

THE DOMINATION OF THE *TABLIGHI JAMAAT* IN THE SEMI-
COMPETITIVE RELIGIOUS MARKET IN KYRGYZSTAN: A RELIGIOUS
MARKET APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the factors contributing to the *Tablighi Jamaat's* strong presence and influence in the post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan from the point of view of religious economies approach. The historically and politically unique position of Kyrgyzstan among other Central Asian Republics alongside the *Tablighi Jamaat's* itinerant modus operandi that sets it apart from competing Islamic organizations and movements will be discussed as possible factors.

Keywords: Tablighi Jamaat, Rational Choice Theory, Religious Economies Model, Islam, Kyrgyzstan, Religious Economies Approach

ÖZ

KIRGIZİSTAN'IN YARI REKABETÇİ DİN PİYASASINDA TEBLİĞ CEMAATI'NİN TAHAKKÜMÜ: BİR DİNİ PİYASA YAKLAŞIMI

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Bu tez Tebliğ Cemaati'nin Sovyet sonrası dönemde Kırgızistan'da edindiği hissedilir derecede güçlü varlığı ve etki gücünü mümkün kılan etkenleri dini ekonomiler yaklaşımının merceğinden incelemektedir. Kırgızistan'ın Orta Asya cumhuriyetleri arasındaki tarihi ve siyasi nevi şahsına münhasır konumu ile Tebliğ Cemaati'nin onu rekabete girdiği diğer İslami yapılar ve hareketlerden ayıran gezgin tebliğ metodu muhtemel etkenler olarak öne sürülecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tebliğ Cemaati, Rasyonel Seçim Teorisi, Dini Ekonomiler Modeli, İslam, Kırgızistan, Dini Ekonomiler Yaklaşımı

To my mother, my father and my Joy

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Soviet republics began to proclaim their independence and the Soviet anti-religious policy that marked the past seventy-year period came to an end.¹ What had already begun during the *glasnost* era with the gradual loosening of the restrictions to religious activities throughout the Soviet Union culminated in the further loosening or total abandonment of this policy by the newly independent states. This transition period begot what is usually referred to as the resurgence of religion in the post-Soviet space, which is a part of a return to political, social, and cultural prominence of religions on a global scale.

With its relatively liberalized but definitely pluralized religious market in the post-socialist period, Kyrgyzstan offers a challenging yet attractive research atmosphere for scholars from all the disciplines studying state, religion, culture, or society. The relationship between various religious movements seeking members in the Kyrgyz society and the state apparatus is as complex as it is uneasy. The Kyrgyz state apparatus assumes varying degrees of caution with regard to religious movements; some religious movements are deemed categorically inimical to ‘Kyrgyz characteristics’ and to national security, and, therefore, banned, while some are allowed to operate and proselytize as long as they ‘respect’ the existing political structure and the social fabric.

¹ While the anti-religious policy was a defining characteristics of the Soviet Union, the degree to which it was enforced varied from period to period as a function of the domestic and foreign developments which necessitated that a particular course of action be implemented with regard to religious observance within the Soviet Union. Waves of fervent anti-religious campaigns obtained only to be followed by visibly less astringent periods marked by a certain measure of tolerance towards religions and religious observance by Soviet citizens.

The Islamic missionary groups in Kyrgyzstan come in many forms: from Sufis to non-violent fundamentalists to violent extremists, almost all ‘hues’ of Islamic activism are represented. A great majority of Islamic missionary groups are simply foreign groups, which maintain branch offices and have local adherents in Kyrgyzstan but are headquartered and, usually, funded from abroad. Mostly dominated by Islamic trans-national networks and movements originating abroad, the rich supply-side of the post-Soviet religious market is a source of perceived security threat for the Kyrgyz state, especially taking into account the recent trend among Kyrgyz nationals as studied by the Crisis Group² and Sageman³ indicating a rise of Islamic extremism nationwide. The Kyrgyz state is primarily focused on the surveillance of the activities of various Islamic movements in order to make sure that no group pose what the Kyrgyz state considers as a threat to national and regional security as well as to the ‘peaceful’ and ‘tolerant’ Kyrgyz lifestyle.

While the Kyrgyz state has adopted repressive methods to fight Islamic movements it deems extremist, the *Tablighi Jamaat*⁴, a Muslim missionary group originating in South Asia, enjoys a pervasive spatial and social extent throughout Kyrgyzstan; and its members visit even the remotest villages in hope of recruiting Muslims for their cause. The relative ease with which the *Tablighi Jamaat* operates in Kyrgyzstan begs the questions: How do the *Tablighi Jamaat* and the Kyrgyz state stand vis-à-vis one another, and what dynamics lead to the proliferation of the *Tablighi* presence and activity in and throughout Kyrgyzstan

² *Kyrgyzstan: State Fragility and Radicalization*. Briefing No. 83. International Crisis Group, 2016.

³ Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the 21st Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 58-60.

⁴ The *Tablighi Jamaat* is a trans-national Islamic organization originating in the British *Raj* whose objective is to bring ‘stray’ Muslims back to the ‘correct path’ at the grassroots level through personal improvement and Islamic learning. The movement is headquartered in India, and allegedly has more adherents than any other Islamic movement globally. The *Tablighis* claim that they are a non-political *da‘wa* organization and that, as such, they focus solely on delivering the message of Islam.

without incurring state repression? This thesis is an attempt to shed light on the multi-faceted and precarious interplay between the state and Islam by concentrating on the ‘relatively positive’ relationship between the Kyrgyz state apparatus and the *Tablighi Jamaat*. The nature of this relationship can be described as accommodative to the point of being collaborative and symbiotic; and I argue that the state in Kyrgyzstan may and does assume a more nuanced stance towards Islam than simply being detached, circumspect or inimical, as a function of the political message and alignment of the Islamic group in question, or lack thereof. The state apparatus may tailor its religious policy to allow room to an Islamic missionary group, as long as the group in question is not perceived as a political or ideological threat. I shall, therefore, further argue that, despite exercising an increasingly intolerant and politically-motivated policy towards certain Islamic actors it considers a threat, such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir*,⁵ the state apparatus in Kyrgyzstan is also capable of acting pragmatically and with flexibility towards what it considers as a non-threatening Islamic group, that is, the *Tablighi Jamaat*. It is, therefore, my aim to explore under which conditions a *rapprochement* came to exist between the Kyrgyz state, which is always vigilant for signs of ‘extremism’ as regards to religious movements, and the *Tablighi Jamaat*, one of the most active Islamic movements according to number of adherents, reportedly having the largest number of members among all Muslim missionary movements.

Despite its worldwide network, global presence and the vast number of adherents attracted to it, the *Tablighi Jamaat* remains to this day an understudied topic. References to the movement can be found in chapters dealing with the late 20th century phenomenon of ‘religious awakening’ or in studies on Islam in India during the Raj, but monographies or doctoral theses dedicated specifically to the

⁵ According to a report published by the Human Rights Watch in 17 September 2018, “Kyrgyzstan is convicting hundreds of people for possessing videos, pamphlets, and books that it has banned using a dangerously overbroad definition of extremism [...] Offenders are sentenced to 3 to 10 years in prison even if they did not distribute the material or use it to incite violence.” The report can be accessed at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/09/17/we-live-constant-fear/possession-extremist-material-kyrgyzstan>

Tablighi movement are not many. It is obvious that the *Tablighis* are a movement based on a culture, which values spoken and personal communication over written expressions; hence the dearth of written material produced by its members.⁶ This is not inconvenient for the *Tablighis* because as a grassroots movement the *Tablighi Jamaat* interacts mostly with ordinary people usually from poor countries who have limited exposure to written means of communication; and also, because written material can be used as evidence by authoritarian governments against the movement or its members. Secondly, as with most religious movements, the members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* are not very enthusiastic about interlocution if it is about the activities of the movement and does not involve a potential ‘recruit’ or ‘convert’. Scholars are usually seen as suspicious and possibly as government agents. Therefore, face-to-face interview with *Tablighi* members are difficult to arrange. This situation is a serious limitation for researchers who wish to study the *Tablighi* presence and activities in Central Asia in particular. Since the *Tablighi Jamaat* is a grassroots movement and, accordingly, interacts with most segments of society, the dynamics of their wide-ranging outreach and the impact they have on their targeted population are of great importance both to state agents and to researchers. The paucity of data and studies on the *Tablighi* movement and its position vis-à-vis the state in the existing literature has led me to explore the movement and its activities in Kyrgyzstan. I, therefore, aim that the present study will contribute to filling a void and contribute to the existing literature to better understand the dynamics of the *Tablighi Jamaat's* missionary activities and its relationship with the state apparatus in Kyrgyzstan.

Previous studies dealing with the *Tablighi* movement in Kyrgyzstan were mostly based on secondary data where the *Tablighi Jamaat* is usually treated in a chapter within a broader context of Islamic movements operating in a particular

⁶ David Zeidan, *The Resurgence of Religion a Comparative Study of Selected Themes in Christian and Islamic Fundamentalist Discourses* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 3.

geography. I have relied more on primary than secondary sources and my study is devoted entirely to the *Tablighi Jamaat*.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

In sociology of religion, a good part of the 20th century was dominated by secularization theory foundation of which was laid by such 19th century social theorists as Marx, Freud, Durkheim, and Weber. Secularization theory predicted that as modernity permeated into societies, religion would become less central to the lives of people to the extent that religions would ultimately be relegated to personal life and either fade away in visibility, relevance, and importance in public or even, according to some scholars, completely disappear from public life. Freud, for instance, considered “history as a great war between science and religion and rejected all compromise between the two contending forces”⁷ and argued that:

Religion ... arose out of the Oedipal complex, out of the relation to the Father. If this view is right, it is to be supposed that a turning away from religion is bound to occur with the fatal inevitability of a process of growth, and that we find ourselves at this very juncture in the middle of that phase of development.⁸

While not as emphatically anti-religious as Freud was, both Weber and Durkheim “recognized that Western modernity appeared increasingly inhospitable to religion”⁹ having been convinced of the irrelevancy of religion in the future. Weber, for one, saw secularization as “desolating yet ultimately salutary—a kind of *felix culpa*, or fortunate fall.”¹⁰ Weber believed that

⁷ *The Freud Reader* edited by Peter Gay (New York : W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 685.

⁸ Peter Gay

⁹ Rob Warner, *Secularization and Its Discontents* (New York, NY : Continuum, 2010), 2.

¹⁰ Sara Lyons, “The Disenchantment/Re-enchantment of the World: Aesthetics, Secularization,

“rationalization is at once enervating disenchantment and enlightening empowerment [... It] is at once a terrible condition, the worst evil, and the only human path for liberation.”¹¹ Therefore, the demise of religion as well as its “retreat from the public to the private, from universal truth to personal conviction”¹² were sociologically irrevocable and universal.

However, these predictions have largely remained unmaterialized on the eve of the turn of the century. Not only new religious groups are visibly gaining ground worldwide but also established religions such as Islam and Catholicism demonstrate that they are capable of winning new converts anew.¹³ In the words of Peter Berger, a prominent contributor to secularization theory, “[t]he world today, with some exceptions [...], is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever,”¹⁴ whereas he had previously prognosed back in 1968 that religious believers in the 21st century were “likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture.”¹⁵

That secularization theory fell short of interpreting the evolution of religion and spirituality in the late 20th and early 21st centuries inevitably cast doubt upon the

and the Gods of Greece from Friedrich Schiller to Walter Pater,” *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 109, No. 4 (October 2014), 873.

¹¹ ‘The Dialectic of Individuation and Domination: Weber's Rationalization Theory and Beyond’, in ed. by Sam Whimster and Scott Lash, *Max Weber: Rationality and Modernity* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 187.

¹² Rob Warner, 2-3.

¹³ Anthony Gill, “Religion and Comparative Politics,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 4, (June, 2001), 117-118.

¹⁴ Peter L. Berger, “La désécularisation du monde : un point de vue global” in *Le Réenchantement du monde*, Peter Berger, Georges Weigel, David Martin, Jonathan Sacks, Grace Davie, Tu Weiming (Paris : Bayard, 2001), 15.

¹⁵ Peter L. Berger, A Bleak Outlook Is Seen for Religion. *New York Times*. New York, 25 April, 1968, 3.

strength and relevance of the theory, calling for its more nuanced and up-to-date versions to be developed. Therefore, different versions of secularization theory came into existence which have modified and moderated the original theory with a view to adapt it to the current developments without abandoning it altogether. Some scholars, however, were not satisfied with the theory *in toto* and argued instead that the recent so-called ‘resurgence of religion’ phenomenon was no less than a paradigm shift necessitating that secularization theory be discarded and a new approach be formulated. Consequently, at least since the 1970s, other theories and approaches were framed with the flow of empirical data to better explain the current unfolding of religious revival and predict the trajectory of the future of religion on a global scale.¹⁶

Nevertheless, despite the prevailing position of secularization theory among social scientists prior to the collapse of the Communist Bloc, no other theory has achieved the extent to which it was accepted among scholars so far.¹⁷ Social sciences in the post-modern age have been marked with the end or, at least, the erosion of credibility of grand narratives such as modernization theory, Marxism and nationalism. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the *zeitgeist* of the post-modern age obtains in what Jürgen Habermas called¹⁸ as the post-secular age too, where multiple theories were formulated to explain the gradual but noteworthy rise of religious sentiments throughout the world.

There are various theoretical approaches to religion and secularism which originated as a response and alternative to the shortcomings of secularization

¹⁶ Darren E. Sherkat and Christopher G. Ellison, “Recent Developments and Controversies in the Sociology of Religion,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 25, (August, 1999), 365

¹⁷ Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 11.

¹⁸ Michael Reder, “How Far Can Faith and Reason Be Distinguished?” in Jürgen Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What is Missing. Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2010), 37.

theory. What is generally known as the religious economies approach has positioned itself as a major alternative to secularization theory and its varieties and is closest to what can be considered as the most salient theoretical framework of the post-secularization paradigm. Arguing that the religious economies approach problematizes the way secularization theory outlines the implications of institutional differentiation, that is, separation between state and religions, Evelyn Bush contends that the proponents of the model “do not take issue with the claim that religion has come to be organized according to a market logic, but they disagree with the implications that secularization theory derives from market rationality.”¹⁹ Opposing the unrealized scheme of secularization theory that religious pluralism in the absence of state sponsored religious firms shall erode religious attendance and religiosity in general, the religious economies approach predicts that divorce of state and religious market will result in increase of aggregate levels of religious attendance and religiosity due to incentivizing ‘entrepreneurs’ to offer improved quality and quantity of religious services and goods to meet consumer demands.²⁰

It is possible to divide theories regarding religion, secularism, and state into demand-side theories and supply-side theories according to where they stand with regard to the religious market. The secularization theory and its modified versions are concerned with its demand side. So is the demand-side version of the religious economies approach which rose to prominence in the 1980s emphasizing “shifting preferences and underlin[ing] the influence of social constraints on individual choices.”²¹ The demand-side theories hold that the tenacity of religion in a given society is a function of demand for religion, religious beliefs and religious services. As a consequence of industrialization and

¹⁹ Evelyn Bush, “Explaining Religious Market Failure: A Gendered Critique of the Religious Economies Model,” *Sociological Theory*, Volume 28, Issue 3, (September 2010), 305.

²⁰ Evelyn Bush, pp. 305-306.

²¹ Darren E. Sherkat and Christopher G. Ellison, 378.

modernization, demand for religion is weakened. Among the proponents of the secularization theory, structural functionalists believe that this is due to the fact that most social and economic functions of religion prior to the advent of industrialization were transferred to bureaucracy and to various actors, and thus, religion became obsolete. The rationalist adherents to the secularization theory hold that the weakening demand for religion stems from what Max Weber called the “disenchantment of the world”²², or loss due to the Enlightenment and the subsequent rationalization of the irrational quality of life and worldview (*Weltanschauung*). The thesis of Secularization Based on Existential Security, as formulated by Norris and Inglehart, attributes diminishing demand for religion to improvement of reassurance and security of well-being both on societal and personal levels among industrialized and post-modern societies which delegates the prior source of reassurance, i.e., religion, to a diminished role.²³

There are, on the other hand, supply-side approaches, as well. The religious economies approach, whose demand-side version has been noted above, originated, and drew heavily from the rational choice theory of microeconomic theory and comes also with a supply-side version. Such supply-side approaches consider religious demand, i.e., people in search of fulfilling their religious needs, as somewhat constant and concentrate, instead, on the supply-side of religion, that is, religious actors such as churches, sects, denominations, *tariqahs*, and religious actors seeking to offer their religious goods and services to those who demand such goods. Bush argues that despite having a demand-side version as well, “the religious economies approach theoretically privileges supply, rather than demand, as the determining factor.”²⁴

²² The origin of the expression goes back to Friedrich Schiller’s poem ‘Die Götter Griechenlands’.

²³ Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred*, 18.

²⁴ Bush, p. 306.

Of these theories, the supply-side religious economies approach, hereinafter referred to as the religious economies approach, shall be employed in the present thesis. The religious economies approach is indebted to the wider rational choice theory which various disciplines of social sciences have borrowed from microeconomics to treat and explain human behavior and decision-making process in accordance with rationality. Religious economies approach is better suited to the post-Soviet space than any other to elucidate how liberalization of religious market in Kyrgyzstan and pluralization of choices available on the market have helped Islam with its various interpretations, including that of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, and other religions as well, proliferate and appeal to masses whose prior levels of religious adherence and observance were very low. While religious economies approach was outlined in the United States at least a decade before the collapse of the Communist Bloc and the so-called religious ‘re-awakening’ as a global phenomenon, it was formulated to explain, on the one hand, the decline of religious life in Europe which secularization theory successfully predicted, and, on the other, the robust religious market in the United States on which secularization theory failed to shed light. Religious economies approach underlines the positive nature of relationship between religious pluralism and religious activity; arguing that the lack of religious market is the root cause for the marked absence of religious activity in Western Europe.²⁵ Inspired by and drawing from rational choice theory which microeconomics employs to explain agents’ consumption choices based on methodological assumptions of universal and objective scientific law, individualism, and rational self-interest,²⁶ religious economies approach came into existence with the application of rational choice theory to sociology of religion by Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge first in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, who in their book *Future of Religion* made and attempt to elucidate why, despite numerous analyses foretelling the demise of religion in

²⁵ Grace Davie, *Sociology of Religion: A Critical Agenda* (London: Sage Publications, 2013), 67.

²⁶ S. M. Amadae, *Rationalizing Capitalist Democracy: The Cold War Origins of Rational Choice Liberalism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3-4.

the age of rationalization and secularization, religion, in fact, persevered, both in the United States and elsewhere. They observed that secularization was not unique to modern religious economies but was instead found in all religions, arguing that secularization came in a continuous cycle.²⁷ Secularization, according to Davie, thus engenders revival and religious innovation which act as countering forces in societies where secularization obtains. Therefore, in modern societies religion does not fade out in the face of secularization but instead ebbs and flows.

The approach borrowed from economics its fundamental premises and certain concepts such as cost avoidance and compensators. The mechanics of religious economies approach is based on people's avoidance of costs and search for rewards as well as what Stark and Bainbridge consider as compensators.²⁸ Compensators are what supplants rewards when rewards are unattainable, such as salvation and entry into Paradise. As such, compensators act like promises that, should the individual be committed to the religious tenets, the reward will come at the end. The compensators offered by religious institutions and organizations come in the form of metaphysical answers to existential problems.

Religious economies approach is applicable to the rise of Islamic movements in Kyrgyzstan due also to its emphasis on the supply-side rather than the demand-side of the liberal and pluralistic religious market. According to the approach, the more pluralistic the religious market is in a given society, the more people are attracted to religious activities.²⁹ Religious economies approach is also applicable specifically to the case of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan, or any country where the *Tablighi Jamaat* is active for that matter. That the movement

²⁷ Davie, *Sociology*, 71.

²⁸ Davie, *Sociology*, 71.

²⁹ Davie, *Sociology*, 73.

has successfully expanded its rank and file among the Kyrgyz despite the rigorous and demanding nature of missionary and day-to-day activities expected from members can be attributed to the argument by religious economies approach that the costlier a religion is the better it fares in the religious market, as the more a religion demands from the faithful the more it offers them in exchange; an argument which goes against the grain of secularization theory.³⁰

1.2. Research Methodology

According to Zeidan, analyzing the *Tablighi Jamaat* solely on the basis of written material is difficult because, there is a huge quantitative disparity between the adherents and the texts produced and circulated by the group.³¹ Therefore, in order to test and assess the assumptions, perceptions, and theories as to the activities, extent, and public image of the *Tablighi Jamaat* and its relationship with the state apparatus in Kyrgyzstan, this study has relied on both documentary research and fieldwork (in-depth interviews). Within the context of documentary research, various primary sources of data have been studied, including a few written material by prominent *Tablighis* and official, unclassified Kyrgyz documents. It is a well-known fact among researchers of the *Tablighi Jamaat* that the movement is more oriented toward oral communication than written transmission of ideas. Nevertheless, the *Tablighi Jamaat* does indeed have some approved but by no means obligatory written material in the form of books, which constitute the basis for my documentary research. The written *Tablighi* material include two books by Muhammad Yusuf Kandhlawi, *Melfûzât* [Words] and *Kandehlevî'den Mektup* [Letter from Kandhlawi]; the former a collection of sermons of the founder of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, Maulana Muhammad Ilyas Kandhlawi and the latter a collection of his dicta regarding the

³⁰ Davie, *Sociology*, 73.

