

Piety, publicity, and the paradox of Islamization

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by Arsalan Khan



It was the perfect day for a beach break. The sun was out, the air was clear, and the Arabian sea was a calm sparkling blue-green. I was near the end of my second year of fieldwork in Karachi, Pakistan and spending my time with Tablighis, practitioners of the transnational Islamic piety movement the Tablighi Jamaat. That afternoon in 2012, I decided to take a break from fieldwork and join a group of my high school friends on a picnic to the French beach, roughly forty minutes from the city.

I sat in the passenger seat with my friend Amir, while his wife and two young children rode in the backseat. Amir was mostly a good-humored sort of character but he did have a bit of a temper, something that was bound to erupt given Karachi's notoriously stress-inducing traffic. Driving down the Mai Kolachi road, a speeding Toyota Corolla tried to pass between us and another vehicle and nearly clipped the front left side of our car. If Amir had not slammed the brakes we surely would have crashed into the concrete divider separating our side of the road from oncoming traffic. Enraged, Amir sped behind the car and pulled next to it, screaming: "You son of a dog, you don't know how to drive! You have your kids in the car and you drive like a maniac! I will fucking put you in the ground." The man was speechless. "Fucking *maulvi* keeps a beard!" Amir proclaimed as we peeled off.

While Amir's rage could have been induced by anyone who endangered his children, it is telling that his attention was immediately drawn to the man's beard. Among Muslims, the beard is an iconic sign associated with Prophetic example (*sunnat*) and a metonym for a

virtuous Islamic persona. The reckless driving and blatant disregard for the wellbeing of others, however, contradicts this persona, revealing the man's claim to virtue to be spurious and implying that the man is a hypocrite (*munafiq*). There is a long and veritable tradition in South Asia of mocking the hypocrisy of those who claim Islamic authority but are in fact bereft of pious virtue and act in direct contravention of precisely those things they insist others must do. A famous couplet by the eminent nineteenth-century poet Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797-1869) exemplifies this:

kahāñ mai-ḳhāne kā darvāza 'ghālib' aur kahāñ vaa.iz
Where from the "saintly" priest, and where the tavern's door

par itnā jānte haiñ kal vo jaatā thā ki ham nikle
But as I entered he was leaving, this much I do know

The accusation of hypocrisy implies a deliberate, intentional act of subterfuge, not simply a lapse in moral character. But all invocations of Islamic authority can potentially create a backlash that ranges from charges of hubris to hypocrisy. This is because the Prophetic ideal to which people claim an association is by definition unrealizable, so failure to live up to it can always be highlighted. But, this general problem of Islamic authority has been exacerbated as the Islamization of public life has expanded the scope of Islamic authority and made it available to greater numbers of people.

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Pakistan represents a paradigmatic case of the Islamization of public life that has swept the Muslim world in recent decades. Founded in the name of a Muslim identity, the Pakistani constitution declares Islam to be the basis for state sovereignty. The military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988) pursued an Islamization campaign that placed Islam at the center of bureaucratic, democratic, and legal institutions. In the past few decades, Pakistan has witnessed the emergence of a wide range of institutions and actors including Islamic banks, corporations, NGOs, new educational institutes, televangelists, and lay preachers that claim to make capitalism and development compatible with Islamic precepts. Claims to Islamic legitimacy and authority are ubiquitous. But, the more that Islam becomes entangled with powerful institutions, and especially those tied to the possibility of making money, the more people have come to see Islam as something strategically used for self-interest (*mafad*), often in ways inimical to virtuous behavior. It is this context that explains Amir's contempt toward the *maulvi*.

I became particularly attuned to this paradox of Islamization in my study of Pakistani Tablighis. Even in a context where Islam seems ubiquitous, Tablighis say Muslims have abandoned "religion" (*din*) for "the world" (*dunya*). This, they insist, has created all manner of social ills from marital and kinship strife, to chicanery in the market and corruption in the government, to ethnic conflict and political instability, a condition they refer to as moral chaos (*fitna*). The central claim of the Tablighi Jamaat is that only their own distinct, ritualized, face-to-face form of preaching (*dawat*) is capable of spreading Islamic virtue and therefore remedying the dire situation in which Muslims in Pakistan and beyond find

themselves. Dressed in traditional *shalwar kameez*, an Islamic cap, and sporting long flowing beards, as per Prophetic example, Tablighis can be seen walking through Pakistan's villages, towns, and cities in groups of ten or twelve men, exhorting Muslims to fulfill their ritual duties, calling them to the mosque to listen to sermons and encouraging them to join the movement.

