharif*; these are mainly Urdu poems in praise and honour of the Prophet, and are emblematic of traditionalist Sunnism in the Asian subcontinent. He also became a disciple of Mawlana Ibrahim Khushtar (1930-2002), an Indian *shaykh* who followed the Barelvi school and who periodically visited South Africa.

Kajee Saheb completed a Higher Diploma in Chemistry at ML Sultan College in Durban and subsequently worked for twenty-five years for the multinational Unilever, where he was involved in product development research. He also had periods of work in Boksburg (Gauteng) and Dubai, and he is currently a consultant to a cosmetics firm in Pretoria. However, the consultancy is done on an *ad hoc* basis and he now devotes himself more fully to the activities of Dawate Islami.

He first became aware of Dawate Islami in 1994 while on Hajj, after seeing members of the movement distributing cassettes and literature. He was invited by Dawate Islami to recite *naat sharif* at their gathering in Mecca. However, his close friend at that time 'poisoned his mind' against the movement. This friend, also a Sunni traditionalist, claimed that the movement was contrary to the teachings of the Prophet. However, while working in Dubai in 2001, he again came into contact with Dawate Islami and cultivated friendships with members of the group. He was impressed by their sincerity and came to appreciate them as 'real lovers' of the Prophet. He was further prompted in their direction by Mr Aslam Fyzoo, head of Dawate Islami in South Africa, and finally, by Mufti Abdun Nabi Hamidi:

66 The following section is based on an interview with Amirudeen Kajee in Pretoria on 14 February 2013.

The final point that made me join Dawate Islami was a lecture by Mufti Abdun Nabi Hamidi. He gave an inspiring lecture and in it he described all the Sunni organizations as little boats afloat in the ocean. They are being tossed and turned by the huge waves and are finding difficulty in reaching the destination because the path is long and treacherous. However there is one huge ship sailing steadily towards its destination. He was also in one of these little boats fighting a losing battle. He decided to jump on board this ship. He asked “do you know this ship?” [...] It is Dawate Islami. Now I can reach my destination. This ship is being piloted by an experienced and seasoned captain, *Amir-e-ahle Sunnat* (“Leader of the Ahlal-Sunna”, namely, Mawlana Ilyas) and a well-trained crew.⁶⁷

He subsequently became a member of the movement and a *tālib* (spiritual student in the *tariqa*)⁶⁸ of Mawlana Ilyas.

As a member of Dawate Islami, he is involved in *neki ki dawat* (Urdu for ‘invitation to goodness’) and the dispensing of spiritual cures (*ta’wīdh*) and he has also been authorized to give lectures (*bayān*). He is also involved in a number of translation activities: he translates the lessons of the scholar who presents the first-year *Dars Nizami* course for adults in South Africa and he has also translated parts of *Faizane Sunnat*, Mawlana Ilyas’s *magnum opus*. He has also edited and proofread the *Rafiq al-Ḥaramayn* by Mawlana Ilyas, which is a guide for Hajj pilgrims, and is involved with the new translation of Imam Ahmad Raza Khan’s Qur’anic commentary, *Kanz al-Īmān*.

The main feature that attracts Kajee Saheb to Dawate Islami is what he perceives as the very spiritual personality of Mawlana Ilyas. As described by Kajee Saheb, Mawlana Ilyas lives an ascetic life, fasting

67 Interview, Amirudeen Kajee, 14 February 2013.

68 A *tālib*, as defined by Kajee Saheb, offers an opportunity for a *murīd* to continue his spiritual training under another Shaykh, especially if such a person’s own Shaykh has passed away. The *murīd*, though, is still formally attached to his original Shaykh and does not become a disciple of the other Shaykh.

every day, eating simply when he breaks his fast, and having few worldly possessions. Mawlana Ilyas's emphasis on gaining Islamic knowledge and following the religious obligations as well as the Sunna is another attraction, particularly his practice of lowering the gaze, since the eye is seen as the door to all evil suggestions. Mawlana Ilyas himself is seen as a prime exemplar of this quality.⁶⁹ Such characteristics set him apart from some other *pirs* (Sufi leaders) who, according to Kajee Saheb, come to this position through hereditary means, are financially motivated and do not give due regard to the Sharia or even claim to be beyond it. These 'false *pirs*' may even, out of jealousy, prevent their disciples from becoming students of another *shaykh*, whereas guides truly concerned with their disciples' welfare would not do this.