³¹ David Zeidan, 3.

appropriate method of *tabligh*.³² Also included among the written *Tablighi* material are *Zilletin Tek İlacı* [The Sole Remedy to Debasement] by İhtişam'ul Hasen Kandehlevi (Ehteshamul Hasan), Maulana Ilyas's brother-in-law, as well as books written by Muhammad Zakariya Kandhlawi, nephew of Maulana Ilyas. English and Turkish translations of the so-called *Fazâ'il* [Virtues] book series, namely *Fazâ'il-i A'mâl* [Virtues of Acts], *Fazâ'il-i Sadaqat* [Virtues of Charity], and *Fazâ'il-i Hajj* [Virtues of Pilgrimage]. Another primary *Tablighi* written material is *Davetçinin Yol Aziğı* [Viaticum for the Tablighi] by Mustafa Islam, a Turkish member of the *Tablighi Jamaat*. The unclassified Kyrgyz document refers to a booklet titled *Din Çöyrösündөгү Mamlekettik Sayasat Jana Kyrgyzstandagy Negizgi Diniy Agymdar* [State Policy in the Field of Religion and Main Religious Movements in Kyrgyzstan] published by the State Commission for Religious Affairs in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan. My sources of secondary data include articles, newspapers, theses, monographs, electronic sources, and previous studies dealing with the *Tablighi* movement in particular or Islamic missionary movements in general.

The fieldwork comprises semi-structured and unstructured interviews, with the members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* constituting the bulk of interviewees. I also conducted expert interviews with Kyrgyz authorities as well as members of other Islamic movements. As far as the present study is concerned, interviews rather than surveys are likely to engender information from a fieldwork point of view. Interviews have the potential to provide researchers with invaluable insight into personal opinions, prejudices, perceptions as well as daily lives of the people interviewed. Not only what the interviewees say during the interview but also the manner in which they express themselves and what they choose to remain silent about do enable the researcher to see into the inner working of the topic of study. As far as the present research is concerned, the effectiveness of interviewing members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* is noteworthy because it is possible to glean

³² Throughout the present thesis, the word “*tabligh*” with a miniscule first letter is employed in reference to the Islamic missionary activity itself; whereas the word “*Tablighi*” beginning with a capital letter refers specifically to the *Tablighi Jamaat* as a movement or its members.

further insight into the worldview and the self-image of the group due more to their mannerisms than what little personal information their answers typically offer. On the other hand, interviewing members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* poses a challenge limiting for the interviewer in that *Tablighis* consent to be interviewed only if the interviewee does not ask them personal questions as they want to remain anonymous. For that reason, during my interviews with the *Tablighis* I avoided asking them such questions regarding their families, professions, etc. Expert interviews, on the other hand, offer precious insight into the public perception of the *Tablighi Jamaat* which is indispensable for the present study for it enables to discern the extent to which the group is welcome among the upper-class. Without expert interviews, any such study would depend solely on the *Tablighi* perspective and on the self-image of the group produced by interviews with the members of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, resulting in a lopsided portrait of the current state of affairs with regard to the Kyrgyz state, the Kyrgyz society, and the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Nevertheless, data collection through semi-structured and unstructured interviews does not always unfold according to the plans or expectations of the researcher. For expert interviews in Kyrgyzstan, the attention span of the interviewees usually left a lot to be desired for government agents were often interrupted at work and they would be unwilling to devote more-than-necessary time to interviews about sensitive subjects such as the *Tablighi Jamaat*. These people were usually busy during workdays and unwilling to be interviewed during weekends because they did not wish to be seen socializing with researchers. Therefore, effectiveness of expert interviews are limited by unfavourable local conditions in Kyrgyzstan.

The primary data concerns the data I have personally collected in the course of my multiple fieldworks, the first of which took place in November 2016 in Bishkek during which I conducted seven interviews, all interviewees being experts. During the second fieldwork I conducted three interviews with the members of the Cameroonian chapter of the *Tablighi Jamaat* regarding the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan in March 2018 and in September 2019 in Yaoundé. I had a telephonic interview with a Turkish *Tablighi* in Turkey in

January 2021, and had in depth face-to-face interviews during various times with an Kyrgyz *ex-Tablighi* multiple times in Ankara and a Turkish *Tablighi* in Tavşanlı. All *Tablighi* interviewees were males up to that point. The most recent source of the primary data the current thesis relies on was collected during my second fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan, which took place in December 2021 in the town of Bishkek. During my second fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan, I interviewed a total of six *Tablighis* and two persons formerly affiliated with the group but are rarely going on *tabligh* tours nowadays: seven men -one Turk, a shop owner by trade, who resides in Kyrgyzstan, and six ethnic Kyrgyz- as well as one Kyrgyz woman, all of whom attended *Tabligh* tours and are currently involved with the *Tablighi Jamaat* to varying degrees, except for the Turkish shop owner whose involvement with the *Tablighi Jamaat*, rather than stemming from a spiritual drive, is more erratic and derives instead from his need to socialize with his *Tablighi* clientele and neighbours. During the same period, I have consulted two Turkish officials posted in Kyrgyzstan, four Kyrgyz experts on Islam, and several Kyrgyz citizens from various walks of life with regard to their views on the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan as an indicator of the public opinion.

It must be noted that most *Tablighi* members I have met and interviewed both in Kyrgyzstan, Cameroon, and Turkey had paid more attention to devoting their time and efforts to personal improvement through prayer, reflection, and proselytism by way of joining *Tablighi* tours than reading the said *Tablighi* documents. Therefore, informative though it is, documentary research on the *Tablighi Jamaat* comes with shortcomings; rendering fieldwork and interviews all the more invaluable.

In-depth interviews in Kyrgyzstan were conducted with Kyrgyz state officials, para-state officials such as members of the Kyrgyz *Muftiate*, independent researchers, academicians, ordinary people, and members of various other Islamic movements. All interviews were conducted under the condition of anonymity in order to protect my interviewees. All interviews in Kyrgyzstan took place in Bishkek. Among the interviewees are, three faculty members of the

Manas Kyrgyz-Turkish University- two Turks and one Kyrgyz, the latter being affiliated with the Kyrgyz state as well, one expert, two Turkish nationals from different Turkish religious groups active in Kyrgyzstan, one member of the Kyrgyz *Muftiate* who is also a *Tablighi*. To put the interplay between the *Tablighi Jamaat* and political authorities into perspective, I have interviewed three *Tablighi* Cameroonian nationals living in Cameroon as well as one Turkish member of the *Tablighi Jamaat* hailing from the town of Çankırı in Turkey.³³ Both Kyrgyz and Cameroonian *Tablighi* members I have interviewed come from middle echelons. One Cameroonian *Tablighi* member is a shop owner in the Muslim quarter of Yaoundé and the other one is a university professor, both being interviewed in Yaoundé: the shop owner at his shop; and the university professor at my office. The third member of the Cameroonian *Tablighi Jamaat* is from the town of Maroua, in the Far North region of Cameroon, who is both an entrepreneur and a teacher at a private Islamic school. The interview was conducted via the Internet due to the sheer geographical distance between

³³ At the time of my research I was stationed by my employer in Cameroon where the *Tablighi Jamaat* was and still remains very active among the Muslim minority, despite the fact that almost eighty percent of Cameroon's population belongs to various Christian denominations. The *Tablighis* are mostly active in the Muslim majority regions in the north, where they hold annual meetings for their members throughout Cameroon. On the other hand, the *Tablighis* constitute a sizeable community in Yaoundé, the capital city where I was working in my capacity as TIKA Coordinator at the time. The *Tablighi* movement in Cameroon operates as a non-governmental organization without hindrance and suffers no harassment nor any persecution by officials. My interviews in Cameroon have offered me invaluable insight into the *Tablighi modus operandi* in a country other than Kyrgyzstan allowing me to compare and contrast the cases. The political, social, and religious setting in Cameroon stands in relative contrast to the Kyrgyz case, as Muslims are a sizeable minority in the former which did not go through the Communist experience to which the latter was subjected. Therefore, religions and denominations in Cameroon, no matter how small a community they appeal to, are very visible in the public space without state interference. Moreover, religiosity is not a contested topic in Cameroon, despite the fact that the Catholic Church enjoys remarkable political influence over Paul Biya, the President of Cameroon, who is known to hold the Holy See and its Apostolic Nuncio in Yaoundé in very high esteem. While the threat of Islamic extremism is more a fiction often exploited by political actors than an imminent reality in Kyrgyzstan, it has a tangible daily presence in the Extreme North region of Cameroon where Boko Haram, a trans-national Islamic terrorist group active around the Lake Chad Basin since at least 2009, has been waging an unconventional war against the army. Despite the actual presence of Islamic extremism and its trans-national nature emanating from the neighboring and much more unstable Nigeria, Cameroon assumes a remarkably more liberal position vis-à-vis Islam and its various, non-violent denominations and forms in comparison to Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, for researchers like me Cameroon offers a socio-political setting where myriad religious movements like the *Tablighi Jamaat* operate without state intervention.

Yaoundé and Maroua. The Turkish *Tablighi* whom I have personally visited and interviewed too comes from a middle-class background and is a shop owner in Tavşanlı, his home-town. He is an active member of the *Tablighi Jamaat* who not only has partaken in several *Tabligh*-related tours in Turkey but also traveled to Bangladesh in order to participate in the annual *ijtima* there.³⁴

Most members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan hail from lower echelons of society where written communication material are disfavoured. Both experts and the *Tablighi* members would like to avoid leaving any written material behind which might ‘incriminate’ them. As for interviewing the *Tablighi* members, interviews during the missionary visits are almost impossible because to do so one needs authorization from the Kyrgyz state agents to be able to leave Bishkek, and such authorization is rarely granted, if any, which rules out observant participation as well. In a recent study conducted among researchers in Kyrgyzstan, the authors found that:

³⁴ This Turkish *Tablighi* acquaintance has left such an impression on me that I came to conclude that he was the embodiment of some of the quintessential *Tablighi* qualities, but with a Turkish twist, in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek manner. Firstly, he went through wild times during his youth which included, as he told me, soccer cheerleading, chain smoking, alcohol abuse, and some serious womanizing. His fast times came to an end in a gradual manner as he became involved in various Islamic groups all the while he continued his lifestyle. In a sense he had a finger in every pie, experimenting not only with various religious firms but also clashing lifestyles in search of his place in this world. Secondly, his odyssey seems to have ended with him settling finally with the *Tablighi Jamaat* which serves as the terminus for him, where, for the time being, he is the happiest and the most satisfied with himself, an effect which other Islamic groups failed to provoke in him for a variety of reasons, such as due to their ossified and hierarchical structures, and the extreme reverence towards the spiritual leader of the groups typical of Islamic Sufi orders. Thirdly, he is a man of action with little faith in the virtue of long periods of deliberation and planning embodying the *Tablighi Jamaat* which prioritizes actions over words, spontaneity in decision-making and improvised actions over careful planning in decision-making. He told me that he traveled abroad couple of times for making *tabligh*, but he spoke no foreign languages and had little money, and that he even married a local woman he somehow met during his *tabligh* tour in Asia and brought her to Tavşanlı with him. This is an indication of how the *Tablighis* tend to pay little attention to what might lie ahead, as they have complete faith in the divine plan. Fourthly, he went to make *tabligh* in very unlikely places in Turkey such as night clubs for he believed like his peer *Tablighis* that all Muslims deserve to be and can be saved. The Turkish twist, however, is that he is politically very involved and an outspoken proponent of the current Islamic leadership of Turkey which is unusual among the *Tablighi* circles outside of Turkey who prefer to keep their political beliefs to themselves and avoid discussing such issues.

none of the potentially competent bodies – the State Commission for Religious Affairs, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (*muftiat*), and its local branches, called *kaziat* – acknowledge either competency or responsibility to issue approvals or licenses for researchers ahead of their fieldwork.³⁵

Therefore, I have interviewed the *Tablighi* members in Kyrgyzstan and Cameroon at mosques or at their workplaces where they were at ease or when they paid me amicable visits at my own office in Cameroon in order to inform me about the *Tablighi Jamaat* and to be interviewed about their involvement with the *tabligh*-related activities. Nevertheless, the precarious situation in Kyrgyzstan with regard to Islamic groups and the fact that government agents are always suspicious of missionary activities as well as of researchers, render fieldwork difficult. For researchers and adherents alike, the religious market in Kyrgyzstan is not entirely free, despite its more liberal outlook than the rest of the Central Asian republics *prima facie*. Interviewing the members of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, be it in Kyrgyzstan, Cameroon, or Turkey, is a difficult task also on the account that the prospective interviewees, when asked questions about the motives and the modus of the organization, tend to produce in an amicable but definitely nonchalant manner very standard replies, almost as if taken from the playbook. Matthew Kuiper attributes this *Tablighi* stance to their conviction that the *Tablighi Jamaat* is above inquiry and study through secular eyes:

The researcher who seeks to analyze the movement from an academic perspective may find TJ activists insisting that he or she has got it all wrong. For TJ activists, the dynamics of the movement are fundamentally spiritual and not susceptible to “worldly” analysis.³⁶

³⁵ Nurbek Bekmurzaev, Philipp Lottholz and Joshua Meyer, “Navigating the safety implications of doing research and being researched in Kyrgyzstan: cooperation, networks and framing,” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 37, No. 1, (February, 2018). The article offers a rare, good, and relatively recent survey of the safety implications of conducting research and being an object of research in Kyrgyzstan.

³⁶ Matthew J. Kuiper, *Da‘wa and Other Religions: Indian Muslims and the Modern Resurgence of Global Islamic Activism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 139.

Yoginder Sikand, on the other hand, contends that the *Tablighi Jamaat* is uniform in its methods no matter where they operate:

Tablighi Jamaat leaders and activists believe that the particular method of doing tabligh work (tariqa-i-tabligh) that Maulana Ilyas developed is actually the method that the Prophet Muhammad himself employed. Since it is seen as the nabavi tariqa, it is believed that it cannot be changed or altered and that it must be followed to the letter at all times and in all places. Consequently, the tariqa of the TJ is entirely the same wherever the movement is active.³⁷

I have personally witnessed the suspicion and caution Kyrgyz nationals feel when their personal opinion is inquired as to the *Tablighi Jamaat* and the manner in which this apprehension on their part inhibits gleaning information from them through interviews. One of my middle-aged male interviewees in Bishkek during my second field trip to Kyrgyzstan in December 2021 took offense when I asked him in an up-front and rather tactless manner whether he was affiliated with the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Seated in a restaurant next to the mosque most visited by the *Tablighis* in Bishkek, *Чоң мечит* (Grand Mosque), my potential interviewee replied by asking me the equally up-front question whether I was a spy. My insistence that I was a researcher and not a spy fell on deaf ears as the interviewee got up and accused me of being a spy loudly for the entire crowd in the restaurant to hear. The staff and clientele at the restaurant, to their credit, paid little attention to our discussion and even less so to the baseless accusation he leveled against me. The strained situation was fortunately defused soon when my interviewee sat at my table without even my asking him to do so, and asked me why I was curious about the *Tablighi Jamaat*, thus starting a discussion which evolved in a matter of seconds into an amicable if repetitive monologue by the interviewee as to the merits of the *Tablighi Jamaat* and joining the group. I consider the entire encounter as an indication of the extent to which ordinary Kyrgyz *Tablighis* are wary of inquiring strangers firing questions about the *Tablighi Jamaat* while jotting down notes. Under such unfavorable circumstances, attempts to interview in the public turn out to amplify the

³⁷ Yoginder S. Sikand, "The Origins and Growth of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Britain", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Volume 9, Issue 2, (1998), 172.

uneasiness. However, convincing potential interviewees to meet at places where they would feel more comfortable without fearing eavesdroppers is not easy either, for there among Kyrgyz people is a general distrust with foreigners. The best way to ensure to gain the trust of ordinary *Tablighis*, it seems, is to attend the same mosque for as long a period of time as possible, make some acquaintances among the mosque attendants, listen to the impromptu *Tablighi* sermons after prayers, and, finally, join a *Tablighi* tour along with other mosque attendants.

The present thesis uses thematic analysis for research method which is a very useful approach to analyzing data gleaned by fieldwork and comes with flexibility which is suitable with many theoretical frameworks.³⁸ Thematic analysis is especially convenient for dealing with qualitative data and “identifying patterns (“themes”) across qualitative datasets.”³⁹ Developed in the 1970s in order to identify themes in scientific thought, thematic analysis gained currency in the next decades among social scientists, but it was also considered by many a researcher as an umbrella term for various research approaches that displayed much divergence, lacked clear boundaries, and needed future demarcation till the mid-2000s when despite harboring different approaches to pattern identification thematic analysis became upon further elaboration acknowledged as a valid and coherent method in its own right.⁴⁰ Thematic analysis is based on identifying themes to which there are different approaches pertaining to how to identify them. According to shared meaning-based patterns conceptualization, a well elaborated and much widely used approach a theme is “a *pattern* of shared meaning, organized around a core concept or idea (...)” which “capture the essence and spread of meaning; unit[ing] data that might

³⁸ Virginia Braun, Victoria Clarke, Nikki Hayfield, and Gareth Terry, “Thematic Analysis” in *Handbook of Research Methods in Health Social Sciences* (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 849-850.

³⁹ Virginia Braun, 844.

⁴⁰ Virginia Braun, 844-845.

otherwise appear disparate, or meaning that occurs in multiple and varied contexts.”⁴¹ Shared meaning-based approach is superior to its alternative, the domain summary approach, because the latter usually ends up having underdeveloped themes which impair the decipherment of the data and construction of meaning from them.

According to Braun et al., there are three ‘schools’ of thematic analysis, namely coding reliability, codebook, and reflexive, which are distinguished from one another on the basis of how data are collected and analyzed.⁴² Unlike the more malleable nature of reflexive approach which allows it to be employed in a wide array of data collection method, coding reliability is mostly suitable for quantitative-oriented cases where “reliable” and replicable data coding is prioritized.⁴³ Typically, two or more researchers gather data independently but using the same set of research questions, and compare their codes seeking high level of congruence. Codebook approach too uses codes but is less quantitative than coding reliability.

Unlike the other two ‘schools’ which are less qualitative and lean more quantitative, reflexive approach, which is employed in the present thesis, is a completely qualitative approach. Reflexive approach is especially dexterous for its use is not limited to a particular theory or paradigm and can in fact be adapted to work with a wide variety of theoretical frameworks “ranging from phenomenological ones to critical constructionist interrogations of meaning.”⁴⁴ This flexibility was what attracted me to reflexive thematic analysis in the first place because the theoretical approach employed in this thesis, i.e., religious

⁴¹ Virginia Braun, 845.

⁴² Virginia Braun, 847.

⁴³ Virginia Braun, 847.

⁴⁴ Virginia Braun, 850.

economies approach, is not as widely used in the sociology of religion as other theoretical frameworks and, thus, a flexible approach has given me more room for innovation and improvisation. After all, creativity of the researcher impacts the results and quality of their work in thematic analysis.⁴⁵

Once settled on the reflexive approach, the researcher goes on to collect data via interviews or other methods, the former being my primary source of data. Once the interviews are carried out, data are combed and as common ideas and elements appear from data gleaned from different interlocutors which are then identified as and elaborated into themes. A theme is:

used as an attributive, descriptor, element, and concept. As an implicit topic that organizes a group of repeating ideas, it enables researchers to answer the study question. It contains codes that have a common point of reference and has a high degree of generality that unifies ideas regarding the subject of inquiry.⁴⁶

Theme development process involves identifying common categories which are then elaborated into themes. While a category is a description of interviewees accounts and is more explicit, a theme requires interpretation of such categories.⁴⁷ While themes are identified and constructed around common ideas, accounts of certain interviewees are of importance not due to their commonality with other accounts but due to their uniqueness.⁴⁸ In such divergent cases, a theme might be created around this unique concept whose uniqueness is usually meaningful in itself.

⁴⁵ Mojtaba Vaismoradi, Jacqueline Jones, Hannele Turunen, and Sherrill Snelgrove, "Theme development in qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis" *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice* Vol. 6, No. 5, (2016), 101.

⁴⁶ Mojtaba Vaismoradi, 101.

⁴⁷ Mojtaba Vaismoradi, 102.

⁴⁸ Lioness Ayres, Karen Kavanaugh, and Kathleen A. Knafl, "Within-case and across-case approaches to qualitative data analysis" *Qualitative Health Research* Vol. 13, No. 6, (2003), 872.

The identification and elaboration of themes is the final step towards marrying the data gathered and the theoretical framework the researcher has adopted beforehand. While elaborating the themes, the researcher bears in the mind that themes should relate to the various concepts problematized in the theoretical framework. In the case of the present thesis, the themes that emerged after the interpretation of the data are constructed in such a way that postulations of religious economies approach embedded sought to answer the following questions: What are the reasons why people became unsatisfied with their religious lives, which religious options, if any, were available to them, why did they specifically elect to affiliate themselves with the *Tablighi Jamaat* and not another religious movement, what did they expect to find by joining the movement, whether they were satisfied with their decision to become a *Tablighi*, how does the government of the Kyrgyz Republic regard the robust presence of the *Tablighi Jamaat* throughout the nation, does the government consider the movement as a counterbalancing power against what it considers ‘harmful’ Islamic movements operating in a legal or illegal capacity in Kyrgyzstan, and how does the *Tablighi Jamaat* and its members finance *tabligh*-related activities in Kyrgyzstan, including *madrasas*, *tabligh* tours both within Kyrgyzstan and abroad as well as yearly *ijtima*-related visits to the sub-continent.