Dawat tours are male activities and follow a set structure; an evening tour every week in one's own neighborhood and one in an adjacent neighborhood, a three-day tour every month that takes one to another part of the city, a forty-day tour that takes one to various parts of the country, and a four-month tour at least once in one's life that takes one to the far reaches of the country and beyond. During these tours, Tablighis live in mosques and try as much as possible to disconnect themselves from life at home. The forty-day tour is symbolically associated with a period of gestation of the child in the womb of the mother and the four-month tour is compared to the point at which God blows the spirit (*ruh*) into a child, transforming the fetus into a person. In this sense, *dawat* is understood as a form of spiritual rebirth. Tablighis understand these tours in the idiom of sacrifice of life-force (*jaan*), wealth (*maal*), and time (*waqt*) because the Tablighi assumes the physical hardship of the tour, finances his own way, and commits his own time. These are sacrifices that God rewards with the gift of faith.

But, being seen by other Muslims to be doing God's work is essential to the process. Tablighis index the Prophetic ideal in their comportment and dress and place particular stress on keeping a beard. Tablighis say that the beard reminds one that one is representing the Prophet, and it therefore compels one to act in accordance with those expectations lest one tarnish the image of the Prophet. In *dawat*, one is performing the same tasks that the Prophet and Companions performed. In following the actions of the Prophet and Companions, one feels compelled to live in terms of the ideals they represent. Drawing the gaze of others comes out in all Tablighis activities, which are particularly marked by their formality, but it is central to what Tablighis call *tashkeel*, which literally means to give shape or form, and is a process of registering a public commitment to *dawat*. After the *maghrib* prayers, itinerant Tablighis and those they have recruited gather together to listen to the sermon (*bayan*). Following the sermon, a designated Tablighi stands up and asks all who are present to commit to future *dawat* tours, which he records in a notebook. Making one's commitment to *dawat* publicly known by standing is considered an essential act of faith, even if one's commitment has already been documented. This act of standing is understood to create a heightened sense of moral responsibility in the Tablighi and also serves as encouragement to others to follow suit. In other words, it is precisely the *publicness* of *dawat* that makes it a mode of ethical cultivation of self and other.

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When I told a Tablighi friend about the incident of the rash driving *maulvi*, he was not surprised. He said there is an increasing disconnect between Islamic signs and Islamic virtues in these times. He explained that people no longer get their religious education

from “traditional” sources like madrassas or from authorized Sufi sheikhs. Instead, they rely on books, television, the internet, and even their cellphones for knowledge of Islam, and this knowledge is riddled with falsehoods based on inauthentic sources. Even when the knowledge does come from authorized sources, he added, it does not guarantee that a person will understand it correctly. Finally, and this is crucial, even if it is knowledge produced by an authorized source and is appropriately understood by the listener, this knowledge only appeals to the “mind” but it does not “descend into the heart.” In other words, knowledge transmitted through mediums like books, television, the internet, and cellphones only reconfigures the surfaces of persons, not their depths. It takes the embodied and performative acts of *dawat* to bridge that gap between outer practice and inner self.

The focus of scholars studying Islamic piety movements has been on the way that such movements have arisen as a challenge and response to the hegemony of secularism in public life.¹ While this perspective has enriched our understanding of secularism, it has also shifted the focus away from the political contestation among Muslims over what constitutes authentic Islam. This contestation not only focuses on the content of Islamic doctrine but also on how Islam circulates and how it adopts a public presence. In Pakistan, state and corporate driven Islamization has made appeals to Islamic authority ubiquitous in public life. The paradox of Islamization, however, has been that in expanding the scope of Islamic authority and making it more broadly available, it also appears to Muslims to have been emptied of its ethical substance. The growing popularity of the Tablighi Jamaat in urban Pakistan represents a reflexive response to this political situation. The arduous and painstaking work of *dawat* has come to stand in as the authentic site of Islam at a moment when Islamic authority is being exercised with what many Muslims see as a blatant disregard for ethical life.