Above all else, Mawlana Ilyas speaks with a sincere heart and it is this sincerity that brings 'light to dark hearts.' Moreover, it sets his preaching apart from 'our preaching.' He essentially changes his disciples through his example rather than through words.

This sincerity is also manifested in members of this movement and is the reason, according to Kajee Saheb, why the movement has been so successful. Most Dawate Islami members are young and Kajee Saheb finds it remarkable that they are attracted to religion in 'this day and age.' However, they are attracted precisely because of Mawlana Ilyas's sincerity: his words have the ability to change people and his supplications can move them to tears.

According to Kajee Saheb, Mawlana Ilyas's heart is in constant *dhikr* (remembrance of God) and being connected to him helps lessen the love of the world in our own heart. Mawlana Ilyas is, in many ways, the 'shadow' of Imam Ahmad Raza Khan. In common with Imam Ahmad Raza, he has an immense love for and attachment to the Prophet. As with Imam Ahmad Raza, he appears to be divinely endowed with the capacity to carry out numerous tasks and functions; this capacity goes well beyond the normal.

69 Kajee Saheb relates that an airport official in Pakistan became a member of Dawate Islami solely because he was impressed by Mawlānā Ilyas's observance of this Sunnah when at the airport.

His foresight is additionally shown, according to Kajee Saheb, by launching Dawate Islami's television foray, *Madani Channel*, which is an important conduit by which it spreads its teachings. Mawlana Ilyas was initially very reluctant but after due consultation with Dawate Islami scholars, he decided that such a channel was the best way to combat the irreligious attitude generally prevalent on television. Kajee Saheb expresses this pithily: "one can't fight helicopter gunships with stones."⁷⁰ He also sees the success of the channel as another 'miracle' of Mawlana Ilyas.

Kajee Saheb feels that since he joined Dawate Islami his acts of worship (*'ibādāt*) have brought him a measure of 'joy'. Dawate Islami has also reinvigorated his spiritual life by bringing him back to the basics and making him conscious of the need to perform proper ritual prayer and ablutions, properly to recite the Qur'an, and so forth. These basics are important in terms of personal salvation and by emphasizing them, Mawlana Ilyas is helping 'to save the *umma*.'

Kajee Saheb's spiritual experiences as a member of the movement most prominently relate to his role as a dispenser of spiritual cures (*ta'wīdh*). These are cures that originate with Mawlana Ilyas and are thus called *ta'wīdh attari*. Kajee Saheb was amongst those trained in this field by a Dawate Islami member sent from Pakistan. These cures are for illnesses such as cancer, for barrenness and for dealing with phenomena such as *jinn* (invisible spiritual beings) and black magic. The Dawate Islami members permitted to dispense these cures are not allowed to take money nor seek publicity through them. Kajee Saheb has personally witnessed the efficacy of the cures he has dispensed and relates a number of incidents in this regard.⁷¹ This has provided added confirmation of his faith in the movement and its founder.

Speaking more generally, he finds himself more spiritually conscious, particularly in respect of keeping his gaze downwards and so avoiding temptations altogether. He finds himself less inclined to take part in permitted but ultimately frivolous activities. He also emphasizes that he

70 Interview, Amirudeen Kajee, 14 February 2013.

finds especially valuable the booklet *Madani In'amat*, which allows him to take daily stock of his deeds in a practical way, alerting him to specific sins and weaknesses that need to be overcome: this practice is what the Sufis used to call *muḥāsaba* or the examination of conscience.