As for how the interviews unfolded, the interviews I have conducted were structured as such: I asked my *Tablighi* interlocutors how they defined the *Tablighi Jamaat* and their relationship with the group. I asked them how they came to be affiliated with the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Unlike ordinary Kyrgyz who were mostly eager to disclose their opinions, my *Tablighi* interlocutors were noticeably less enthusiastic to talk to a stranger, a foreigner no less, about their experience with or within the movement. Such interviewees were always hard to come by and when they assented to give an interview, they tended to keep it simple with curt answers. However, as they became more relaxed some interviewees opened up more in the course of interviews, and uttered more nuanced and personal answers. I did not usually direct many questions on them because I did not want them to tense up anymore than they already did if they

thought they were questioned, and simply asked them to tell me about their lives. Only after such interlocutors loosened up, did they become ready to answer questions demanding longer and more profound answers. These questions centered around their own experiences with the *Tablighi Jamaat* such as what their lives were before becoming affiliated with the movement, why they decided to join, and in what ways joining the movement shaped and gave a new direction to their lives.

For my interviews with ordinary people who were not affiliated with the *Tablighi Jamaat*, people were to most extent approachable and willing to answer my questions. My interviewees come from different walks of life; from the learned businessman to the small-time housepainter woman to the well-to-do Turkish shopkeeper, people of differing levels of education, economic means, and civic involvement accepted to be interviewed by me and offered me their opinion regarding the *Tablighi Jamaat*. While I found most of my interlocutors through mutual acquaintances who were informed beforehand that I was doing research on the *Tablighi Jamaat*, those interviewees I simply chanced upon in the street or in coffeehouses, having no way to know of my research till I mentioned it, had, therefore, little time to ponder and adjust their ideas when I started to ask them questions about the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Therefore, such interviews provided me with valuable insights into how the proverbial man in the street in Bishkek perceived the *Tablighi Jamaat*. My questions for them focused on their personal opinion about the *Tablighi Jamaat* and its unique *modus operandi*, that is, preaching Muslims door-to-door, how involved were they with the group, and whether they consider the group's presence and activities as well as extensive network throughout Kyrgyzstan harmful. To the more informed interviewees I also asked further questions, such as whether they considered the self-professed apoliticism of the group genuine, or how they saw the future of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan, with the hope that they might potentially produce more profound answers armed with insider information. Some of these interviews did not last too long, but most interviews lasted around or more than half an hour. Some interlocutors were willing collaborators and were happy to

disclose their opinion with regard to anything related to the *Tablighi Jamaat*, be it positive or negative. These interviews usually stretched out a much longer duration but generally lacked coherence on the part of interviewees whose accounts needed to be directed by me to avoid long deviations from the main storyline.

For expert interviews, which includes bureaucrats and academicians for interlocutors, I asked how they felt about the presence of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan, how they explained its robust network among people from all walks of life, as well as whether they believed that the movement posed a threat and how they saw its future in Kyrgyzstan. A related question was how did the Kyrgyz government envisaged the future of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in the nation. Another question for the experts was whether they believed the government considered the movement as a non-harmful Islamic movement and weaponized and instrumentalized the *Tablighi Jamaat* as a check against a real or perceived *Salafi* threat among its population. These interviews were semi-structured, and usually did not last more than half an hour.

1.2.1. Limitations of Research Methodology

Due to the paucity of written material and the prioritization of personal contact on the part of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, my use of primary data was limited and through fieldwork I generated my own data. That relatively few written materials have been produced by the founders and/or members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* can be attributed to two factors. It can partly be attributed to a desire to leave behind as little written evidence as possible. While this might be a wise measure as far as authoritarian regimes are concerned, including that of Kyrgyzstan, it might simply be counter-productive vis-à-vis the target population in Europe or the United States who faces rarely, if any, restrictions of such nature for religious reasons. A more plausible reason for avoidance of written material is attributable to the nature and kind of society the *Tablighis* both hail from and aim to re-Islamize. The *Tablighi* formula “*na parcha, na charcha, na kharcha*” (no

publication, no publicity, no expenditure) encapsulates the emphasis the movement places on the primacy of oral transmission.⁴⁹ A hierarchy exists between what Marshall McLuhan calls the “magical world of the ear” as opposed to the “neutral world of the eye”⁵⁰, that is, auditory and oral versus written sources of materials insofar as the Islamic and South Asian roots and the current global station of the *Tablighi* movement is concerned. Contrasting the written culture of the industrialized West with the oral tradition of the underdeveloped, non-Western, and non-literate societies and their respective implications, J. C. Carothers argues that when things are put into writing they become stripped of their dynamism “which is so characteristic of the auditory world in general, and of the spoken word in particular” to become static, and impersonal to the point that “words, by becoming visible, join a world of relative indifference to the viewer—a world from which the magic ‘power’ of the word has been abstracted.”⁵¹ The segments of the population the *Tablighi Jamaat* aims most to reach out depend more on oral than written sources of cultural transmission and acculturation. The authority of oral transmission over written transmission in Islamic tradition has been well observed by Francis Robinson: “The oral transmission of the Quran has been the backbone of Muslim education” and “[t]he methods of learning and of transmitting the Quran laid their impress on the transmission of all other knowledge.”⁵² This is also what Brinkley Messick refers to as recitational logocentrism in Muslim societies.⁵³ In such

⁴⁹ Humeira Iqtidar, “How Long Is Life? Neoliberalism and Islamic Piety”, *Critical Inquiry*, 43 (4) (Summer 2017), 797.

⁵⁰ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 22.

⁵¹ J.C. Carothers, Culture, “Psychiatry, and the Written Word”, *Psychiatry*, Volume 22, Issue 4, 1959, 311.

⁵² Francis Robinson, “Technology and Religious Change: Islam and the Impact of Print”, *Modern Asian Studies* 27, 1 (1993), 235.

⁵³ Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim*

societies, such as rural Kyrgyzstan, where access to written culture is limited, written means of enculturation might be seen by relatively uneducated masses as alien, abstruse, elitist, and unwelcome. Moreover, what little *Tablighi* written material exists it is direct in style and very simple to understand.⁵⁴ Therefore, the *Tablighi Jamaat* which has hoped, *ab ovo*, to reach out to ordinary members of the public above all, as opposed to the elites, and to vulgarize religious praxis and knowledge among them would unsurprisingly favor the oral means of transmission that laymen would consider more personal, familiar, lucid, down-to-earth and sincere. I will argue that the *Tablighi* preference for auditory and personal transmission over written and impersonal mode of acculturation gives the movement an edge over rivalling Islamic movements that rely on written material in Kyrgyzstan. In fact, this feature is the *sine qua non* of the *Tablighi Jamaat*'s overall strategy and *modus operandi* in Kyrgyzstan and further contributes to its nationwide salience and success. As a side note, the *Tablighi* anti-elitist and even anti-intellectual attitude can be contrasted with the elitism of the so called *Gülen Movement*⁵⁵ whose teachings are mostly based on the *opus* of its founder which are mostly found to be highly complicated in style, content and language by a large number of people, to the point of sometimes being described as obscurantist.

The relatively few number of written primary sources about the *Tablighi Jamaat* constituted a challenge to the feasibility of the present thesis, which the author attempted to overcome by shifting the weight of sources to interviews from written material. Generating data from interviews and increasing the number of interviewees, it is expected, will serve as a compensation for paucity of written sources and help compose a realistic depiction of the *Tablighi Jamaat* and its

Society, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 25-26.

⁵⁴ Humeira Iqtidar, "How Long," 803.

⁵⁵ The so-called *Gülen Movement*, following the failed 15 July 2016 *coup d'état* in Turkey, has been outlawed and since then has been officially labeled as a terrorist organization.

relationship with the Kyrgyz state. To that end, the interviewees were selected from different walks of life, from members of the Turkish chapter of the *Tablighi Jamaat* to experts from academia of various disciplines, including international relations, sociology, and law.

Another limitation of the present thesis relates to how my fieldwork played out in Kyrgyzstan. While I observed the *Tablighis* in various mosques, joining their sermon circles and interviewing them after sermons, I was unable to join their *tabligh* tours due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. While it was my intention to partake in at least one such tour during my second fieldwork in Bishkek in December 2021, I came to notice that vaccination rates were very low and wearing masks was not observed in the entire country, and most *Tablighis* I interviewed either took little notice of the pandemic or denied its existence altogether. Under such conditions, I came to the conclusion that joining *tabligh* tours with them posed too serious a health risk for me and that it would be better if I skipped it.

1.3. Structure of the Present Study

This thesis develops as such: the second chapter aims to sketch a mapping of major Islamic movements which are currently present in Kyrgyzstan. The attempt does not claim to be an exhaustive one, for such an endeavor would constitute a dissertation in itself in terms of scope and required depth of research for such an undertaking. Nor does it offer a complete landscape of religious dynamism and vitality throughout the entire country, despite the presence of non-Muslim religious movements active alongside with and, to some extent, in a state of rivalry with the said Muslim organizations and movements. Therefore, only those Islamic groups exerting political influence or having a bearing on at least a sizeable section of population are included. Each group is introduced with brief background information and their respective activities in Kyrgyzstan in more detail. Special emphasis, however, will be placed on the *Tablighi Jamaat*

owing to the fact that the present study is devoted to the interplay between the movement and the Kyrgyz state.

In the second chapter the theoretical framework is elaborated. The first part of this chapter is devoted to the discussion of secularization theory which was the dominant paradigm in sociology of religion from the 19th century up until the third quarter of the 20th century. The second part examines the empirical challenges secularization theory faced with and the subsequent formulation of more refined versions of secularization theory which better account for what has come to be known popularly as the ‘resurgence of religion’ in the late 20th century. The third part of the second chapter deals with what is sometimes referred to as the ‘new paradigm’ in the study of the religion, that is, religious economies approach. Grounded in rational choice theory of microeconomics, the approach attempts to account for why religions became more prominent on the eve of the 21st century. The last part of the chapter is devoted to the discussion of the advantages and limitations of religious economies approach in general, and with regard to the *Tablighi Jamaat* in particular. As religious economies approach emerged in the United States and draws its empirical data mostly from Protestantism, it is conceivable to argue against the relevance of the approach with regard to the *Tablighi Jamaat*. In the last section, therefore, an attempt is made to argue for its relevance due both to the resourcefulness of the approach and the sui generis qualities of the *Tablighi Jamaat* which, together, render it more susceptible to religious economies approach than other Islamic movements. The third chapter comes with two parts and comprises an account of the *Tablighi Jamaat* as a religious movement. Intellectual, institutional, and practical roots of the movement as manifested today are ingrained in the 19th century India. Encroached by the expanding British incursion, Muslims of India, a spiritually, linguistically, politically, and economically diverse population which held little in common with one another, sought to counter what they considered the erosion of the faith and the community by imitating the Prophet and his companions, the so-called Golden Age of Islam. Not only did this state of mind beget the *Tablighi Jamaat* in the early 20th century in the British Raj but also continues to exert

influence on its adherents in today's world regardless of where they operate. Anywhere the *Tablighis* go, they see maladies of faith and community and seek the remedy in the restoration of faith and practice in imitation of the Prophet. This state of mind has a bearing on their presence and activities in Kyrgyzstan as it does anywhere. The *Tablighi* literature will be utilized to identify the mind frame and the ethos the movements seeks to instill in existing and would-be adherents. The first part of the third chapter thus aims to lay the groundwork for an examination of how the *Tablighi* disposition operates in Kyrgyzstan which is discussed in the second part of the same chapter. Having established in the first part a more profound understanding of how and under which conditions did the *Tablighi Jamaat* come into existence and, the manner in which it operates, the second part is where the presence and the activities of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan are examined and analyzed in detail. Despite having enjoyed for the past three decades the distinction of being permitted to operate in Kyrgyzstan, which is denied to most other Islamic movements, the odyssey of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in the Central Asian nation is far from being a straightforward but marked with a tortuous relationship with the state. The second part of the third chapter is intended to shed light on the dynamics of this uneasy relationship. Focus will be placed on the extent to which the *raison d'être* and the mindset of the *Tablighi Jamaat* stand in harmony with the priorities of the Kyrgyz state apparatus to ensure the viability of the precarious association of the two parties. The manifold concerns of the Kyrgyz state in sustaining this association come in the shape of political, cultural, and social interests. The fourth chapter, thus, aims to engender in readers familiarity with the modus operandi through which the *Tablighi Jamaat* performs in Kyrgyzstan and responds to the challenges they face in the post-Communist space in Central Asia on the one hand, and the complex concerns and anxieties of the Kyrgyz state on the other.

The fourth chapter is devoted to the presentation of the data generated by fieldwork and interviews. This chapter is intended to set forth the data gleaned through interviews in Kyrgyzstan, Cameroon, and Turkey. While the thesis concerns the *Tablighi* activities in Kyrgyzstan, existing conditions in Kyrgyzstan

and the reluctance of the members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* to be interviewed set constraints on the viability of fieldwork, as explained in the Introduction. However, the group's peculiar philosophy and praxis exhibit an almost universal conformity thanks to which interviewing the *Tablighi* members outside Kyrgyzstan also remarkably make possible to gain insight into the movement. This chapter also aims by using the hermeneutic capacity of religious economies approach to provide an interpretation of the data fieldwork and interviews have generated. It is thus intended to bridge the gap between the arguments regarding the so-called 'resurgence of religion' in the post-Soviet space in the late 20th century and theoretical tools discussed in the second chapter, and the existing state of matters with regard to the activities of the *Tablighi Jamaat* and the state apparatus in Kyrgyzstan reflected in the data. Therefore, an attempt shall be made to show in what manner does rational choice theory explain the *Tablighi* frame of mind and praxis, from their philosophy to their preferred outward appearance to particular religious practices.

The last chapter comprises the interpretation of the data collected during the fieldwork in the light of religious economies approach with regard to its compatibility with the case of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan. This assessment will also help us have a better understanding of the relevancy of religious economies approach in contexts which are remarkably divergent from the American case which inspired the approach.

CHAPTER II

A MAPPING OF ISLAMIC GROUPS AND BODIES IN KYRGYZSTAN

2.1. A Mapping of Islamic Groups and Bodies in Kyrgyzstan

With independence, Kyrgyzstan, more than any other republic in the Asian territories of the Soviet Union, became a free market for various religious movements, groups and organizations seeking to gain a firm foothold and a robust followership in the former Soviet space. From trans-national Islamic organizations to the US-based Evangelical Christian groups to the Catholic Church and to the local Shamanists, myriad religious activists, missionaries, and denominations have been in search for expanding their influence and membership in Kyrgyzstan. Of these, actors from different Islamic schools constituted the most active and numerically superior faith-based groups present in Kyrgyzstan. According to Dietrich Reetz, “Muslim actors in post-Soviet Central Asia engaged with various trans-national Islamic movements that arrived to promote their concepts and formats in a growing competition over defining true Islam and gaining the support of Central Asian Muslims.”⁵⁶

According to a study carried out by the Faculty of Theology at Manas University, as of 2007, there were about 1.300 religious organizations, local and foreign likewise, in Kyrgyzstan of which 1.032 belonged to various Islamic groups, 44 to Orthodox Christianity, 40 to Jehovah’s Witnesses, 35 to Baptists, 19 to Lutherans, 19 to Adventists, 21 to other Christian faith groups, 10 to Bahá’is and

⁵⁶ Dietrich Reetz, “Mediating Mobile Traditions: The Tablighi Jama‘at and the International Islamic University between Pakistan and Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan)” *The Journal of Transcultural Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2017, 130.

41 to other confessional groups and movements.⁵⁷ According to the Commission of Religious Affairs, the figures in 2016 are as follows: of the 2.989 religious organizations registered at the Commission, 2.595 belong to various Muslim groups, 380 to Christians, 1 to Jews, 1 to Buddhists and 12 to Bahá'ís.⁵⁸ As for Islamic organizations and bodies, there is one *Muftiate*, 9 regional *qadiats*, 10 Islamic Institutes, 70 *madrasas* and 69 other *waqfs* and associations by 2007.⁵⁹ By 2018 the number of *madrasas* reached 80, the number of Islamic Institutes did not change, while total number of students studying at either institution was in excess of 6.000.⁶⁰ According to a source, the number of mosques throughout Kyrgyzstan reached 2.669 by 2016, *imams* numbered 2.500, and mosques outnumbered secondary schools in the country.⁶¹ More than sixty percent of the mosques in Kyrgyzstan are situated in the traditionally more devout south which is home to the nation's Uzbek minority.⁶² The number of pilgrims to Mecca more than doubled in seventeen years from less than 2.150 in 2000 to 4.585 in 2017, whereas the nation's population increased about twenty percent in the same period.⁶³ The number of pilgrims increased 24 % from 2016 to 2017.⁶⁴

⁵⁷ Suat Cebeci, *Kırgızistan'da Dini Etki Mekanizmaları ve Dini Gelişmenin Karakteristiği* (Bişkek: KTMÜ İlahiyat Fakültesi Yayınları, 2016), 34.

⁵⁸ *Vliianie Religioznogo Faktora na Sotsialno-Politicheskuiu Situatsiiu v Kırgızskoi Respublike*, (Osoo Triada Print: Bishkek, 2016), 5.

⁵⁹ Suat Cebeci, *Kırgızistan'da*, 35.

⁶⁰ http://ummamag.kg/ru/articles/interesting/1216_islam_v_gody_nezavisimosti_kyrgyzstana_26_let

⁶¹ Johan Engvall, *Religion and the Secular State in Kyrgyzstan* (Lithuania: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, June 2020), 15.

⁶² https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2017/12/04/feature-02

⁶³ http://ummamag.kg/ru/articles/interesting/1216_islam_v_gody_nezavisimosti_kyrgyzstana_26_let

⁶⁴ Mukaram Toktogulova, "Islam in the Context of Nation-Building in Kyrgyzstan: Reproduced Practices and Contested Discourses", *The Muslim World* Volume 110, Issue1, (Winter 2020), 51.

A large number of non-governmental actors and public organizations from such diverse countries of origin such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran operated without hindrance, provided of course that they be acknowledged by the Kyrgyz state as non-extremist and, thus, legal. Among the most prominent foreign Islamic actors active in Kyrgyzstan are *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, which, despite being legal, was frowned upon by state authorities for some time but no longer enjoys legal status and has thus been forced to go underground, the *Tablighi Jamaat*, a trans-national organization originating from and based in India, numerous Wahhabi movements with varying degree of recognition on part of Kyrgyz state apparatus, the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs, various groups from Turkey such as the so-called *Gülen* Movement which still retains its influential position vis-à-vis the political echelons of Kyrgyzstan, the *Süleymançis* from Turkey and the *Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi* Foundation.

Apart from the wealth and diversity of missionary activity nationwide, Kyrgyzstan is also rich in ethnic and religious diversity, which, according to *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, more than 80 ethnic groups call it home⁶⁵, is second only to Kazakhstan in the entire Central Asia. It can be argued that the high level of ethno-religious diversity in Kyrgyzstan, *inter alia*, has led to the diverse and vibrant missionary activism in the country, with groups professing various religions and denominations targeting different sections of the Kyrgyz society. In that respect, as Islam and Orthodox Christianity -the so-called traditional religions of Kyrgyzstan- each enjoy a long-lasting presence and large number of membership in the country, their respective target audiences do not overlap but instead are restricted to their respective followers, no matter how nominal the said followers might be with regard to their religious affiliations. Nevertheless, the newly introduced denominations with little presence in Central Asia, such as Baptism and Catholicism, do target members of different religious and sectarian backgrounds. Similarly, religious groups and movements unknown

⁶⁵ “Unrest in Kyrgyzstan,” Radio Free Europe, accessed 02.01.2017, http://www.rferl.mobi/a/Feature10_Things_You_Need_To_Know_About_The_Ethnic_Unrest_In_Kyrgyzstan/2071323.html.

or little known to Kyrgyzstan prior to independence but which belong to the more established religions in Kyrgyzstan, namely Islam and Orthodox Christianity, do also engage in missionary activity directed towards members of other religions.

National religious bodies dealing with religions in general and Islam in particular in Kyrgyzstan must be mentioned. The State Agency for Religious Affairs (SARA) is the single official body in Kyrgyzstan responsible for overseeing religious activities, their compliance with national laws and promoting harmony, religious tolerance, and respect as well as secularism on national level. SARA in this capacity is the umbrella organization for surveillance of all religions and confessions. All religious organizations, movements and associations need to be registered at SARA in order to operate in Kyrgyzstan. The Grand *Muftiate* of Kyrgyzstan, also known as the *Muftiate*, on the other hand, is the overseeing body which handles Islamic affairs. The *Muftiate* is not an official organization per se, but a non-governmental organization (NGO), albeit one heavily controlled by the state. Not unlike SARA, it is responsible for ensuring that secularism and tolerance are respected.

The following pages of this chapter are dedicated to short description of the activities in Kyrgyzstan of various Islamic groups and organizations of foreign origin in Kyrgyzstan. However, as noted above, such a list is exhaustive, considering the relative ease of operating religious organizations in Kyrgyzstan. For that reason, small or local groups which exert extremely limited influence in Kyrgyzstan or whose influence is restricted to provincial level are excluded. Therefore, only major Islamic movements and groups which are influential either on a national scale or exert influence among the elites are described.

2.1.1. Turkish Governmental Bodies and Islamic Groups

2.1.1.1. Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs

Established in 1924, Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs, henceforth referred to as *Diyanet*, is heir to its Ottoman-era predecessor, the Ministry for Sharia and Foundations (*Şeriye ve Evkaf Vekaleti*), inheriting the religious responsibilities of the Ministry minus those relating to the administration of the vast number of lands entrusted to the foundations. *Diyanet* is continually active in Kyrgyzstan through *Diyanet* Foundation and the recently founded *Iman* Foundation (*İman Vakfı*). The latter was established in Kyrgyzstan by Turkish officials in order to help *Diyanet* Foundation reach out and capacitate imams and preachers. In this capacity, *Iman* Foundation has received 2 Million US Dollars from Turkey, out of a previous 10 Million Dollar pledge.⁶⁶ *Diyanet* Foundation is the most visible arm of *Diyanet* with regard to its activities in Kyrgyzstan. The Foundation's activities can best be summarized as funding religious education and training as well as carrying out charity works in Kyrgyzstan.

Established in 1993, the Theology Faculty at Osh State University in Osh is one of the most prominent venues *Diyanet* Foundation is active in Kyrgyzstan. The Foundation pays stipend on a monthly basis to *imams*, *qadis*, *muftis*, *madrasa* instructors, preachers and professors who graduated from the Theology Faculty in Osh and work at SARA, the *Muftiate* or at the Kyrgyzstan Islamic University.⁶⁷ The said theology faculty is funded completely by *Diyanet* Foundation.

Diyanet Foundation also carries out some charity activities throughout the nation which help it maintain close ties with people from all walks of life. For instance,

⁶⁶ <http://www.haberler.com/kurtulmus-konusulan-onemli-projelerden-birisi-iman-6810729-haberi/>, accessed 02.01.2017.

⁶⁷ This information is based on my interview with an expert at Turkish *Diyanet*.

during the celebration of the Holy Week of Nativity (*Kutlu Doğum Haftası*), which is carried out annually under the auspices of *Diyanet* in order to mark the birth of Prophet Muhammad, the *Diyanet* Foundation has organized a program for three thousand spectators. The participants to the organization include ordinary people as well as representatives of various Muslim ethnic groups. The celebration program ends with a banquet for the spectators. Another large-scale program the *Diyanet* Foundation carries out annually is the distribution of food packages to the needy before the month of Ramadan. The Foundation distributed 831 packages to the needy in the North of Kyrgyzstan. The distribution of meat during the *Eid al-Adha* is yet another activity where *Diyanet* Foundation maintains its touch with the needy people outside the capital city. In this capacity, 684 sheep were slaughtered, and their meat was distributed to the poor in the North of Kyrgyzstan in 2016. Most recently, Turkey constructed the Mosque of Imam Serakhsi in Bishkek which has the capacity to accommodate 30.000 attendants. Inaugurated by the presidents of Kyrgyzstan and Turkey in 2018, the mosque is the largest in Central Asia.⁶⁸

2.1.1.2. The *Gülen* Movement /FETÖ

The so called *Gülen* Movement falls under the category of terrorist organizations on par with ISIS or al-Qaida for the Turkish government due to the former's involvement and leading role in the failed *coup d'état* in Turkey in 2016. Hence the epithet *FETÖ*, which is used in Turkey to refer to this group which stands for *Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü* which means Fethullahist Terror Organization in Turkish. Therefore, the scope of this thesis excludes the so called *Gülen* Movement altogether. However, it is important to provide some information about this movement, which was quite powerful in Kyrgyzstan.

Members of the *Gülen* Movement do not call themselves that nor do they refer to themselves as *FETÖ*. In fact, the group members identify their movement as

⁶⁸ Johan Engvall, 18.

Hizmet Movement. The name *Hizmet*, which means service in Turkish, is therefore an endonym, but has never caught on outside the group. The *Gülen* Movement originates in Turkey where it is also known as Fethullah Gülen Movement or simply as *Gülenciler*, after its spiritual leader, Fethullah Gülen, a retired *imam* who served within the *Diyanet*. While Gülen is the current spiritual leader every member looks up to, the movement undoubtedly follows the teachings of an earlier Muslim scholar, Said-i Nursî (1877-1960). Said-i Nursî penned or rather had his close disciples pen a large body of Islamic writings collected under the title Letters (*Risaleler*) which is considered and revered by his followers as the epitome of Quranic exegesis. Various important Islamic figures in Turkey have criticized this veneration for Said-i Nursî and *Risaleler*.⁶⁹

The so-called *Gülen* Movement operates in Kyrgyzstan through its local institution, the Sebat Educational Institutions (*Sebat Eğitim Kurumları*) and the Association of Kyrgyz-Turkish Businessmen (*Kırgız-Türk İşadamları Derneği*).⁷⁰ It is reported that the movement is very influential in Kyrgyzstan, owning malls and businesses.⁷¹ There are 21 schools affiliated with Sebat Educational Institutions throughout Kyrgyzstan. The International Atatürk Alatau University in Bishkek is also affiliated with the movement.⁷² The schools affiliated with the *Gülen* Movement in Kyrgyzstan are highly prestigious and expensive, thus cater to elites. That is why despite having produced thousands of graduates over the span of more than two decades in Kyrgyzstan; the so-called *Gülen* Movement has not achieved recognition among all groups within the Kyrgyz society but its influence remained confined mostly to the upper-class and

⁶⁹ Ruşen Çakır, *Ayet ve Slogan: Türkiye'de İslami Oluşumlar* (İstanbul: Metis Yayınevi, 2012). 91-92.

⁷⁰ Suat Cebeci, *Kırgızistan'da*, 40.

⁷¹ Suat Cebeci, *Kırgızistan'da*, 41-42.

⁷² Suat Cebeci, *Kırgızistan'da*, 42.

the power elite. This, however, is not unintentional nor is it undesired on the part of the movement which is not known for its outreach at grassroots level outside Turkey. Adep Basati Progressive Social Foundation (*Adep Başatı İlerici Sosyal Vakfı*) is a sub-group of the *Gülen* Movement in Kyrgyzstan. Established by Kyrgyz nationals educated at *Gülen*-affiliated schools in Turkey and Egypt, it is populated and run solely by Kyrgyz members of the *Gülen* Movement.⁷³ The Foundation is active throughout the nation via charity works.

The schools are operational in Kyrgyzstan, but the suspicions that the Movement spreads an Islamic teaching what Kyrgyz authorities consider as foreign and undesirable are running high. The presence in Kyrgyzstan of hundreds of Turks member to the Movement and their Kyrgyz disciples is probably more irksome to the Kyrgyz power elite than the schools themselves. The same suspicion is shared throughout Central Asia where the schools were closed temporarily in Uzbekistan in the past.

2.1.1.3. Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Foundation

If the *Gülen* Movement is the pioneer among Turkish Islamic groups with regard to establishing institutions of education abroad, *Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi* Foundation is the relatively late-comer, and so is *Süleymanlılar*, which is dealt with below, for that matter. The namesake of the Foundation was a Sufi (1541-1628) who founded the *Jelvetî* brotherhood, which itself is a branch of the wider *Halwatî* order, and served as the sheikh of the Ottoman Sultan Ahmed I.⁷⁴ Established in 1985 by Osman Nuri Topbaş, the spiritual leader of the influential *Naqshbandî* group called *Erenköy Cemaati* in Turkey which is known to be

⁷³ Suat Cebeci, *Kırgızistan'da*, 42.

⁷⁴ Ziver Tezeren, *Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi*, (Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı Yayınları: İstanbul, 1987), 15.

popular among businessmen and small-scale tradesmen, today the Foundation is headed by his son, Ahmed Hamdi Topbaş.^{75,76}

It is possible to argue that the AKP government in Turkey has steadily promoted the *Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi* Foundation both as an alternative and a counter-balancing element against the *Gülen* Movement which has always been a power on its own, escaping the growing influence and control of the AKP in particular and those of the *Milli Görüş*⁷⁷ (National Vision) in general. The preference for the Foundation has been manifest for the past decade, but the most recent altercation with the *Gülen* Movement has accelerated the extent to which the Foundation has expanded its activities abroad. There is a marked difference between the *Gülen* Movement and the Foundation with regard to their respective approach to operations abroad. While the *Gülen* Movement dispatches students as teachers to serve at the schools which are competitive educational facilities in the host countries, the Foundation runs a different branch of schools abroad. The Foundation runs secondary schools abroad which are of strictly religious nature.⁷⁸ The *Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi* Foundation runs *Imam-Hatip* schools which are modelled after the state-run Islamic schools under the same name. While the curriculum is not confined to Islamic subjects only, incorporating science and social science classes as well, there is a marked emphasis on Islamic teaching in line with what I would like to call Orthodox Sunni Islam. Female and male students are taught in separate classrooms and share neither facilities nor school grounds. As a corollary to this, the said schools serve Muslim students only.

⁷⁵ Emeti Saruhan, “Çorba kazanını boş bırakmadılar” in *Gerçek Hayat*, (İhlas Gazetecilik: İstanbul, 2016), v.14 (806) 4-10 April 2016, 20.

⁷⁶ www.hudayivakfi.org/iyilik-ve-takvada-yardimlamak-icin-variz.html

⁷⁷ For a study dealing with the development of Political Islam in Turkey that reviews *Milli Görüş*, among others, see Banu Eligür, *The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey*, (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2010).

⁷⁸ Ahmed Hamdi Topbaş, “Muhterem Hüdâyi Dostları”, *Hüdâyi Bülteni*, Sayı 11, 2019, 3.

Therefore, one could say that the schools operated by *Gülen* Movement are ‘accommodating’ with regard to inter-religious relations; whereas those run by the Foundation are assertive in the same respect.

The *Aziz Mahmut Hüdâyi* Foundation operates in Kyrgyzstan and, according to my observations, is implicitly backed by the Turkish government. The local branch of the Foundation goes by the name Foundation for Support to Youth (*Gençliğe Yardım Vakfı*), which runs the Theology Faculty in the village of Arashan situated in the south, 22 kilometers to Bishkek.⁷⁹ Affiliated with Osh State University since 2001, the Theology Faculty has been supported by the local *Hüdâyi* branch in Kyrgyzstan and the Association of the Path for Compassion (*Şefkat Yolu Derneği*). Successful graduates are employed at SARA, *Muftiate* and the Kyrgyzstan Islamic University.

2.1.1.4. The *Süleymancı* Movement

The *Süleymancı* Movement follows the teachings of Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan (1888-1959). The *Süleymancıs* are very active throughout Central Asia where they run Quranic schools and informal Islamic courses destined for youth and adults alike.⁸⁰ *Süleymancı* is an exonym which the movement considers derogatory, and refers to itself as *Süleyman Efendi'nin talebeleri* which means ‘the pupils of Süleyman Efendi’. The *Süleymancı* Movement prefers to be referred to by non-members as *Süleymanlı*.⁸¹ The *Süleymancı* Movement is noted for its independent stance vis-à-vis the Turkish state since the time of its founder which resulted in occasional frictions between the parties and confiscation of the

⁷⁹ *Aziz Mahmûd Hüdâyi Vakfı: Beş Asırlık Merhamet ve Şefkat Çınarı*, Aziz Mahmûd Hüdâyi Vakfı, undated booklet, 34.

⁸⁰ Emine Çakmak, *Süleymancılık Cemaatinde Dini Eğitim Metotları* (unpublished M.A. thesis, İstanbul, 2013), 60-61.

⁸¹ Thijl Sunier, Nico Landman, *Transnational Turkish Islam*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 58.

group's schools.⁸² Kyrgyzstan has a special place for the *Süleymançıs* for Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan was a student of Selâhaddin Sâkib, a *Naqshbandî* scholar of Uzbek stock, who was born and interred in the city of Osh in Southern Kyrgyzstan.⁸³ The group runs orphanages and dormitories as well as *madrasas* in Kyrgyzstan, with Turkish teachers and qualified students going back and forth between Kyrgyzstan and Turkey. Their activities are not confined to Bishkek; in fact, they are active in smaller towns as well as larger cities, both in the north and in the south. The group has no distinct target group; they do not cater to any region or sub-division and ethnic or sectarian minority. However, not unexpectedly, students from poor families are more likely to prefer *Süleymançı* premises and institutions.⁸⁴ Any Muslim student who has completed the 5th grade can stay at the dormitories run by *Süleymançıs*. Students are housed according to the grade they are at; high school students are housed at high school dormitories whereas secondary school and university students are housed at their own respective dormitories. For a student to enter a *madrasa*, having successfully completed the 9th grade is required.

While the *Süleymançı* branch in Kyrgyzstan receives some financial support from locals, it relies mostly on its own sources, which generally take the form of donations. However, I was told by my *Süleymançı*-affiliated interviewee that they receive no financial support from the 'headquarters' in Turkey. As they are receptive to financial support from Kyrgyz nationals, it is possible to argue that they have some contact with non-elite Kyrgyz nationals. However, this is not sufficient to consider them as a grassroots movement for their contact with

⁸² Hilmi Türkyılmaz, *Dini Gruplar ve Cemaatlerin Sosyolojisi: Konya Örneği*, (İstanbul: Çizgi, 2021), 301-307.

⁸³ <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/selahaddin-sakib>

⁸⁴ This point has also been raised by one of my interviewees who was affiliated to the *Süleymançı* Group.

laymen is limited to students' families and relatives. Nonetheless, their base is wider than that of the *Gülen* Movement which relies heavily on elites.

2.1.2. Trans-national Islamic Groups and Organizations

2.1.2.1. Hizb ut-Tahrir

Established in the 1950s by Taqiuddin Nabhani in Jerusalem, *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, Arabic for Party of Liberation, is a Sunni political organization with a manifestly anti-colonialist hue which aims to liberate the 'ummah from the colonialist intellectual leadership and to remove its cultural, political, military and economic influence from the Islamic lands⁸⁵ and, consequently, to bring all Muslims under the single banner of an Islamic state under Sharia law and led by a caliph.⁸⁶ Today the group is very active worldwide with significant number of supporters in the UK, West Europe, Australia, Middle East and Central Asia.⁸⁷

Hizb ut-Tahrir considers itself a political party, rather than a religious group.⁸⁸ The group claims that it does not resort to violence and confines its methods to intellectual struggle and propaganda.⁸⁹ However, in Kyrgyzstan, like everywhere in Central Asia, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* is banned, on the grounds that the kind of Islam preached by the group and its ilk, the Wahhabis, is conflict-mongering and foreign to the tolerant, 'authentic', local Islam that has been rooted in the history

⁸⁵ Taqiuddin An-Nabhani, *Concepts of Hizb ut-Tahrir* (London: Al-Khilafaj, no date), 76.

⁸⁶ Emmanuel Karagiannis, *Political Islam in Central Asia: The challenge of Hizb ut-Tahrir* (London: Routledge, 2010), 38-40.

⁸⁷ Emmanuel Karagiannis, *Political Islam*, 40.

⁸⁸ Emmanuel Karagiannis, *Political Islam*, 40.

⁸⁹ Emmanuel Karagiannis, *Political Islam*, 48.

of Central Asia.⁹⁰ Kyrgyz scholars have expressed their mistrust for *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, claiming that even though they make a distinction between the peaceful means *Hizb ut-Tahrir* pursues and the violent modus operandi of Taliban and similar groups, both have the ultimate goal of creating the Caliphate.⁹¹

The main appeal of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* for the dwellers of Ferghana Valley is that, despite lack of a coherent economic policy on its part, the party advocates that economic and cultural hardships Muslims face can be overcome only if all Muslims worldwide are united under a single Caliphate which is expected to liberate Muslims from bonds of nationalism. It is then hardly surprising that *Hizb ut-Tahrir* appeals more to the socially and economically deprived Uzbek minority in Kyrgyzstan than other ethnic groups.⁹² The ethnic dimension of membership to *Hizb ut-Tahrir* in Kyrgyzstan is reflected in the Kyrgyz security sources which report that party membership is 90 percent ethnic Uzbek.⁹³ Since the party emphasizes Islamic solidarity and disregards ethnic background, it is understandable that the group is mostly appealing to ethnic Uzbeks who are discriminated against by the Kyrgyz majority. Mariya Omelicheva argues that “two related factors - the greater Islamicization of Uzbeks and Tajiks, and religious persecution of the ethnic minorities - have contributed to stronger support of Islamists by Uzbeks and Tajiks than by other ethnic groups in Central

⁹⁰ Johan Rasanayagam, *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 141-142.

⁹¹ I. Rotar, “An Interview with Sadykzhan Kamuluddin” in *The Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor* (12 March 2004).

⁹² Bakhtiyar Babadjanov, Kamil Malikov and Aloviddin Nazarov, *Islam in the Ferghana Valley: Between National Identity and Islamic Alternative in Ferghana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2011), 296-297.

⁹³ Emmanuel Karagiannis, *Political Islam*, 78.

Asia.”⁹⁴ The group, like many other Islamic groups active in Kyrgyzstan, has been subject to mistreatment, state repression, and arbitrary measures.⁹⁵

2.1.2.2. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

The ISIL, also known as ISIS as well as IS and DAESH or DAISH,⁹⁶ is a terrorist organization, recognized as such by many a government and international organization including the United Nations Security Council, which is active mainly in Syria and Iraq but also maintains strong presence in the Middle East and Libya, and operates through terrorist cells throughout the world since at least 2012.

The origins of ISIL are not clearly understood, but it is generally argued that the group emerged as a response to the US-led occupation of Iraq,⁹⁷ the rebellion and unstable political realm in Syria as well as what some members of al Qaeda in Iraq viewed as a failure of al Qaeda to overthrow the ‘corrupt’ and ‘un-Islamic’ governments throughout the Middle East and to establish a viable Islamic state for the *’ummah*.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Mariya Y. Omalicheva, “The Ethnic Dimension of Religious Extremism and Terrorism in Central Asia,” *International Political Science Review* 31 (2), (January 2010): 168.

⁹⁵ Mushfig Bayram, “Kyrgyzstan: “‘Draconian’ Proposed Religion Law and Administrative Code,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 35, Issue 1 (January 2015), 77.

⁹⁶ The group has changed its name at least five times.

⁹⁷ Andrew Hosken, *Empire of Fear: Inside the Islamic State* (London: Oneworld, 2015), 14. This view was expressed also by Tony Blair, who declared that “Of course you can’t say that those of us who removed Saddam in 2003 bear no responsibility for the situation [in Iraq] in 2015... There are elements of truth in the fact that the invasion [of Iraq] is responsible for the rise of ISIS.” CNN, October 25, 2015.

⁹⁸ Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, “Understanding the Rise of ISIL in Iraq and Syria, and Its Appeal in the US” in *Multi-Method Assessment of ISIL* (US Department of Defense, December 2014), 110.

The information regarding the activities of ISIL in Kyrgyzstan is of anecdotal nature at best and remains very controversial. There is little evidence as to the group's presence in the Kyrgyz soil, and what scanty or dubious information in circulation comes from the government of Kyrgyzstan. According to John Heathershaw and Edward Lemon, the ISIS-affiliated terrorists of Central Asian origin such as St. Petersburg attacker Akbarjon Jalilov, were not radicalized in their native countries but in the Russian Federation which serves as a trans-national space of migration and work for most Central Asian men.⁹⁹ This lack of accurate information and evidence casts doubt on the reliability of government reports about ISIL activities in Kyrgyzstan, raising the argument that such official reports may be politically motivated rather than based on actual intelligence. A report by Crisis Group, acknowledging that there is a worrying tendency of increased radical activity in Kyrgyzstan, "[t]he security services claim regularly to have foiled IS plots. [...] But the assertions are sometimes unsubstantiated and appear to be justification for the harassment of already marginalized communities."¹⁰⁰ An attack on the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek on 30 August 2016, attributed previously to ISIL, has been declared as a terrorist attack by Uyghur separatists affiliated with al-Nusra of Syria which is affiliated with al Qaeda itself.¹⁰¹

The dearth of reliable information with regard to the purported ISIL activity in Kyrgyzstan, coupled with the suspicion that the matter is used by Kyrgyz authorities for political maneuver renders it impossible accurate research any further. In any case, what little activity ISIL might carry out in Kyrgyzstan, its appeal to and influence on people remain insignificant. Although radicalization remains a fact for Central Asia and Kyrgyzstan, there is little evidence that this

⁹⁹ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/can-we-explain-radicalisation-among-central-asia-s-migrants/> accessed 23.09.2020.

¹⁰⁰ *Kyrgyzstan: State Fragility*, 2.

¹⁰¹ *Kyrgyzstan: State Fragility*, 2.

worrisome tendency has resulted in swelling the ranks of ISIL with Kyrgyz nationals so far.

2.1.2.3. Aga Khan Foundation/Aga Khan Development Network

Headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, the Aga Khan Foundation is a non-profit international development agency named after the title of the *imams* of the Nizari branch of Isma‘ilism within the wider Shia Islam. The foundation was founded by Prince Shah Karim Al Hussaini, who is the 49th *imam*, also known as Aga Khan IV. Aga Khan Foundation is an institution within the wider Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). The Foundation operates through its 19 regional offices, one of which is located in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁰² Its activities worldwide are focused on, among others, civil society, education, health, microfinance, and alleviation of poverty. The Foundation is active particularly in countries where Nizari Ismailis are present. According to Daryoush Mohammad Poor, the AKDN is the institutionalized form of the Ismaili *imamate*, which he refers to as the Institutions of the Ismaili *Imamate*.^{103,104} While the AKDN serves the interests of the Ismaili diaspora above all, its activities worldwide have gone far beyond helping uplift the Ismaili populations; transforming into an international development network which “provide services not only to the Ismaili community itself but also to the people among whom they live.”¹⁰⁵

The AKDN is very active in Kyrgyzstan through multiple affiliated institutions such as the Aga Khan School in Osh, the Aga Khan Music Initiative, the First

¹⁰² Aga Khan Foundation, accessed 29 December 2016, <http://www.akdn.org/our-agencies/aga-khan-foundation-0>.