Even Kajee Saheb's assessment of the challenges facing Dawate Islami is shaped by his approach to its virtues. He sees the primary challenge to the movement as the reluctance by many contemporary traditionalist Sunnis to adopt an Islam with a clannish image. Nevertheless, Kajee Saheb also makes the point that members should not fret about their seeming lack of success in a particular area but should rather view this as an opportunity for introspection. The movement should fundamentally attract people by its beauty; in other words, a state of the self which is predicated on virtue. If the movement appears not to be doing so, then members should examine their own conduct or practices and then see where they fall short. In rectifying others, the rectification of the self must continuously be kept under scrutiny.

Kajee Saheb's Reflections: an Analysis

In speaking about Muhammad Abduh's view of the moral subject, Asad observes that it presupposes the capability of *virtuous* conduct which is to be acquired through tradition-guided *practices*, namely the Sunna. "*Fiqh* [Islamic law as applied in practice]," he continues, "is critical to this process not as a set of rules to be obeyed but as the condition for the development of virtues."⁷²

If Mufti Hamidi's focus is on the practices (*fiqh* and *sunna*), then Kajee Saheb's is on the virtues: love, sincerity and the intense divine consciousness of the founder. These virtues, in turn, propel him to be more conscious of the practices of the Sharia. Practices and virtues are mutually reinforcing: practices are the preconditions to developing the virtues while virtues require practice if they are to be maintained.

71 The incidents he related included dispelling a jinn who considered himself married to the woman he inhabited, as well as curing cases of cancer and barrenness. Interview, Amirudeen Kajee, 13 February 2013.

72 Talal Asad, *Formations of the secular*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 250.

Virtues, we would further contend, give rise to new states of the self. For the adherent, these states of the self open new spiritual horizons and the experience of such horizons itself becomes an argument for the validity of the path they follow. In other words, these states of the self by themselves constitute a form of traditional reasoning for the maintenance of practices.

Kajee Saheb speaks about the sense of ‘joy’ he now experiences in his efforts to follow the correct practices and to cultivate the requisite virtues as well as the ‘beauty’ that needs to be displayed by Dawate Islami members. Such discussion of states of the self is not absent in the case of Mufti Hamidi: he mentions how observing someone (a practice) who embodies the Sunna (an embodiment that is in itself a virtue) ‘opens one’s heart’ (a state of the self). But the discussion on states of the self is clearly more pronounced with Kajee Saheb, perhaps because of his focus on virtues. The following passage is remarkable in this context. In it, Kajee Saheb is reflecting on the role that the booklet *Madani In’aat* plays in his life. He states:

[There is] one question [in the booklet that says]: did you read [your ritual prayer] with *khushū* [awe] and *ḥuḍū* [tranquillity]? *Khushū* and *ḥuḍū* mean ... you know, there is one hadith where our beloved *Rasūl* – *Ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* – said: “Worship Allah as if you see him. If you cannot see Him, be assured that he sees you.” [...] What happens to us when [we] read *ṣalāt* (ritual prayer)? As soon as you say *Allāhu akbar*, the *shayṭān* (devil) knows the power of *ṣalāt* ... [The] closest you come to Allah ... is in *ṣalāt* and the closest in *ṣalāt* is when you making *sajda* [prostration] ... how much joy [must there not be] in your *sajda*? Your heart is supposed to connect there ... It is mentioned in one hadith that Allah ... tells the angels: “Remove the *purdah* [veil] between Me and my *banda* [servant] as soon as (he says) *Allāhu Akbar*.” And *Shayṭān* knows the danger ... How many people, [when] you speak to them, [they say]: “as soon as [we] say *Allāhu*