¹⁰³ Daryoush Mohamad Poor, *Authority without Territory: The Aga Khan Development Network and the Ismaili Imamate* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 27.

¹⁰⁴ Daryoush Mohamad Poor, *Authority*, 169.

¹⁰⁵ Daryoush Mohamad Poor, *Authority*, 173.

Microcredit Company, the Kyrgyz Investment and Credit Bank, and the Jubilee Insurance Kyrgyzstan.¹⁰⁶ The Aga Khan Foundation also operates the Mountain Societies Development Support Programme in Osh and Naryn. Another affiliated institution, the University of Central Asia opened its first campus in Kyrgyzstan in Naryn on 19 October 2016.¹⁰⁷ The University of Central Asia aims to improve the educational backbone of Kyrgyz youth through various programs, and also to help the Ismaili diaspora in Kyrgyzstan integrate to the Kyrgyz society.

2.1.2.4. The Tablighi Jamaat

Since this thesis focuses on the interplay between the *Tablighi Jamaat* and the government of Kyrgyzstan, the *Tablighi Jamaat* is outlined more comprehensively than are the previous religious groups in this chapter. The *Tablighi Jamaat*, which means Proselytizing Group in Urdu/Hindi, is a movement that started in what was then the British Raj in 1926 by a Muslim scholar by the name Muhammad Ilyas Kandahlawi (1885-1944), also known as Maulana Ilyas. The movement is an offshoot of the *Deobandi* school, a *Salafi*¹⁰⁸ group of the *Hanafi* Islam also originating in India, which came into being as a response to what its members has viewed as the moral deterioration prevalent throughout the abode of Islam.

Farish Noor who conducted extensive research on the activities of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Southeast Asia notes that:

¹⁰⁶ Accessed 29 December 2016, <http://www.theismaili.org/news-events/mawlana-hazar-imam-kyrgyzstan-review-akdn-activities>.

¹⁰⁷ The University of Central Asia, accessed 29 December 2016, <http://www.ucentralasia.org/>

¹⁰⁸ Whether the *Tablighi Jamaat* can be considered a *Salafi* group is not a question to which experts have found a single answer. As we shall cover in the third chapter, Mehmet Ali Büyükkara distinguishes *Salafi* groups from the *Deobandis* and the *Tablighi Jamaat*, putting the latter under the rubric of *madrasa* traditionalists distinct from *Salafi* traditionalists.

like the Deobandis, the Tablighis were conservative fundamentalists who were inspired by the reformists of the Salafi movement from the Arab lands. However, unlike the Deobandis who were educationists, the Tablighis were mainly lay missionaries who sought to transform Muslim society and bring Muslims back to the path of true Islam.¹⁰⁹

Humeira Iqtidar describes the *Tablighi Jamaat* as a movement concerned with mass Islamic pietism.¹¹⁰ Kandahlawi considered proselytizing to be of extreme importance for the recovery of ‘nominal’ Muslims’ faith in the face of Muslim and non-Muslim interactions intensifying at an increasing pace. While proselytizing existed since the days of the Prophet Muhammad, proselytizing on a massive scale did not exist till the colonial period when Muslims came into contact with Christian missionaries.¹¹¹ Kandahlawi conceptualized proselytizing on two levels: firstly, as a tool to counter the destructive effects on Indian Muslims of Christian missionary activities as well as the syncretic folk Islam that came to existence as a consequence of long-term contact and cohabitation with Hindus; secondly as “a mechanism for strengthening ultimately the belief of the *tablighi* (the proselytizer) rather than the converted.”¹¹² The *Tablighi* movement exhibits some unique features:

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

¹⁰⁹ A. Farish Noor, *Islam on the Move: The Tablighi Jama'at in Southeast Asia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 27.

¹¹⁰ Humeira Iqtidar, “How Long”, 790.

¹¹¹ Humeira Iqtidar, “How Long”, 795.

¹¹² Humeira Iqtidar, “How Long”, 796.

Islamic teachings by other more conservative neo-fundamentalist pietist movements.¹¹³

In the light of these particularisms of the group, the *Tablighi Jamaat* presents itself as non-violent which rejects political involvement in any form, devoting their efforts to missionary activities destined for Muslims. Moreover, not only the *Tablighi Jamaat* does not wish to convert non-Muslims but also avoids contact with non-Muslims altogether. Pieri summarizes the *Tablighi Jamaat* as “a movement founded by Muslims and for Muslims—a revivalist organization seeking to reignite the spirit of Islam among the grassroots of Muslim communities across the globe.”¹¹⁴ The way the *Tablighis* conduct their missionary activities is referred to by Thomas Gugler as *sunnaization*¹¹⁵ and by others as “*sunnatization* of life”, focusing on reviving among the Muslims the *sunna*, the ways of the prophet Muhammad¹¹⁶ and “abandonment of local and sectarian practices in favor of a uniform orthodox practice.”¹¹⁷

The *Tablighi Jamaat* attempts to reach out Muslims worldwide at grassroots level. The movement is immensely popular in the Indian sub-continent as well as

¹¹³ A. Farish Noor, *Islam*, 28. There is considerable debate as to whether the *Tablighi* movement still retains its Sufi character by virtue of its founder’s links to Sufism or has long shed the last vestiges of its Sufi origins embedded in the *Chishtiyya*, transforming fully into a reformist movement. For a review of this debate, see Marc Gaborieau, “What Is Left of Sufism in Tablighi Jamā’at?,” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 51e Année, No. 135, Réveils du soufisme en Afrique et en Asie: Translocalité prosélytisme et réforme (Jul. – Sep., 2006), 53-72.

¹¹⁴ P. Zacharias Pieri, *Tablighi Jamaat and the Quest for the London Mega Mosque* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 15.

¹¹⁵ Thomas K. Gugler, “Sunna, Sunnaisierung und Imitatio Muhammadi: Die Islamisierung der Individualsphäre als Programm der Tablighi Jama’at end Da’wat-e Islami” in Herausgegeben von Paula Schrode und Udo Simon. *Die Sunna Leben: Zur Dynamik islamischer Religionspraxis in Deutschland* (Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 2012), 227-228.

¹¹⁶ Jamal Malik, “Muslim culture and reform in 18th century South Asia,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 13, no. 2, (Jul., 2003): 233, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25188363>.

¹¹⁷ Burton Benedict, Mauritius. *The Problems of a Plural Society* (London: Pall Mall, 1965), 39.

in countries with significant Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi populations, such as UK, South Africa, and Malaysia. More recently, the *Tablighi Jamaat* has made inroads into Central Asia and Latin America as well, where its members contact with large numbers of locals at the events destined for preaching the tenets of the movement. The members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* preach to Muslims in as remote geographies as Papua New Guinea and the Russian Arctic.¹¹⁸ In fact, some scholars argue that it is the largest group of religious proselytizers of any faith.¹¹⁹

The *Tablighi Jamaat* has a unique *modus operandi*, regardless of geography, culture, or political climate of the country they are active. They operate in the following manner: members of the group, locally known as *dawatçis* in Kyrgyzstan, which means callers or inviters, set out to towns and villages in groups on monthly and yearly tours to spread the message to the populace. These travelling missionary groups are generally made up of males; although travelling *Tablighi* women are not unheard of.¹²⁰ Such preaching groups conducted jointly by male and female preachers are called *masturat dawat* in Kyrgyzstan.¹²¹ They visit houses, bazaars and mosques door to door, explaining their message to Muslims willing to listen. Their message is not very sophisticated; indeed, it is limited to the basic tenets of Islam because the target population is laymen who are probably poorly versed in topics relating to Islam. Another reason for the

¹¹⁸ Marlene Laruelle, "Polar Islam: Muslim Communities in Russia's Arctic Cities", *Problems of Post-Communism* Vol. 67, Issue 4-5, (2020).

¹¹⁹ Alex Alexiev, "Tablighi Jamaat: Jihad's Stealthy Legions," *Middle East Quarterly* 12, no.1 (Winter 2005): 3, <https://www.meforum.org/686/tablighi-jamaat-jihads-stealthy-legions>.

¹²⁰ Peter Mandaville, *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the umma* (London: Routledge, 2004), 144.

¹²¹ Mukarram Toktogulova, ed. Ingeborg Baldauf, Stephan Conermann, Hermann Kreuzmann, Shahnaz Nadjmabadi, Dietrich Reetz, Conrad Schetter, Martin Sökefeld, Anna-Katharina Hornidge *The Localisation of the Transnational Tablighi Jama'at in Kyrgyzstan: Structures, Concepts, Practices and Metaphors* (Crossroads Asia Working Papers Series 17, March 2014), 1.

limited scope of the message is the very fact that the *dawatçis* themselves are not well-trained in Islamic tenets, who are mostly former invitees who were drawn to the message. Anyone who is interested in learning more about Islam and the ways of the *Tablighi Jamaat* is invited to the local mosques where the travelling members of the group stay and carry out *tabligh*-related conversation groups. Should the new invitees show an interest in joining the group, they are recruited and encouraged to participate in regular *dawat* tours elsewhere in Kyrgyzstan. After taking in part in such tours out of town and having been exposed to the message, the new members become regular organizers of similar tours and spread the message themselves. According to Gugler, “[f]or the implementation and experience of *imitatio Muhammadi* as a form of piety of action, the missionary trip probably provides an ideal “anti-structure” to isolate participants from their daily environment and distance them from their mundane daily routine.”¹²²

Kyrgyzstan is a prominent target country for the movement where it was reported that the *Tablighi Jamaat* was 10.000 strong in 2007, mostly members of Pakistani origin or locals trained in Pakistan.¹²³ The *Tablighi Jamaat*, according to some sources, is the most active missionary group in Kyrgyzstan.¹²⁴ Toktogulova, on the other hand, puts the number of the *Tablighi dawatçis* at more than 6.000, belonging to 600 preaching groups, noting that the number is probably higher.¹²⁵ According to *Muftiate*, “a total of 8.813 *dawatçis* conducted

¹²² Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) mentioned by Thomas K. Gugler, “Muslim Youths on Tablighi Journeys,” *ASIEN*, No: 126 (January 2013): 76.

¹²³ Eurasia.net, accessed 02.01.2017, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav072307a.shtml>.

¹²⁴ Global Voices Online, accessed 02.01.2017, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2013/06/12/should-kyrgyzstan-ban-tablighi-jamaat/>.

¹²⁵ Accessed 02.01.2017, http://m.gezitter.org/society/19274_uchenyie_issledovali_daavat/.

40 days of preaching tours in Kyrgyzstan.”¹²⁶ My interviews with locally active Turkish religious group members as well as Kyrgyz *Muftiate* confirmed this argument.¹²⁷ Actually, the society has been considered the most active foreign Islamic missionary group not only in Kyrgyzstan but also throughout the entire region. Unlike the aforementioned, underground *Hizb ut-Tahrir* which draws membership among the religious Uzbek minority, it has been reported that the cadres of the *Tablighi Jamaat* have been populated by the Kyrgyz. The society has since its inception assumed an apolitical stance,¹²⁸ which is confirmed even by Kyrgyz authorities who still harbor suspicions against *Tablighi Jamaat* due to the “foreign” and largely “unfamiliar” nature of their views. The interview conducted with a member of the Kyrgyz *Muftiate*¹²⁹ has revealed that *dawatçı* members of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, who were mostly trained in India, wore Indian-style *shalwar kameez* and sported long beards, which Kyrgyz populace found alien to the established norms in Kyrgyzstan. Claiming that similar attire was worn by Kyrgyz Muslims prior to the advent of Russian and the subsequent Soviet rule in Central Asia, members of the group insist on wearing their distinctive attire, at the expense of looking out of place and drawing the ire of some sections of Kyrgyz population. The *Tablighis* also incur public exasperation among the Kyrgyz due to the long periods of *dawat* and their strict attachment to it, which might result in neglecting their familial duties.¹³⁰

It is noteworthy that despite the visually distinct outlook of the members of the group and their incessant call to true Islam, the *Tablighi Jamaat* is legal in

¹²⁶ Mukarram Toktogulova, *Localisation*, 2.

¹²⁷ 14 November 2016, Bishkek.

¹²⁸ Graham Fuller, “The Future of Political Islam,” *Foreign Affairs*, (Mar.-Apr., 2002), 49.

¹²⁹ Interview at Kyrgyz *Muftiate*, 14 November 2016, Bishkek

¹³⁰ Accessed 02.01.2017, http://m.gezitter.org/society/19274_uchenyie_issledovali_daavat/.

Kyrgyzstan, carrying out their *tabligh* activities without hindrance even in the remotest parts of the country. The *Muftiate* has revealed that the *Tablighi* Movement is useful for the Kyrgyz government as long as they stayed out of politics and true to *tabligh*. The Kyrgyz governments since the early years of independence have promoted a policy of return to the ‘authentic’ values of Kyrgyzness, including social cohesion and avoidance of alcohol and other ills.¹³¹ From a certain point of view, these goals do not fall very far from Islamic values.¹³² Therefore, the outreach to grassroots level of the Kyrgyz society of *tabligh* activities come in handy, provided they remain out of the political realm.

The *Tablighi Jamaat* stands out among Islamic movements due to its above-mentioned *modus operandi*. Although *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and similar groups also have travelling missionary groups; the *Tablighi* groups display certain, characteristic deviations from what might be called as the ‘norm’ among translocal Muslim missionary groups. Firstly, as noted earlier, the *Tablighis* shun all forms of involvement in politics. According to Mandaville, “its fervent apoliticism becomes, in a sense, a form of (anti)politics.”¹³³ Dasetto holds that:

The very radicalism of their faith and their methods of reference are powerful elements in a critique of political systems, particularly those defining themselves as Islamic. Everything suggests that the *Tablighs*, far removed from power by virtue of their position in society, instead of attaching themselves to it engage in challenging its legitimacy. They go to the heart of the problem of power in ‘Muslim’ countries without touching it.¹³⁴

¹³¹ This is a recurring theme raised by a majority of my interviewees.

¹³² *Kyrgyzstan: State Fragility*, 10.

¹³³ *Kyrgyzstan: State Fragility*, 10.

¹³⁴ Felice Dasetto, "The Tabligh Organization in Belgium", in Tomas Gerholm and Yngve Georg Lithman, *The New Islamic Presence in Western Europe* (London: Mansell Publishing, 1988), 162.

There are accounts arguing that the group is a hotbed of radical, extremist version of political Islam where some proselytizers have been involved in acts of terrorism against Western targets.¹³⁵ It does not come as a surprise that Kyrgyz authorities have been mulling for some time whether to follow the example of the neighboring Central Asian republics as well as the Russian Federation and ban the organization.^{136,137}

However, as the group refrains from politics and ethnicity-based activities and helps spread messages aiming to improve people's daily lives and make them more pious, Kyrgyz government has little incentive to ban the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Actually, there are certain high-level bureaucrats, such as the head of Kyrgyz *Muftiate*, who are active members of the group. This is a clear indication of the extent to which the *Tablighi Jamaat* has penetrated the Kyrgyz society, and not just the poverty-stricken or rural sections of it. Indeed, the *Tablighi Jamaat* has a distinct appeal to wide sections of the Kyrgyz populace, more than any other Islamic group active in the country. While the *Tablighi* members mostly operate from door to door and in mosques, they have their own *madrasas* as well.¹³⁸ The regular *dawat* activities mostly target poor or poorly-educated village and town-dwellers; and *dawatçis* taking part in such activities hail from a socio-economic background similar to their targets. Nevertheless, training *madrasa* students and having them in their ranks indicate that the *Tablighi Jamaat* does not limit its activities to the poor or the under-educated but also aims to appeal to wealthier or better-educated sections of the society and are ready to cater to their specific needs.

¹³⁵ "Comments", The Guardian, accessed 02.01.2017. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/sep/08/religion-islam-tablighi-jamaat>.

¹³⁶ Azattyk, accessed 02.01.2017, <http://rus.azattyk.org/content/article/24252452.html>.

¹³⁷ Accessed 02.01.2017, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64378>.

¹³⁸ My interview at the Kyrgyz *Muftiate* refrained from giving more detailed information as to the *madrasa* or *madrasas* operated by the *Tablighi Jamaat*.

The distinctive nature of the group can also be seen in the fact that they are the only Muslim missionary group which deals with ordinary people in a door-to-door approach with extensive network throughout Kyrgyzstan. No other Muslim group operates such extensively outside Bishkek, and their grassroots level *tabligh* activities makes them unique among Islamic groups active in Kyrgyzstan. In that sense, their *modus operandi* bears similarity to the way Evangelical groups, Jehovah's Witnesses and Latter-day Saints interact with their respective target groups. That the *Tablighi* groups go abroad to preach is also reminiscent of the way the Latter-day Saints send preachers abroad.¹³⁹ Parallels have been suggested between the *Tablighi Jamaat* and Pentecostalism in "size and scope"¹⁴⁰, as well as in the manner in which new 'converts' associate their conversion with the self-fashioned 'born-again' label,¹⁴¹ although it is not evident whether this self-appellation has really gained currency among new 'converts' to the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan.

The adamancy on the part of *Tablighi Jamaat* on refraining from political life as well as withdrawal from a wider, democratic and multi-confessional society where it operates is explained within the framework of Swaine's dichotomous approach to illiberal groups functioning in liberal democracies, although its relevance to the Kyrgyz context is difficult to assess. According to Swaine's conceptualization, illiberal religious groups operating in liberal democracies are called theocratic groups, whose distinguishing quality is that "the followers strive to live according to the strict and comprehensive dictates of a religious

¹³⁹ Aurélie Biard, "Islam, Ethno-Nationalism, and Transnational "Faith Community" in Kyrgyzstan" in Bryan S. Turner, Adam Posamai and Patrick Michel (ed.) *Religions, Nations and Transnationalism in Multiple Modernities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 107-134, 116.

¹⁴⁰ Thomas K. Gugler, "The New Religiosity of Tablighi Jamaat and Dawat-e Islami and the Transformation of Islam in Europe", *Anthropos*, 105/2010/1, 122.

¹⁴¹ Marloes Janson, "How, for God's sake, can I be a good Muslim?": Gambian youth in search of a moral lifestyle", *Etnography* 2016, Vol. 17 (1), 23; Amélie Blom, "Emotions and the micro-foundations of religious activism: The bitter-sweet experiences of "born-again" Muslims in Pakistan", *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 54 (1), 2017, 124.

conception of the good.”¹⁴² Swaine argues that there are two types of theocratic groups: ambitious theocrats and retiring theocrats. The former is “enthusiastic participants in public life, engaging in public discourse and political affairs with a view to supplanting liberal institutions with stricter laws and regulations drawn from their religious conceptions of the good.”¹⁴³ In that respect, the aforementioned *Hizb ut-Tahrir* falls under the rubric of ambitious theocrats whose members do actively participate in social, economic and political life in Kyrgyzstan, although their activities have been banned by the state. The retiring theocrats, Swaine argues, “withdraw from everyday affairs. They are reluctant to partake in political or other civic matters, working instead to live in small communities where they may practice their religion in seclusion.”¹⁴⁴ Pieri considers the *Tablighi Jamaat* in the UK as retiring theocrats.¹⁴⁵

The *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, displays certain features which render it difficult to place the movement under the rubric of retiring theocrats. While the group in Kyrgyzstan is largely similar to its counterpart in the UK from a doctrinal point of view, the *Tablighi* movement in Kyrgyzstan exhibits at least three major differences from the *Tablighi* branch in the UK. Firstly, the latter operates in a liberal democracy, whereas the Kyrgyz *Tablighi* movement functions in a deeply flawed democracy where the state has frequently been observed infringing upon the rights of individuals and groups, such as those of religious movements.¹⁴⁶ However, the political atmosphere in

¹⁴² Lucas Swaine, *The Liberal Conscience: Politics and Principle in a World of Religious Pluralism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 9.

¹⁴³ Lucas Swaine, *The Liberal Conscience*, 9.

¹⁴⁴ Lucas Swaine, *The Liberal Conscience*, 9.

¹⁴⁵ P, Zacharias Pieri, *Tablighi Jamaat*, 15.

¹⁴⁶ Aurélie Biard, “The religious factor in the reification of “neo-ethnic” identities in Kyrgyzstan” in *Nationalities Papers* 38, No. 3 (May 2010): 325.

Kyrgyzstan is visibly less accommodating for retiring theocrats, urging them to refrain from politics. Thus, the Kyrgyz *Tablighi* movement enjoys a decidedly less liberal arena for operation than the UK *Tablighi* movement does. Secondly, the Kyrgyz *Tablighi Jamaat* carries out its activities in an overwhelmingly Muslim, albeit secular, society, while the *Tablighi Jamaat* in the UK caters to a small Muslim minority in an overwhelmingly non-Muslim society. Thirdly, at least some of the members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan are not as withdrawn from the wider society as suggested by Pieri's study of the *Tablighi* movement in the UK,¹⁴⁷ as evidenced by the fact that the head of the *Muftiate* back in 2017 was a member of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁴⁸ There are bureaucrats from other government institutions in Kyrgyzstan who are members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* whose lines of work stipulate that they interact in their official capacity with non-Muslims as well.

Briefly, the Islamic movements operating legally in Kyrgyzstan, and studied in this chapter, belong to various denominations and schools of thought, from Iran-backed Shia to Sunni groups hailing from Turkey, Pakistan, and the Gulf to *Ahmadiyya*. There are also a number of groups, most conspicuously *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and, purportedly, ISIL, which carry out their activities clandestinely.

Regardless of origin, *modus operandi* or denomination, the *raison d'être* of all foreign Islamic movements in Kyrgyzstan is based on the assumption that the people of Kyrgyzstan have been, as a consequence of seventy-year long Soviet rule, distanced from their Islamic roots, and thus the re-introduction of Islam to Kyrgyzstan was called for.¹⁴⁹ This assumption was pervasive among the preaching Islamic groups as well as the Kyrgyz and still is to some extent.

¹⁴⁷ P. Zacharias Pieri, *Tablighi Jamaat*, 15.

¹⁴⁸ P. Zacharias Pieri, *Tablighi Jamaat*, 227-228.

¹⁴⁹ One of my interviewees from Manas University has drawn my attention to this point on 15 November 2016 in Bishkek.

However, some scholars attribute this presumption to the Cold War era US propaganda dating back to the 1970s. This is indeed seen as a corollary to what some scholars coin as the ‘myth of Islamic revival’ in Central Asia. A report by Chatham House, for instance, argues that the myth of an ‘Islamic revival’ in the Central Asian republics is devoid of any basis.¹⁵⁰ “The level of Islamic activity by the predominantly Muslim Central Asian population has certainly shown signs of increase since 1991 owing to increased opportunities for the expression of faith after the end of the powerful and partially atheistic Soviet state,” however,

the idea of revival is misleading for it suggests that Islam was previously dead or at least passive as a social force. In fact, Islam never went away during the Soviet era and was already in resurgence in the late Soviet period. Indeed, the reshaping of Islam in the Soviet Union’s constituent republics after the Second World War remains a far more valid reference point for contemporary religious life in the region than any process of ‘returning to the past’.¹⁵¹

The Islamic movements, apart from the *Tablighi Jamaat*, have little day to day contact with the man in the street. They usually operate through schools, *madrasas*, dormitories, or orphanages which require them to maintain contact with students and their families, but this does not translate into door to door interaction with Muslims from all walks of life. They also do not preach peripatetically, but are located at the premises they run, such as headquarters, branch offices, schools, and the like. Most Islamic organizations are active in cities and smaller towns, Bishkek being their primary target. They generally do not operate in villages; and when they do, such activities are mostly of temporary nature arising from special occasions, such as distribution of meat during the *Eid al-Adha*, *iftar* (evening meal) organizations during the month of Ramadan or distribution of provisions for the poor.

¹⁵⁰ John Heathershaw and David W. Montgomery, “The Myth of Post-Soviet Muslim Radicalization in the Central Asian Republics” in Chatham House, (November 2014): 4-5.

¹⁵¹ John Heathershaw and David W. Montgomery, “The Myth,” 4.

The *Tablighi Jamaat*, on the other hand, has no headquarters for it is not institutionalized the way other groups are. Registered as a religious group at SARA though it is, the *Tablighi Jamaat* does not run a strictly or visibly hierarchical operation. Therefore, its *modus operandi* runs very differently than those of the other Islamic groups. The *Tablighis* are horizontally organized, relying heavily on voluntary preaching groups which are made up of ordinary people of little formal Islamic education. Their grassroots-level mode of operating allows them to interact with people from both towns and villages on monthly and yearly preaching tours. Thus, of all the Islamic groups active in Kyrgyzstan it is the *Tablighi Jamaat* which maintains the closest ties with the largest number of people. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the *Tablighis* are considered by most scholars as the most influential Islamic group in Kyrgyzstan as a whole.

CHAPTER III

RELIGIOUS ECONOMIES APPROACH

3.1. Theoretical Framework: A Paradigm Shift in the Sociology of Religion

Having explained briefly in the Introduction my reasoning as to why I have chosen to focus my dissertation on the relationship between the *Tablighi Jamaat* and the Kyrgyz state apparatus and introduced a general mapping of Islamic actors operating in Kyrgyzstan in the second chapter, this chapter is devoted to offering a theoretical framework which will help identify the dynamics of the reciprocal relationship between the *Tablighi Jamaat* and the Kyrgyz state.

As mentioned in the Introduction, of various theoretical tools available, religious economies approach is used to seek answers to the research questions regarding the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan and the government of Kyrgyzstan. Before delving into the details of this approach and how it relates to the research questions, an outline will be presented as to the evolution of the manner in which religion's place in a society has been theorized by social scientists in general and by sociologists in particular to put into perspective the versatility of the approach in the context of religious landscape in the post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan.

3.1.1. Secularization Theory: A Paradigm Challenged

Secularization theory, the dominant approach to religion in social sciences up to the late 20th century, was based on positivism and immensely indebted to prominent Enlightenment intellectuals, 19th century sociologists such as Auguste Comte, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Karl Marx as well as the early 20th century

sociologists, namely Max Weber and Emile Durkheim who, according to Peter Berger “dealt with the ‘big questions’ of the time.”¹⁵² A diverse set of sociologists of the 20th century subscribed to it: from Talcott Parsons to Robert Bellah, from Bryan Wilson to Peter Berger argued for secularization theory. Due to its ‘value-free’ nature, secularization theory came to be taken, albeit grudgingly, as a scientifically established fact by Christian theologians alike.¹⁵³ It is essential, therefore, to explain briefly in what ways the ‘founding fathers’ of sociology contributed to the elaboration of secularization theory. To this end, respective contributions of Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim to secularization theory will be discussed.

3.1.1.1. Auguste Comte

Auguste Comte is usually credited with the distinction of being the founder of the doctrine of positivism and of being one of the forerunners of sociology as a discipline. In fact, it was Comte who coined the very term of *sociologie* to describe the science of society.¹⁵⁴ However, the legacy of Comte in today’s social sciences is remarkably flimsy in comparison to that of the later, ‘founding fathers’ of sociology like Marx, Weber, and Durkheim for:

most contemporary “positivist” sociologists seem to have lost any taste for the kind of grand historical schemes favored by Comte, just as they are wary of avoiding the conflation of descriptive statements with normative claims typical of Comte’s sociological analyses, not to mention their rejection of the politically conservative and authoritarian implications of positive politics.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Peter L Berger, “Sociology: A Disinvitation?” *Society* 30, (1992), 12.

¹⁵³ Peter L. Berger, Anton Zijderveld, *In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions Without Becoming a Fanatic* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2010), 9.

¹⁵⁴ Vincent Guillin, “Comte and Social Science” in edited by Michel Bourdeau, Mary Pickerin, and Warren Schmaus *Love, Order, and Progress: The Science, Philosophy, and Politics of Auguste Comte* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018), 128.

¹⁵⁵ Vincent Guillin, 128-129.

Particularly, the evolutionary scheme of Comtean sociology was unable to withstand the piling up of ethnographic evidence of the late 19th century which challenged his unilineal evolutionary theory and gave way instead to functionalistic interpretations of social systems.¹⁵⁶

Comtean science “conceived of society as an organic whole and maintained that its historical development could be explained and predicted through laws that would be as objective as those of the natural sciences.”¹⁵⁷ According to Wilhelm Schmidt, Comte argued that there existed a sociological law wherein

the development of man passed through three stages, the theological or fictive, the metaphysical or abstract, and the positive or scientific. In the first stage, the universe was explained as a result of the activities of personal beings; in the second, it was made to depend on abstract forces; in the third, inquiry was confined to establishing the succession irrelations of experimental facts without troubling about the question of the Absolute. For the whole attention of man must now be turned upon the positive, that is to say, the precise, actual and relative.¹⁵⁸

Comte believed in the validity and unalterableness of the threefold evolutionary states not only for religious and spiritual thought but also for each branch of knowledge.¹⁵⁹ According to Comte’s evolutionary scheme, thus, transcendental quality of religions became obsolete with the advent of science. Much as he saw archaic, and redundant religions in a ‘scientific’ world such as his, Comte, however, came to appreciate the social function of religion and even went on to establish one with himself as the *Grand Prêtre*. As early as 1826, he talked of the necessity for a ‘spiritual power’ (*le pouvoir spirituel*) without which the post-

¹⁵⁶ Wouter W. Belier, “Durkheim, Mauss, Classical Evolutionism and the Origin of Religion”, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, Volume 11, Issue 1, (January 1999), 24.

¹⁵⁷ Vincent Guillin, 128-129.

¹⁵⁸ Wilhelm Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion: Facts and Theories* translated by H.J. Rose (London: Methuen & Co, 1935), 57.

¹⁵⁹ Mike Gane, *Auguste Comte* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 3.

Revolutionary France would be unable to reorganize society, or the entire Europe for that matter, arguing that what he called the metaphysical philosophy that toppled the *ancien régime* was unfit for the task at hand.¹⁶⁰ Convinced that, in order to keep going and prevent from dispersion the division of labor in a given society, spiritual power took precedence over temporal power in terms of urgency, Comte suggested that a spiritual power based on positive faith, which he designated as a “disposition to take on trust to principles established in sciences by competent men,”¹⁶¹ as opposed to theological faith of the *ancien régime*, be established. Such a spiritual power, he contended, should be popular and, thus, appeal to numbers rather than to wealth for temporal power already belonged to the latter.¹⁶² The spiritual power would be entrusted with indispensable social functions such as education, universal education at that, and classification which is to sustain hierarchy of a society.¹⁶³ Such a spiritual power, which Comte named Religion of Humanity (*Religion de l’Humanité* or *église positiviste*) and Thomas Huxley called “Catholicism without Christianity,”¹⁶⁴ would retain Catholic morale without the transcendent of Christianity by replacing “faith and church [with] the positivisation of knowledge and the rising authority of science.”¹⁶⁵ Disbelief in the transcendental and faith in science were common traits among early sociologists including Comte, but the latter’s

¹⁶⁰ Michel Bourdeau, “Comte’s Political Philosophy” in *Love, Order, and Progress*, 164-165.

¹⁶¹ Michel Bourdeau, 175.

¹⁶² Michel Bourdeau, 175-176.

¹⁶³ Michel Bourdeau, 178.

¹⁶⁴ Thomas Henry Huxley, *Lay Sermons, Addresses, and Reviews* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1870), 167.

¹⁶⁵ Andrew Wernick, *Auguste Comte and the Religion of Humanity: The Post-theistic Program of French Social Theory* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 97.

appreciation of the social functions of organized religion to the point of establishing a positivist church was what set him apart from others.

3.1.1.2. Karl Marx

Marx has not written extensively on religion; in fact his take on religion can best be described as sparse on which he dwelled not as an independent phenomenon but as a function of socio-economic factors he prioritized.¹⁶⁶ Although his knowledge of religion was far from being thorough, Marx:

knew the scriptures well and quoted them often for a variety of reasons, sometimes to expose exploitation and hypocrisy, sometimes to manifest irony, sometimes to convey insight, sometimes to put superstition in its place and sometimes, one suspects, just for the fun of it.¹⁶⁷

Reading Marx's writings from a longitudinal perspective, it has been remarked by Marxologists that the early Marx in its evolution into the later Marx shed his initial humanist and personal tone to assume a more impersonal mood while his emphasis on "Man" was replaced by social classes.¹⁶⁸ The early Marx is the era in which most of Marx's writing on religion occurred, which suggests that the later Marx's repudiation of his earlier thoughts such as "alienation" and "humanism" might have also extended to his early views on religion, creating a disunity in Marx's thought.¹⁶⁹ It has been suggested by Karl Löwith that Marx's thinking evolved in such a way that "[a]t first he criticized religion philosophically, then he criticized religion and philosophy politically, and at last

¹⁶⁶ Delos B. McKown, *The Classical Marxist Critiques of Religion: Marx, Engels, Lenin, Kautsky* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 6.

¹⁶⁷ Delos B. McKown, 6.

¹⁶⁸ Robert C. Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 165.

¹⁶⁹ Delos B. McKown, 9.

he criticized religion, philosophy and politics, and all other ideologies, economically.”¹⁷⁰

To summarize Marx’s thoughts on religion, it can be said that Marx was avowedly hostile to religion but did not espouse a head-on attack on religion. Rather, he believed that the working class was “expected to free [itself] from religious influences but in such a way that religion would die from neglect and loss of function rather than from frontal assault.”¹⁷¹ He also believed that items of religious belief both governed man and rendered him slave; remarking also that religion served a conservative social function.¹⁷² Of religious institutions Marx “always maintained that there was a close relationship between the interests of religious institutions and those of secular property whether movable or immovable.”¹⁷³ Marx also held the belief that religion would eventually disappear for it was already in a long process of decay, which would finally die out when human relations were based totally on rationality.¹⁷⁴

Marx has famously described religion as the “opiate of the people.”¹⁷⁵ This oft-quoted phrase has been used by Marxists and anti-Marxists alike to suggest that Marx believed that religion could be summarized as a pacifier for the aching masses. Reductionist and equivocal, this take on Marxian perception of religion

¹⁷⁰ Karl Löwith, “Man’s Self-Alienation in the Early Writings of Marx,” *Social Research*, XXI (Summer, 1954), 204.

¹⁷¹ Karl Marx, *The Critique of the Gotha Program* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, n.d.), 35.

¹⁷² Delos B. Mckown, 11.

¹⁷³ Delos B. Mckown, 11.

¹⁷⁴ Delos B. Mckown, 12.

¹⁷⁵ Karl Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* (Paris, 7 & 10 February, 1844).

is due to decontextualization and loss of meaning of Marx's opium metaphor which Roger O'Toole attributes to its interminable repetition in the Marxist tradition.¹⁷⁶ Criticisms raised against Marx's analysis of religion usually center around his understanding of religion, accusing Marx of approaching the problem one-sidedly and being blind to the ways religion ameliorate the plight of the oppressed.

John Raines, for one, draws parallelism between Marx's discourse on the essence of human beings in the latter's critique of Hegel and the suffering African slaves experienced in the antebellum South. Raines concedes that for Marx the essence of religion is to give voice to people's sufferings caused by exploitation, and the essence of human beings is "a passionate suffering, struggle to take back into our hands a world we have made but which is then taken away from us."¹⁷⁷ Raines then goes on to question as to why Marx wants religion abolished when the whole point of our lives is to suffer, the answer being provided by Marx:

The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness. To call them to give up their illusions about their conditions is to call on them to *give up a condition that requires illusions*. The criticism of religion is therefore *in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo*.¹⁷⁸

Raines argues that Marx's personal experience with and impression of religion were based on and shaped by the highly structural state churches of Great Britain and the German states, concluding that had Marx witnessed the unstructured religious practices of African slaves and the asymmetrical power relations that exist between them and their owners, he would have drawn a more balanced

¹⁷⁶ Roger O'Toole, *Religion: Classic Sociological Approaches* (Toronto: McGraw Hill, 1984), 68.

¹⁷⁷ "Introduction" in *Marx on Religion*, edited by John Raines (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 8, emphasis in original.

¹⁷⁸ Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* translated by Joseph O'Malley (Oxford University Press, 1970), 7.

conclusion towards religion. When slaves sing a particular spiritual to express their anguish, how people perceive the meaning of the lyrics depends on where they stand:

What is the function of “heaven-talk” and “God-talk” in slaves giving voice to their sufferings? Is it simply pie-in-the-sky bye-and-bye talk that gives comfort to those who own and enjoy the pie here on earth? Certainly that is how the slave owners heard it. They didn’t hear the subversive voice in that singing. They couldn’t, for it would have called into profound moral criticism their own behavior! In their singing, as they worked barefoot in the fields of the master, the slaves gave collective voice to their protest and the cry of their own deservedness. Heaven is another way of talking about “how it will be when things are the way they should be.” [...] for the African-American slaves, the transcendent vision of religion helped them subvert all that was so powerfully trying to subvert their own human dignity. It was the cry of protest and the promise of a different future.¹⁷⁹

3.1.1.3. Max Weber

Although Weber has written extensively on religion, he refused to produce a definition of it, arguing that such a definition could not be offered at the beginning of a presentation but only could it be done at the conclusion which never materialized in his studies.¹⁸⁰ It is through Max Weber that several concepts related to religion such as the Protestant Work Ethic and Disenchantment of the World gained currency in sociology.

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* which dates to 1905, Weber sets out to discover the genesis of capitalism in religion. Poggi argues that for Weber:

the first and possibly most vital feature of the spirit of capitalism is that it invested economising itself with high moral significance. That is, the entrepreneur [...] engages in capitalistic economising not purely as a matter of expediency, of constrained adaptation to the mundane necessity of making a

¹⁷⁹ John Raines, 9.

¹⁸⁰ Peter Beyer, *Religions in a Global Society* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 4.

living, but in the expectation that such activity would test his inner resources as an agent, as a person in charge of his own existence, and affirm his human worth. [...] the tasks of the enterprise are performed with an earnestness of purpose that places them at the very centre of the subject's life, endows them with intrinsic dignity. There is nothing degrading about them, nothing demeaning about the attention to minutiae they require, nothing requiring apology in the style they impart to the entrepreneur's whole existence. He indeed expects his work to shape his very identity, to mobilise and develop his most personal qualities. In a word, the spirit of capitalism enjoins the entrepreneur to consider his economic activity as a calling (*Beruf*).¹⁸¹

The entrepreneur as a layman has a calling from God not unlike the priest does, but the former fulfils it by applying himself to his worldly profession, the latter by ecclesiastical work. The entrepreneur has to first and foremost gain money from his professional endeavors. Making money in capitalistic spirit, according to Weber, necessitates that the monetary gain of the entrepreneur should bear no semblance to materialistic greed and, accordingly, money thus gained should not serve to satisfy basic needs like lust and gluttony but should be accumulated.¹⁸² Money gained through entrepreneurial initiatives is not for immediate consumption or display but is reserved for future investments. The entrepreneurial life, therefore, has a temporal aspect where the entrepreneur defers his consumption for the sake of employing his resources for the future toward which he is oriented.¹⁸³

As spirit of capitalism requires that the entrepreneur focus his entire life around his business, he should retain his manners and attitudes towards his business and business contacts in his daily life towards his family and acquaintances as well. Capitalist entrepreneurs display such personal traits like frugality, sobriety, individualism, impersonality, anti-traditionalism, and a secular orientation as opposed to Christian values of communitarianism, charitability, and acceptance

¹⁸¹ Gianfranco Poggi, *Calvinism and the Capitalist Spirit: Max Weber's Protestant Ethic* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1983), 40-41.

¹⁸² Gianfranco Poggi, 41.

¹⁸³ Gianfranco Poggi, 43.

of one's lot in life.¹⁸⁴ As such, capitalism is a secularizing force, according to Weber. The whole point of the spirit of capitalism is to:

attribute moral significance to entrepreneurial activity, not simply to supply a set of pragmatic rules for the pursuit of an utterly utilitarian end (44; 53-4). The spirit of capitalism is intended (also) to lend *meaning* to the existence of those committed to it. As such, according to Weber, it has and can only have an irrational or a-rational option at its core (268 f273; 276 j79). It must constitute, for those embracing it, an existential wager. In this sense, then, the spirit of capitalism is indeed a *spirit*, an Ethos, a vision capable of imparting meaning only to the existence of those untroubled by its lack of further rational justification.¹⁸⁵

Having thus outlined the spirit of capitalism, Weber goes on to identify its roots in religion, namely Puritanism, or Calvinism and Lutheranism to be precise. For “Puritanism as a doctrine turned away from emotional display, it had a horror of sensuous and sexual enjoyment, it regarded art as frivolous, and regarded idleness as one of the greatest sins.”¹⁸⁶ Luther, Weber argued, showed no concern for economic development, being a traditionalist from an economic point of view, whereas Calvinism urged the faithful to dramatically orient their lives towards business.¹⁸⁷ Calvinism with its two distinct doctrines, namely God's transcendence and individual's predestination, prompts individuals to assume such ethical values that he is to follow in his everyday conduct.¹⁸⁸

To Calvinists, “God had already determined everything that could happen, and it was already chosen who were the damned and who would be saved, irrespective

¹⁸⁴ Gianfranco Poggi, 52-53.

¹⁸⁵ Gianfranco Poggi, 46-47.

¹⁸⁶ Sam Whimster, *Understanding Weber* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 63.

¹⁸⁷ Sam Whimster, 64.

¹⁸⁸ Gianfranco Poggi, 63.

of people's actual behavior."¹⁸⁹ The doctrine of predestination "developed as a 'logical necessity' from the transcendental character of God."¹⁹⁰ Although the fatalism of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination seems at first to discourage hard work and charitable behaviour leaving no room for earning divine grace,¹⁹¹ this happens not to be the case for "the social psychology of this belief system excluded any intellectual doubt about salvation and demanded complete confidence of its members that they should act as if they were predestined for salvation."¹⁹² A self-signaling mechanism exists, according to Calvinism, where the elect embody Christ and are epitome of good behavior; the corollary to which is that believers wishing to glean information regarding their standing before God should behave properly following the example of Christ.¹⁹³

Later scholarship has cast doubt on the accuracy and relevancy of Weber's theses regarding to the birth of capitalism he put forward in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Data from early modern German cities, both Catholic and Protestant, over the long run do not empirically support Weber's thesis, with no distinguishable difference in terms of economic growth.¹⁹⁴ It has also been argued that Weber's argumentation was logically flawed as it failed,

¹⁸⁹ Sam Whimster, 65.

¹⁹⁰ Frank J. Sparhawk, "The Protestant Ethic Thesis: An Internal Critique," *Mid-American Review of Sociology*, Vol. 1, No: 1 (1976), 29.