Akbar we are not in *ṣalāt* ...” And that is what is called the deception of *Shayṭān*. It makes you feel: “I’m reading *namaz* (ritual prayer) five times a day.” Which *namaz* did you read? How many seconds did you think of Allah ...? Now, this is the danger. Therefore we’re saying, in this *Madani Inaamat* is mentioned ... you ticked: I read five *namaaz*, five *jamaat* [in congregation ... I read all my [recommended and voluntary prayers]. Then you come to the final question. Did you read with *khushū’* and *ḥuḍū’*? [And it] is zero. So which of those *namazes* were accepted? Can you recall one *sajda* that you made that connected? [For] what is *ṣalāt*? In *ṣalāt* every action shows you how to humble yourself before Allah....”⁷³

In this passage Kajee Saheb knits together in a seamless fashion the inter-relationship between the practice (the act of prostration), the virtue (continuous consciousness of God) and the state of the self (a sense of joyous connection – or its lack). Here, Kajee Saheb states that the mere formal, perfunctory act of *ṣalāt* is insufficient and, in fact, defective. It must be accompanied by humility, a virtue which in turn is predicated upon another: that is, the consciousness of God throughout the act. It is only through cultivation of these virtues that the required states of the self can be achieved: joy; ‘connection’ or intimacy with God; and, a self that can see beyond the ‘veil’. The realization of such states is not an easy process and requires a constant battle against the distractions believed to be caused by Satan. Nevertheless, and here we come to a full circle, this battle is conducted through continuous *practice* until the virtues and the associated states of self are attained. The goal of practice is to realize the pious self.

We can then perhaps extend Asad’s juxtaposition of practices and virtues. While the two are indeed integrally related, their very juxtaposition results in new states of the self. It is these states which may help explain why members maintain their practices. These practices may be regarded as valid because they have a specific *genealogy* in tradition

73 Interview, Amirudeen Kajee, 14 February 2013.

but it is their perceived *fruit* in the form of the states of the self, produced by the practice of traditionally sanctioned virtues, which refreshes and invigorates adherence to these practices and, by extension, to the tradition as a whole.

Conclusion: Towards a Transformative Engagement

The two concerns that drove the author to produce this essay were: (1) the need to establish a genealogy of Dawate Islami activism: thus, how did Mufti Hamidi and Kajee Saheb come to do what they do? (2) How do they experience and represent their activism?

The second concern is actually the more crucial question and is closely tied up with the issue of validity: how do these two activists know that what they are doing is right? Validity is, in turn, connected to the matter of motivation: what drives them to do what they do?

Both these activists believe in the correctness of the *maslak* (way) of Imam Ahmad Raza as interpreted by Mawlana Ilyas. The veracity of that way is at times substantiated by personal witness of visions and extraordinary phenomena. Yet, such phenomena are really incidental to the larger aim of the movement. More profoundly, the movement allows them to experience transformed states of the self that they believe come from following the Sunna (a set of practices) in the fullest sense, as exemplified for them in the personality of Mawlana Ilyas, who is perceived as a model of virtue. Here, we believe that Asadian terminology is helpful in ‘making sense’ of what they do from a vantage point that committed members would themselves appreciate. It is this Sunna-driven bond of loyalty to Mawlana Ilyas, seen also as a current-day vanguard of Sunni traditionalist perspective, which spurs them to carry out his instructions and recommendations. These, in turn, translate into the visible social and institutional manifestations of Dawate Islami activity. To put it another way, the motto “I must strive to rectify myself”⁷⁴ represents the striving to be in conformity with the Sunna and the Sunni perspective, which by its nature is a continuous self-critical process. This is done under the guidance of Mawlana Ilyas’ teachings. The motto “I must strive to

74 The first part of the Dawate Islami motto.

rectify others”⁷⁵ follows as a crucial consequence of following the Sunna in accordance with those teachings.