¹⁹¹ The Calvinist concept of predestination is likened and linked to the Reformist principle of *sola gratia*.

¹⁹² Sam Whimster, 65.

¹⁹³ Gilat Levy, "The Intelligent Design of Religious Beliefs," in edited by Jean-Paul Carvalho, Sriya Iyer, Jared Rubin, *Advances in the Economics of Religion*, IEA Conference Volume No. 158 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 77.

¹⁹⁴ Davide Cantoni, "The Economic Effects of The Protestant Reformation: Testing the Weber Hypothesis in the German Lands," *Journal of the European Economic Association*, vol. 13(4) (2015), 2.

first, to demonstrate a link between religious motivation stemming from the Calvinist calling and ascetic economic activity, and, second, to take into account the evolving dynamics of Calvinism.¹⁹⁵ On the other hand, Benjamin Nelson pointed to the evolution of Weber's own scholarship in this matter, arguing that in the "Author's Introduction" to the *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, published posthumously in 1920, Weber emphasized the development of science and technology, rather than his restrictive arguments in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, as the factors giving birth to modern capitalism.¹⁹⁶

Weber pronounced in *Science as a Vocation (Wissenschaft als Beruf)* in 1917 what he saw as the culmination of a process the West had been going through for millennia which he called "Disenchantment of the World" (*Entzauberung der Welt*) a term he borrowed from Friedrich Schiller. The latter in *On the Aesthetic Education of Men* dated 1794 coined the term to refer to "shift from the holistic world view of the ancient Greeks to the fragmentation characteristic of modernity."¹⁹⁷ Weber, however, used the expression to designate

a development within the domain of religion from ritual and magic to "other-worldly salvation religions" in which paths to salvation completely devoid of magic are formulated [...], and, on the other, to a broad historical development in the West according to which knowledge of the universe is less and less understood by reference to supernatural forces and salvation doctrines, and more and more by reference to empirical observation and the experimental method of the natural sciences.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ Frank J. Sparhawk, 32-39.

¹⁹⁶ Benjamin Nelson, "Max Weber's "Author's Introduction" (1920): A Master Clue to his Main Aims," *Sociological Inquiry* 44(4) (1974), 271-272.

¹⁹⁷ Jibu Mathew George, *The Ontology of Gods: An Account of Enchantment, Disenchantment, and Re-Enchantment* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 2.

¹⁹⁸ *Max Weber: Readings and Commentary on Modernity*, edited by Stephen Kalberg (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), xxii-xxiii.

In Weber's parlance, what distinguishes 'civilized' man from the 'savage' was Disenchantment, not scientific knowledge: "the growing process of intellectualization and rationalization do *not* imply a growing understanding of the conditions under which we live. It means something quite different. It is the knowledge or the conviction that if *only we wished* to understand them we *could* do so at any time."¹⁹⁹ Jibu George summarizes Weberian understanding of Disenchantment as consolidation of the realm of 'real' beings and that of "culturally postulated superhuman agents"²⁰⁰ into one:

Disenchantment is tantamount to either an ontological reversal or reducing the two realms to one—the realm of "real," natural beings. The historico-philosophical story of disenchantment is one that explains what swung human conceptions in the realist direction, a substitution of cultural explanations for metaphysical explanations, cultural codes for metaphysical codes.²⁰¹

For Weber, Disenchantment, as a result of intellectualization and rationalization brought about bureaucratization of the mundane and the central place religion used to occupy had constantly contracted to the point that he believed that religion had no future in modern societies.

3.1.1.4. Emile Durkheim

Having witnessed the Franco-Prussian War, the suppression of the Paris Commune, and the establishment of the Second Republic in the span of a few turbulent years, Durkheim established himself in France as a prominent intellectual figure defending the modern ideals of the Third Republic against the

¹⁹⁹ *Max Weber: The Vocation Lectures*, Edited by David Owen and Tracy B. Strong (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 12, emphasis in original.

²⁰⁰ Robert N. McCauley, and E. Thomas Lawson, *Bringing ritual to mind: Psychological foundations of cultural forms* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2003), 8.

²⁰¹ Jibu Mathew George, 11.

rightist reactionary and leftist revolutionary forces.²⁰² Amidst such a social and politically embattled setting, social functions of religion became an object of scholarly interest to him as he applied himself to establishing and popularizing a secular morality which essentially meant contesting the Catholic Church over the latter's cultural hegemony over the society.²⁰³ According to Royce, for Durkheim, religion, "though not based on fact, cannot be dismissed as a 'vast error,' an 'inexplicable hallucination,' or a mere delusion. It expresses something real. There is a truth to religion, though this truth is not what believers think it is."²⁰⁴ The reality of religion, Durkheim insisted, was embedded in the society as "religion is something eminently social."²⁰⁵ Had religion been totally devoid of a social basis, it would long have ceased to exist:

This is not the place to enquire into whether or not some scientists must be reproached for turning religious history and ethnography into an engine of war to combat religion. In any case, this cannot be true of the sociologist. It is an essential postulate of sociology that a human institution cannot be based on error and falsehood, otherwise it could not have lasted.²⁰⁶

Durkheim proclaimed that in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* that god and society were same,²⁰⁷ where, in Idinopulos's words, Durkheim:

²⁰² Edward Royce, *Classical Social Theory and Modern Society: Marx, Durkheim, Weber* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 56.

²⁰³ Pierre Hayat, "Laïcité, fait religieux et société: Retour à Durkheim?" *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 52^e Année, No. 137 (Jan. – Mar., 2007), 9-10.

²⁰⁴ Edward Royce, 86.

²⁰⁵ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, translated by Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 44.

²⁰⁶ *Durkheim on Religion: A selection of readings with biographies and introductory remarks*, edited by W.S.F. Pickering (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke & Co., 2011), 103.

²⁰⁷ Emile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Paris: Quadrige Puf, 2013), 270. The dictum that "religion is the society worshipping itself," which bears a similar meaning, is usually attributed to Durkheim without much basis for those words do not feature in his

makes a convincing case that religion is a genuine phenomenon and not an illusion when religion is understood as a function of social behavior. The nexus between religion and society means that beliefs and mythologies and rituals are not delusory; they must be studied as important sources of insight about human beings in their communal relations. In this regard Durkheim separated himself from those other reductionists—Marx, Mueller, Tylor and Freud—who judged religion to be a delusion.²⁰⁸

Durkheim like his contemporaries believed that as our scientific knowledge deepened religion lost its social relevancy. In Danièle Hervieu-Léger's words, "[t]he developing social contraction of religion, which, according to Durkheim, coalesces with human history, is the exact counterpart of the process of expansion in science, with science annexing even the development of the scientific intelligence of religious phenomena."²⁰⁹ However, that is not to suggest that Durkheim believed that religion would be replaced by secular ethics. "He insisted [...] that religion lies at the heart of social and moral life. So how can it survive the rise of secularism in the modern western world and the disappearance of God from many of our lives and many of our institutions? The key to the problem is the survival of a sense of the sacred."²¹⁰ Durkheim proposed that the sacred was transferred in the modern world from God to human person.²¹¹ Durkheim, however, does not suggest the transfer of sacrality from God to individual, for he distinguished person from individual:

writings nor in their English translations.

²⁰⁸ Thomas A. Idinopulos, "The Strength and Weaknesses of Durkheim's Methodology for the Study and Teaching of Religion" in *Reappraising Durkheim for the Study and Teaching of Religion Today* ed. by Thomas a. Idinopulos and Brian C. Wilson (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 2-3.

²⁰⁹ Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2000), 20.

²¹⁰ W. Watts Miller, "Secularism and the Sacred: Is There Really Something Called 'Secular Religion'?" in *Reappraising Durkheim*, 27.

²¹¹ W. Watts Miller, 28.

Identity as an individual is about all our differences, which make each of us distinct. Identity as a person is about a same human dignity, which every one of us shares. It is this idea that Durkheim saw as the only possibility, in a modern, large-scale, plural world, of a common faith. And it is this idea that he saw as transcendent, setting the person above other things and going beyond all our differences as individuals and as members of particular groups.²¹²

3.1.2. Secularization Theory

What came to be known as secularization theory, or, simply, secularization, has become the master narrative of the 20th century. In José Casanova's words

secularization may be the only theory which was able to attain a truly paradigmatic status within the social sciences... shared by all the founding fathers: from Karl Marx to John Stuart Mill, from Auguste Comte to Herbert Spencer, from E.B. Tylor to James Frazer, from Ferdinand Toennies to Georg Simmel, from Emile Durkheim to Max Weber, from Wilhelm Wundt to Sigmund Freud, from Lester Ward to William G. Sumner, from Robert Park to George H. Mead.²¹³

According to Steve Bruce, Bryan Wilson defines secularization as the “process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance.”²¹⁴

Based on Wilson's definition, Bruce elaborates on what constitutes secularization:

Secularization includes: the decay of religious institutions; the displacement, in matters of behaviour, of religious rules and principles by demands that accord with strictly technical criteria; the sequestration by political powers of the property and facilities of religious agencies; the replacement of a specifically religious consciousness (which might range from dependence on charms, rites, spells, or prayers, to a broadly spiritually inspired ethical concern) by an empirical, rational, instrumental orientation; the shift from religious to secular control of a variety of social activities and functions; the decline in the

²¹² W. Watts Miller, 29.

²¹³ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 17.

²¹⁴ *Religion in Secular Society: Fifty Years On*, ed. Steve Bruce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6.

proportion of their time, energy, and resources that people devote to supernatural concerns.²¹⁵

What constitutes the core of secularization theory is a contested subject which generated a great variety of answers from many a prominent sociologist. For the sake of simplicity, focus will be placed on Oliver Tschannen's well-organized description of secularization. Arguing that "while a number of theories have been very systematically stated [...], it is true [...] that one cannot combine these theories into a single, coherent super-theory,"²¹⁶ Tschannen identifies three basic elements, "exemplars" in the Kuhnian framework, of 'the standard model' of secularization: differentiation, rationalization, and worldliness:

In the course of history, religion becomes progressively differentiated from other domains of social life, eventually emerging as a very specific institutional domain within a new type of social structure made up of several such institutions (education, politics, economy, etc.). For example, the Church and the State become clearly differentiated (*differentiation*). At the same time, the different non-religious institutions born from this process of differentiation start working on the basis of criteria that are rationally related to their specific social functions, independently from any religious control or guidance. Thus, for example, the economy starts to work in a rational way dictated by its own inherent logic (*rationalization*). The impact of these processes on the religious sphere itself causes it to lose some of its specificity and to become more worldly. Religious organizations start to cater to the psychological needs of their members (*worldliness*).²¹⁷

Differentiation comprises five over-arching consequences: firstly, as institutions become autonomous from religion, the latter loses its previously powerful capability to influence the former (*autonomization*). As religion must re-organize itself to adapt itself to the changing conditions, two seemingly contradictory processes emerge: individuals begin to form their own interpretations of the

²¹⁵ Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2.

²¹⁶ Oliver Tschannen, "The Secularization Paradigm: A Systematization", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Dec., 1991), 396.

²¹⁷ Oliver Tschannen, "The Secularization Paradigm", 400-401.

world (*privatization*), and religion becomes generalized penetrating now secular institutions (*generalization*). Fourthly, differentiation begets religious pluralism whereby the collapse of unquestioned authority of religious authority enables different religious interpretations to emerge and populate the religious market (*pluralization*). Lastly, religious practice declines as a consequence of the erosion of power of religious authority (*decline in practice*).²¹⁸ The process of *rationalization*, on the other hand, comprises two consequences: *scientization* which refers to the replacement of religion by science in explaining the world, and the natural phenomena and *sociologization* which refers to the process by which rational and scientific study is applied to understand human affairs.²¹⁹

Noteworthy, at least in my opinion, in Tschannen's treatment is that "privatization" in his model does have a somewhat different meaning to "privatization" as used by, *inter alia*, Peter Berger who employs it to denote the withdrawal of religion to the private sphere from the public sphere.²²⁰ Privatization as it generally features in secularization narratives indicates the process by which religion, which used to regulate both public and private spheres in the pre-modern age, has been gradually confined to the private lives in the modern age,²²¹ which in Charles Taylor's terminology corresponds to "secularity 1".²²² Arguing that the term "privatization" may denote, in the context of

²¹⁸ Oliver Tschannen, "The Secularization Paradigm", 401.

²¹⁹ Oliver Tschannen, "The Secularization Paradigm", 402.

²²⁰ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, [1967] 1969), 129.

²²¹ Thomas Luckmann was one of the first to use the term 'privatization' in *The Invisible Religion*.

²²² Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, Markus Dressler, "Introduction: Modernity, Religion-Making, and the Postsecular" in *Secularism and Religion-Making* Editors Arvind-Pal S. Mandair and Markus Dressler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6.

Christianity, different phenomena, each relating to religion, Stephen Hart observes that the term “privatization” indicates, among other things

[s]eparation of religion from public concerns: the idea that religion is concerned only with the inner life of each individual, and perhaps with our person-to-person dealings with each other in private settings such as with family and friends, but is not concerned with the issues that arise in the public domain.... [T]his theory relates Christian faith and teachings only to the life of each individual considered separately, and not to social questions. It goes beyond separation of church and state, and even beyond the view that only individuals (and not churches as organizations) should relate faith to social issues, in that the view I am describing as privatized does not connect faith to social issues at all.²²³

Useful, concise, and well-organized though Tschannen’s threefold scheme of secularization is, his formulation, in his own words, is “purposely unsophisticated;” for “[i]n order to be effective, a paradigm must be simple and be based on typical examples rather than on elaborate definition.”²²⁴ Therefore, there are elements which, by virtue of their absence in certain prominent analyses, are passingly mentioned or not included at all in Tschannen’s treatment but are often mentioned by other sociologists. The process of “privatization” in the Bergerian sense is one example detailed above.

Another such process is modernization, although various aspects of it are already included by Tschannen. The corrosive influence of modernization as well as modernity over religion and religiosity constitutes a salient component of most descriptions of secularization theory. Franck and Iannaccone argue that:

[t]hough theories of secularization are many and varied, it suffices for present purposes to know that they all see modernization as the prime cause of religious decline, undercutting religion by rendering supernatural claims less plausible and supernatural products less valuable. The spread of scientific knowledge and thinking is presumed to be part of this process, but the theories also stress

²²³ Stephen Hart, “Privatization in American Religion and Society”, *Sociological Analysis*, 1987, 47(4), 320.

²²⁴ Oliver Tschannen, “The Secularization Paradigm”, 400.

urbanization (which removes people from tight and traditional communities), industrialization and family change (which rationalizes work and separates production from consumption), pluralism (which brings people into contact with competing views and lifestyles), and prosperity, health, and technology (which leave fewer needs unmet).²²⁵

According to Charles Taylor, of various versions of the theory, it is possible to “zero in on the following proposition as the heart of ‘secularization’: modernity has led to a decline in the transformation perspective.”²²⁶ A critique of ‘the standard model’ of secularization theory, Taylor further argues that proponents of what he calls orthodox theorists “take some feature of modernization, like urbanization, or industrialization, or the development of class society, or the rise of science/technology, and see them as working steadily to undermine and sideline religious faith.”²²⁷ After all, this line of thought is best summarized by A.N. Wilson:

The nineteenth century had created a climate for itself—philosophical, politico-sociological, literary, artistic, personal—in which God had become unknowable, His voice inaudible against the din of machines and the atonal banshee of the emerging egomania called The Modern. The cohesive social force which religion had once provided was broken up. The nature of society itself, urban, industrialized, materialistic, was the background for the godlessness which philosophy and science did not so much discover as ratify.²²⁸

The transformation of the medieval city conceived around a cathedral into the modern urban landscape with the diminished, if not disappearing, visibility and centrality of religious buildings and monuments, and many other spatial and temporal facets of modern, urban, and materialistic life bespeak a lack of God or,

²²⁵ Raphaël Franck, Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Religious decline in the 20th century West: testing alternative explanations,” *Public Choice* (2014), 386-387.

²²⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2007), 431.

²²⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 432.

²²⁸ A.N. Wilson, *God’s Funeral* (London: Norton, 1999), 12.

rather, as Taylor puts it, a lack of meaning.²²⁹ Another component of ‘the standard model’ of secularization theory commonly included in various analyses is that, it has been conceived as a unilinear, universal and inevitable process which can be considered as another facet of modernization. The renowned Canadian anthropologist Anthony Wallace has noted as late as 1966 that “belief in supernatural Powers is doomed to die out; all over the World, as the result of increasing adequacy and diffusion of scientific knowledge.”²³⁰ However, as I will explain in detail in the next section, a unilinear, unidirectional, and universal secularization narrative has come under harsh criticism particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union to the point that the standard model is almost discarded now.

3.1.3. Abandonment of Orthodoxy and Search for Revisionism: Neosecularization Theory

Doomed to gradually fade away in the age of rationality and modernity, religion, according to ‘the standard model’ of secularization theory, was a relic of our ‘enchanted’ past. Where secularization has not already relegated religion into the private sphere would soon triumph over religion and ‘disenchant the world’. Therefore, when data gleaned through surveys regarding secularization and levels of church-going in the 20th century Western world consistently failed to meet the expectation that secularization leads necessarily to diminished levels of religiosity at the same pace at the same time in every society where it occurs, the validity of ‘the standard model’ of secularization gradually came under criticism. It was the British sociologist David Martin who, for the first time, criticized the, by then, well-established secularization theory in 1965:

²²⁹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 552.

²³⁰ Anthony F. C. Wallace, *Religion: An Anthropological Review* (New York: Random House, 1996), 255.

First, I suggested that it was conceptually a hotch-potch of ideas, some of them contradictory. And then I suggested it was *in part* an ideological projection on history based on an apotheosis of reason, on an existential anticipation of autonomous man, and on a Marxist leap into freedom and into reality with the conclusion of the historical dialectic in class society. Not so long after, a parallel critique was launched by the American sociologist Andrew Greeley. We were both anxious to underline the extensive influence of religion even in Western European society and the sharp difference between Western Europe and North America. There was, in our view, more than one model of modernity and of the future.²³¹

In a similar vein, Thomas Luckman expressed, in *The Invisible Religion* back in 1967, his dissatisfaction with the way sociologists of religion approached and analyzed religion. He argued that sociologists of religion increasingly came to devote their attention on the institutionalized aspect of religion at the expense of other forms in which belief and spirituality might be professed:

The main assumption—which also has the most important consequences for research and theory in the sociology of religion —consists in the identification of church and religion. On occasion this assumption is explicitly formulated as a methodological principle: religion may be many things, but it is amenable to scientific analysis only to the extent that it becomes organized and institutionalized. Most other assumptions are intimately linked with this main assumption or are directly derived from it. Religion becomes a social fact either as ritual (institutionalized religious conduct) or doctrine (institutionalized religious ideas).²³²

Remarking that no other sub-discipline of sociology relied on so uncritical and narrowly positivistic a methodology as sociology of religion did,²³³ Luckmann found this shortsighted emphasis on institutionalized religion in conformity with theoretical positivism and argued that the dominant theory of then begot such a biased approach:

²³¹ David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*, (London: Routledge, 2005), 19.

²³² Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion In Modern Society* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), 22.

²³³ Thomas Luckmann, 21.

In the absence of a well-founded theory, secularization is typically regarded as a process of religious pathology to be measured by the shrinking reach of the churches. Since the institutional vacuum is not being filled by a counter-church—which was still envisaged by Comte—one readily concludes that modern society is nonreligious. [...] The churches remain, in a manner of speaking, islands of religion (or irrationality) in a sea of secularism (or reason). It only remains for the sociologist of religion to analyze the national and class differences in the process of religious decline—that is, of the shrinking reach of the churches.²³⁴

According to Luckmann, identification of church and religion had distortive consequences for the field:

Such a view of secularization, derived from the dominant sociological view of religion, is consistent with the theories of the increasing specialization of institutions and institutional areas in modern society. Religious institutions, too, are taken to have an increasingly specialized function in modern society. The observable changes in the structure of religious institutions tend to be explained by transformations in other areas of the social system. The reasons for the shrinking reach of the churches are sought in the processes of urbanization and industrialization which—so runs the argument—“undermined” other traditional institutions also. [...] An indirect and incidental advantage of the identification of church and religion is that it legitimates the transfer of the techniques of institutional analysis to the study of religion, obviating methodological reflection on the special nature of the problem. An important consequence of this situation is the concentration of research upon the parishes and congregations. It follows from the assumption that the administrative organization of the churches predefines the areas in which religion can become a tangible social fact. In any case, the bulk of the recent sociology of religion is parish sociology.²³⁵

Heavy reliance and emphasis on the part of sociologists on institutionalized religion -objective religiosity- and omission of individual religiosity -subjective religiosity- precluded sociologists of religion from problematizing how individuals internalize and individuate pre-constructed world views they were offered by institutionalized religions.²³⁶ This has important repercussions because an individual’s internalization from an official church a certain world

²³⁴ Thomas Luckmann, 23.

²³⁵ Thomas Luckmann, 23-24.

²³⁶ Thomas Luckmann, 70-71.

view is not coherent due to various difficulties associated with the official model, resulting in individuals' failure to create a subjectively meaningful, and practical, world view which wedges apart what is officially offered by religious institutions, religious suppliers, from individuals, religious consumers, seeking meaning outside official institutions, hence the decreasing church attendance rates observed in Western Europe.²³⁷ Peter Berger succinctly observes in *Everyday Religion* that “there is a lot of religion that cannot be studied by looking under “churches” in the Yellow Pages of the phone book.”²³⁸ This argumentation has a bearing on religious economies approach which shall be addressed in the section devoted to the limitations of religious economies approach.