The social and institutional manifestations are bound to have implications for the public sphere, even if this is defined in a conventional liberal sense. For example, because of his popularity, Mawlana Ilyas has bodyguards assigned to him by the Pakistani state. Yet, this deployment of state resources only scratches the surface of its political import. As Charles Hirschkind has pointed out in the Egyptian context, large scale *da'wa* (invitation, propagation of Islamic teachings) through recorded sermons has assigned moral significance to a range of commercial, educational and welfare activities essential to the maintenance and reproduction of modern society. The same applies in Pakistan. Although ostensibly non-political, the very nature of its activities causes Dawate Islami to extend into these spheres, subtly undermining the liberal distinction between private and public morality. But more fundamentally, as Hirschkind has noted in the case of Egypt, it *re-politicizes* the choices available to the citizen of the modern liberal state, subjecting those choices to new and very different epistemological categories from those prevailing in such a state.⁷⁶

This challenge to the state is implicit and in passing. Dawate Islami does not purposely set out to confront liberalism. Rather, this challenge springs from the deep architecture of Sunni traditionalism, and follows from the way Dawate Islami normally goes about its business. It is an architecture that has its own constructions of causality, of ultimacy, and of the distinction between the private and public realms. For example, according to Ash'ari and Maturidi theology, the universe is regarded as the field of God's continuous acting, with each and every event being seen as occurring through His permission, or rather, by virtue of His very 'acting.' This viewpoint sets the adherent to this traditionalism in a completely different orientation to natural causality. While the 'natural'

75 The second part of the Dawate Islami motto.

76 Charles Hirschkind, "Cassette ethics: public piety and popular media in Egypt," in *Religion, media, and the public sphere*, ed. Birgit and Moors, and Annelies Meyer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 29-51.

chain of cause and effect is admitted, these are only seen as a 'habit' (Sunna) of God, in whose Hands things are believed to be. This viewpoint radically changes the *affective* disposition of the traditionalist adherent to material reality although it does not lead to a withdrawal from that reality. On the contrary, viewing this reality as God's dominion is seen as a description of what reality truly is. It follows that there is a need for the Sunni traditionalist activist to bring others to this same realization and to the same affective disposition. Similarly, in terms of ultimacy, the emphasis on the Hereafter radically diminishes the status of this 'world' in the eyes of a believer. However, the activist is impelled to communicate that same diminished value of the world, and the concomitant importance of the Hereafter, by heightened activity in this world (institutional and other). Similarly in the realm of ethics, because reality is rooted in God and humanity faces starkly different alternatives in that Hereafter, the distinction between private and public morality collapses as one reality ultimately faces all. Therefore, it becomes the duty of the activist to communicate the means (those practices and virtues) by which one can safely navigate that reality.

The discourse, in the Asadian sense of the term, offered here by Dawate Islami, is premised on what it believes to be true reality. It also seeks to invite others to view this as the reality that stands before them. Yet, there is also a qualitative dimension to their activism. In facing and accepting this reality, and in navigating it through appropriate practices and the associated cultivation of virtues, we discover new states of the self as well as new and possibly more durable sources of joy and inner perception. Dawate Islami, in other words, also invites us to the 'good life,' or to use classical Islamic terminology, "*sa'adah*" – durable happiness.

This concept of the 'good life' will by its nature stand in tension with those that are based on conflicting epistemological premises. Yet, if we are truly open to being transformed by that concept and willing to put under scrutiny our own concepts of what a 'good life' may be, then we need to ensure that we do not use, however unwittingly, our own epistemological lenses to view the other. While doing fieldwork among members of the seemingly submissive women's mosque movement in

Egypt, Saba Mahmood reflects tellingly on the questions her research asks of the prescriptive feminist project:

Do my [feminist] political visions ever run up against the responsibility I incur for the destruction of life forms so that ‘unenlightened’ women may be taught to live more freely? Do I even comprehend the forms of life that I so passionately want to remake? Would an intimate knowledge of lifeworlds that are distinct from mine ever question my own certainty about what I describe as a superior way of life for others?⁷⁷

As this paper has suggested, a similar self-reflective awareness must be exercised when seeking to ‘make sense’ of Dawate Islami or of other forms of Islamist activism.

77 Saba Mahmood, “Ethical formation and politics of individual autonomy in contemporary Egypt,” *Social Research* 70, 3, 2003, 37-66. See pages 43-44.