The earliest criticisms of secularization theory mostly focused on why, despite the presupposition of universality of the theory, the American society remained religious as opposed to increasingly secularized Europe.²³⁹ Seymour Martin Lipset noted that:

Although America, like other developed nations, has become more secularized, it is also still true that it remains the most religious nation, by far, among these countries, as reflected in the overwhelming proportion who report believing in God, in church attendance (controlling for Protestant and Catholic rates), and in taking religious beliefs seriously.²⁴⁰

That religious life in the United States in the 20th century showed no sign of attrition and remained strong as opposed to the decline of church attendance and

²³⁷ Thomas Luckmann, 74-76.

²³⁸ Peter L. Berger, “Foreword” in *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* edited by Nancy T. Ammerman (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), vi.

²³⁹ Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Introduction to the Economics of Religion”, *Journal of Economic Literature* Vol. XXXVI (September 1998), 1465-1466.

²⁴⁰ Seymour Martin Lipset, “The Political Culture of American Democracy: The Enduring Influence of Religion” in *Max Weber: Readings and Commentary on Modernity*, edited by Stephen Kalberg (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 367.

religiosity in the Western European case called for a better understanding of the dynamics of American religious life. Despite the seemingly rapid, vigorous, and unrelenting pace of secularization throughout Europe, with the possible exception of Ireland which resisted secularization and devoutly remained Catholic, the United States witnessed a robust religious life and, indeed, an increase in church attendance to the point that all-time high church attendance rates have been observed.²⁴¹ The American peculiarity is that, despite such high levels of religious observance throughout the nation, the American state has always been secular in its structure in the sense that separation of church and state has been observed.²⁴² In Conrad Ostwalt's words, the American culture "is at once thoroughly secular in its organization while essentially religious in its orientation."²⁴³

The American 'failure' to follow the European experience of secularization, or, in other words, the American peculiarity came to be associated with what the American sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset called the American "exceptionalism", a concept he formulated to describe the unique character of the United States with regard to the rest of the world in terms of politics, religion, and race, *inter alia*. Lipset's formulation of what constitutes the American "exceptionalism" owes to the earlier American political notion that America was "a city upon a hill", i.e., a nation with a divine mission, a metaphor rooted in the American religious experience drawing on the parable of Salt and Light from the

²⁴¹ Rodney Stark and Laurence R. Iannaccone, "A Supply-Side Reinterpretation of the "Secularization" of Europe", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Sep., 1994), 230. Also, David Martin, *On Secularization*, 18.

²⁴² If Robert Bellah's argument in his renowned article "Civil Religion in America" still holds, the nature of the separation of state and church in the American experience can be said to be exceptional as well as questionable, if not totally illusory or absent.

²⁴³ Conrad Ostwalt, *Secular Steepless Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), ix.

New Testament.²⁴⁴ The concept of American “exceptionalism” is relevant to the present study, because of its juxtaposition by Grace Davie who theorized that it was Europe which was exceptional with regard to secularizing tendencies, not the other way around.²⁴⁵

According to Rob Warner critiques of unmodified, orthodox secularization theory can be summarized under six rubrics. First, secularization theory is a prescriptive model which is a “totalizing, enlightenment meta-narrative, as coercive as Christendom.”²⁴⁶ Second, as a Eurocentric model, the logic behind secularization theory is normative and patronizing towards non-Western cultures which, according to the theory, should attain the acme that is the European experience. Third, secularization theory is ‘unfalsifiable’ in Popperian terms because its proponents use any data to bolster their claims for the theory, even if data indicated otherwise. Fourth, some proponents of secularization have an ideological agenda. Fifth, the linear evolutionary aspect of secularization theory fails to explain the rise of Christianity while predicting its doom. Sixth, secularization theory is unilinear and monolithic, leaving little room to diverse trajectories.²⁴⁷

Rodney Stark argues that instead of jettisoning the grand narrative of secularization theory altogether:

[f]or decades, American sociologists of religion were content to accept the views of their European colleagues that pluralism harms religion because

²⁴⁴ For the parable, see *The New Testament*, Matthew 5:14 (World English Bible). For Lipset’s formulation of the American “exceptionalism”, see *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion* Edited by Bryan S. Turner (Singapore: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 142-145.

²⁴⁵ Grace Davie, *Europe, the Exceptional Case: Parameters of Faith in the Modern World* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002).

²⁴⁶ Rob Warner, 41.

²⁴⁷ Rob Warner, 41-42.

competing religious bodies undercut one another's credibility. Not until the 1980s did anyone challenge Peter Berger's [...] repeated claims that pluralism inevitably destroys the plausibility of all religions and only where on faith prevails can there exist a 'sacred canopy' able to inspire universal confidence and assent. Nevertheless, although this view appealed to European biases against religious competition (and Berger himself is of European upbringing), it is utterly inconsistent with the American experience.²⁴⁸

Alternative versions of and revisionist approaches to secularization theory have been formulated by proponents of secularization theory in order to address the enigma of high levels of religiosity in the United States where, in R. Stephen Warner's words, "societal modernization went hand in hand with religious mobilization."²⁴⁹ These revisionist approaches to secularization theory come under the rubric of neosecularization. According to David Yamane:

[a]s a result of the postsecularization challenge, secularization theorists have an opportunity to formulate a neosecularization paradigm which reaches back to earlier understandings of secularization and retains what was essential to those conceptualizations while jettisoning peripheral concerns and unsustainable claims.²⁵⁰

Therefore, against the backdrop of highly visible and strong American religiosity when the opposite was happening across the Atlantic Ocean, social scientists, drawing from the counter-arguments by Popper and Lakatos against the Kuhnian concept of paradigm shift, attempted to revise secularization theory instead of discarding it completely. According to Yamane:

The postpositivist philosophy of science, particularly as articulated by Kuhn (1970) and Lakatos (1978), has challenged this view by suggesting the ways in which theories are resilient to empirical challenges. As Alexander (1990: 10) has summarized it: "Theories differentiate between core notions, which are

²⁴⁸ Rodney Stark, "German and German American Religiousness: Approximating a Crucial Experiment", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Jun., 1997), 183-184.

²⁴⁹ R. Stephen Warner, *A Church of Our Own* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 22.

²⁵⁰ David Yamane, "Secularization on Trial: In Defense of a Neosecularization Paradigm", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Mar., 1997), 112.

positions considered essential to the theory's identity, and others that are more peripheral. Faced with studies that throw some of their important commitments into doubt, general theories can sustain their vivacity by discarding peripherals and defending their core." In other words, when paradigms are attacked, they engage in what Lakatos (1978) calls a "negative heuristic."²⁵¹

If one is to conceive the orthodox version of secularization theory and the application of rational choice theory to sociology of religion as diametrically opposite, the neosecularist versions can be located somewhere halfway between the two ends. That is, if theories and approaches to secularization are arranged on a scale so that at the one extremity sits the orthodox version as its quintessential sponsor as explained above and rational choice theory sits at the opposite as its foremost negator, there exist arrayed halfway between the two ends multiple approaches which, while not negating it *in toto*, do offer revisions to secularization theory.

Neosecularization theory has been embraced by a large number of sociologists. There are prominent sociologists who made significant contributions to neosecularization like Charles Taylor, José Casanova, Mark Chaves, Grace Davie, Martin Riesebrodt, and Peter Berger, who was among the most well-known proponents of 'the standard model' of secularization in the 1960s but has recanted his orthodox arguments to offer a revised version in the 1990s. For the sake of simplicity, I will confine my review of neosecularization theory to Charles Taylor, José Casanova, and Mark Chaves.

One revisionist approach that has come into prominence has been offered by Charles Taylor who has written extensively about the postsecular setting the post-1980 societies have increasingly come to find themselves entrenched in. Taylor argued that what John Rawls called an "overlapping consensus." should

²⁵¹ David Yamane, "Secularization", 112.

constitute the basis of secularism in a religiously pluralistic society.²⁵² An “overlapping consensus” as explained in Rawlsian terms is:

a consensus on some policy that is arrived at by people with very different moral and religious and political commitments, who sign on to the policy from within their differing points of view, and therefore on possibly very different grounds from each other. It contrasts with the idea that when one converges on a policy one must always do so for the same reason.²⁵³

Conceding that secularization did indeed happen but not the exact way as described by ‘the standard model’ secularization theorists, Taylor argues that:

most of the changes they [proponents of orthodox secularization theory] identify (e.g., urbanization, industrialization, migration, the fracturing of earlier communities) had a negative effect on the previously existing religious forms. They often made some of the earlier practices impossible, while others lost their meaning or their force. This did sometimes lead whole groups to adopt some quite other outlook, antithetical to Christianity, or indeed, to any religion: such as Jacobinism, Marxism or anarchism (as in Spain); but it also happened that people responded to the breakdown by developing new religious forms. This happened partly through the founding of new denominations, such as Methodism and its off-shoots. But it also could happen through new modes of organization and new spiritual directions in older established churches, the Catholic Church for instance.²⁵⁴

Another prominent theorist of neosecularization is José Casanova who placed emphasis on the transformation the role of religion has gone through during the modern age. Casanova’s main thesis in *Public Religions in the Modern World* is that the world at the present age is going through what he calls a “deprivatization” of religion.²⁵⁵ In Casanova’s terminology, “deprivatization” denotes “the fact

²⁵² Charles Taylor, “Modes of Secularism,” in Rajeev Bhargava (ed.), *Secularism and Its Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 33-35.

²⁵³ Akeel Bilgrami, *Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 8.

²⁵⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 436.

²⁵⁵ José Casanova, *Public Religions*, 5.

that religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them.”²⁵⁶ Casanova goes on to argue that “a dual, interrelated process of repoliticization of the private religious and moral spheres and renormativization of the public economic and political spheres” has taken place as a consequence of “deprivatization” in the 1980s.²⁵⁷ Casanova, not unlike Taylor, notes that, in spite of the fact that there is an element of truth to critics of secularization theory, there is little ground to call secularization a myth. He wrote:

The core of the theory of secularization, the thesis of the differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms, remains valid. But the term “deprivatization” is also meant to signify the emergence of new historical developments which, at least qualitatively, amount to a certain reversal of what appeared to be secular trends. Religions throughout the world are entering the public sphere and the arena of political contestation not only to defend their traditional turf, as they have done in the past, but also to participate in the very struggles to define and set the modern boundaries between the private and public spheres, between system and life-world, between legality and morality, between individual and society, between family, civil society, and state, between nations, states, civilizations, and the world system.²⁵⁸

Mark Chaves, on the other hand, instead of dwelling, unlike above-mentioned sociologists, on the question whether religiosity is in decline in modern societies, focuses on the manner in which functional authority of religion transforms in a modern society. Chaves argues that the scope of religious authority, not religion itself, is in decline in modern age, and that abandoning the concept of secularization *in toto* would “throw the baby out with the bathwater”.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁶ José Casanova, *Public Religions*, 5.

²⁵⁷ José Casanova, *Public Religions*. 5-6.

²⁵⁸ José Casanova, *Public Religions*. 6.

²⁵⁹ Mark Chaves, “Secularization as Declining Religious Authority,” *Social Forces*, Vol. 72, No. 3, (Mar., 1994), 750.

Consequently, secularization as the decline in religious authority denotes “[...] the declining influence of social structures whose legitimation rests on reference to the supernatural.”²⁶⁰ Chaves’s use of decline in religious authority is indebted to Karel Dobbelaere’s three-dimensional identification of secularization which rests on the concepts of laicization, internal secularization, and religious disinvolvement. According to Chaves:

Laicization refers to the process of differentiation whereby political, educational, scientific, and other institutions gain autonomy from the religious institutions of a society. The result of this process is that religion becomes just one institutional sphere among others, enjoying no necessary primary status. The second dimension, internal secularization, is the process by which religious organizations undergo internal development towards conformity with the secular world. Religious disinvolvement is Dobbelaere’s third dimension of secularization and refers to the decline of religious beliefs and practices among individuals. These dimensions also may be understood as operating at three different levels of analysis. Laicization refers to a societal process; religious change to transformations at the level of the religious organization; and religious disinvolvement to shifts among individual persons. [...] Secularization at the societal level may be understood as the declining capacity of religious elites to exercise authority over other institutional spheres. Secularization at the organizational level may be understood as religious authority’s declining control over the organizational resources within the religious sphere. And secularization at the individual level may be understood as the decrease in the extent to which individual actions are subject to religious control. The unifying theme is that secularization refers to declining religious authority at all three levels of analysis.²⁶¹

As can be seen, what has come to be referred to as neosecularist theory is, in substance, an assembly of various theories and approaches the common denominator of which is the idea that secularization theory, notwithstanding its serious shortcomings and the reductionism that came with it, did, in fact, correctly indicate a series of socio-political phenomena which transformed the role of religion in modern societies, although the pace and content of change each society experienced varied. Therefore, the main point these various approaches share is that ‘the standard model’ of secularization theory is not a

²⁶⁰ Mark Chaves, “Secularization,” 756.

²⁶¹ Mark Chaves, “Secularization”, 757.

complete *cul-de-sac* in the study of sociology of religion as far as the changing character of religion in today's world is concerned and that the theory needs updated and modified in accordance with social and political developments on a global scale.

3.1.4. Rational Choice Theory: The New Paradigm

Having examined in the previous pages both 'the standard model' of secularization, also known as the 'old paradigm', which, since at least the collapse of Communist and Socialist regimes, has become obsolete as well as the neosecularization theory with its various variations, the present section is devoted to religious economies approach, which is sometimes referred to as the 'new paradigm' of the sociology of religion, that is, the application of rational choice theory to the debates over secularization. The appellation 'new paradigm', however, is not uncontroversial, for it has been argued that despite much public and scholarly excitement brewed over the demise of secularization theory

it is unclear whether twenty-first-century scholarship on religion has produced anything amounting to consensus, with no legitimate intellectual heir to secularization theory yet identified. Indeed, the fall of secularization theory's monopoly over the field seems to have fissured critical and social scientific theories of religion into inestimable and disparate factions.²⁶²

In order to provide a better perspective as regards the application of rational choice theory to the study of religion, in what follows, a brief summary of rational choice theory will be offered.

3.1.4.1. Rational Choice Theory

Rational choice theory, also known as rational action theory, is a theoretical framework developed by economists for better understanding human behavior.

²⁶² Clayton Fordahl, "The post-secular: Paradigm shift or provocation", *European Journal of Social History*, Volume: 20, Issue: 4, (November 2017), 2.

Originating in microeconomics among neo-liberal economists for studying and modelling behavior, rational choice theory owes its ideological legacy to the Enlightenment, utilitarianism and liberalism.²⁶³ Rational choice theory can be described as “the idea that all function is fundamentally ‘rational’ in character and that people calculate the likely costs and benefits of any action before deciding what to do.”²⁶⁴

Rational choice theory comprises two particularly important *a priori* postulates: completeness and transitivity. Completeness refers to an ideally rational actor’s ranking of preferences on a constant and consistent manner; whereas transitivity holds that these preferences are transferable to the point that an actor preferring a to b, and b to c, shall also always prefer a to c.²⁶⁵ As rational choice theory has come to be treated as a naturalist philosophical approach, study of economics has come to exert immense influence on social sciences well beyond the scope of economics which manifested itself in two ways. Firstly, more and more economists have assumed that rational choice theory was a scientific study of human agency, a process which Blakely calls the anthropologization of rational choice theory. With the dovetailing of the predating concept of *homo economicus* with rational choice theory, the latter came to capture the essence of folk psychology, which sits on the assumption that “reasons people hold are the causes of their actions.”²⁶⁶ As a corollary to the identification of rational choice theory with folk psychology, the former came to occupy in economics an

²⁶³ Margaret S. Archer, Jonathan Q. Tritter, “Introduction” in *Rational Choice Theory: Resisting Colonization* Edited by Margaret S. Archer and Jonathan Q. Tritter (London: Routledge, 2000), 2-3.

²⁶⁴ John Scott, “Rational choice theory” in *Understanding Contemporary Society: Theories of the Present* ed. Gary Browning, Abigail Halcli and Frank Webster (London: Sage, 2000), 126.

²⁶⁵ Jason Blakely, “How Economics Becomes Ideology: The Uses and Abuses of Rational Choice Theory” in *Agency and Causal Explanation in Economics*, Editors Peter Róna, László Zsolnai (eBook, Springer, 2020), 39.

²⁶⁶ Jason Blakely, 40.

important station where rational choice theory gained currency as a realistic tool to predict all human decision-making processes because human decision making is based on reasoning. This is how rational choice theory, resting on three basic assumptions, namely, rationality, individualism, and temporality, gradually grew out of microeconomics and pervaded other branches of the social sciences. Gary Becker, an economist and advocate of rational choice theory and its pertinence to all human behavior, argued for its unlimited applicability: “I have come to the position that the economic approach is a comprehensive one that is applicable to all human behaviour.”²⁶⁷ The utility of the theory is widely recognized among social scientists. Archer and Tritter argue that:

Over the last half century, rational choice theory has forged ahead on ‘purely’ instrumental grounds, by demonstrating its empirical successes in an increasing variety of fields. It has done this through the simple analytical manoeuvre of taking ‘instrumental rationality’ to be the dominant and universal mode of human decision-making. Because the theory is totally permissive about what substantive ends we may seek to pursue, and only offers to model how individuals maximize their net utilities within constraints of cost, time, information, effort, and so on, it recommends itself in wholly technical terms as proffering a powerful helping hand.²⁶⁸

The second manner in which economics laid rational choice theory in naturalist philosophy can be observed in the argument that even though empirical data may not corroborate the axioms, rational choice theory provides scientific predictions.²⁶⁹ Milton Friedman pronounced back in 1953 that “the relevant question to ask about the ‘assumptions’ of a theory is not whether they are descriptively ‘realistic’, for they never are” but one should instead look “whether

²⁶⁷ Gary S. Becker, *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 8.

²⁶⁸ Margaret S. Archer, Jonathan Q. Tritter, 3.

²⁶⁹ Jason Blakely, 41.

it yields sufficiently accurate predictions.”²⁷⁰ Friedman’s argument thus, in a sense, granted rational choice theorists in social sciences power of scientific prediction without having to alter their model even if empiric data falls short of confirmation.

3.1.4.2. Religious Economies Approach

Religion is the last field where rational choice theory was applied. The first academic research where rational choice theory was employed in the study of religion was Corry Azzi and Ronald Ehrenberg’s study of household production model of church attendance and contributions in 1975.²⁷¹ Beginning from mid-1980s, the theory made more and long-lasting inroads into the sociology of religion when economists and sociologists started to view “religious behavior as an instance of a rational choice, rather than an exception to it.”²⁷² The most seminal works came into fruition with the cooperation of William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark,²⁷³ who were followed by Roger Finke, and Laurence Iannaccone, who is an economist. Rodney Stark is an exceptionally prominent figure whose name is associated with the rational choice theory and who is credited with the discovery of the positive correlation between the degree

²⁷⁰ Milton Friedman, “The Methodology of Positive Economics,” in *The Philosophy of Economics*, 3rd edition, ed. Daniel Hausman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 153.

²⁷¹ Corry Azzi, Ronald Ehrenberg, “Household Allocation of Time and Church Attendance”, *Journal of Political Economy* Vol. 83 no. 1, (1975).

²⁷² Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Introduction”, 1478.

²⁷³ Together, Bainbridge and Stark authored three books: *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (University of California Press, 1985), *A Theory of Religion* (Rutgers University Press, [1987] 1996), and *Religion, Deviance, and Social Control* (Routledge, 1996).

to which a religious market is unregulated and levels of overall participation in religious activities.²⁷⁴

True to its economic and liberal origins, the economic analysis of religion takes at the core of its arguments the postulation that religious organizations, religious movements, and rational individuals seeking access to spirituality, affiliation and religious services make up a religious market wherein the former constitute the firms, i.e. the suppliers, and the latter the consumers. In Iannaccone's words:

the approach thus views people as rational religious consumers. With an eye toward costs and benefits, they choose how extensively to participate in religion and what religion (if any) they will embrace...Similar assumptions apply to religion's supply side. Religious producers maximize members, net resources, government support, or some other basic determinant of institutional welfare. The actions of churches and clergy (or denominations and rabbis) are thus modelled as rational responses to the constraints and opportunities found in the religious marketplace...The combined actions of religious consumers and religious producers form a religious market which, like other markets, tends toward a steady-state equilibrium. As in other markets, the consumers' freedom to choose constrains the producers of religion. A "seller" (whether of automobiles or absolution) cannot long survive without the steady support of "buyers" (whether money-paying customers, dues paying members, contributors and coworkers, or governmental subsidizers). Consumer preferences thus shape the content of religious commodities and the structure of the institutions that provide them. These effects are felt more strongly where religion is less regulated and competition among religious firms is more pronounced. In a highly competitive environment, religions have little choice but to abandon inefficient modes of production and unpopular products in favor of more attractive and profitable alternatives.²⁷⁵

Economic approach to religion or as the "counter-orthodox model",²⁷⁶ offers a markedly different point of view to both secularist and neosecularist approaches

²⁷⁴ Andrew Chesnut, *Specialized Spirits: "Conversion and the Products of Pneumacentric Religion in Latin America's Free Market of Faith"* in Edited by Timothy J. Steigenga and Edward L. Cleary *Conversion of a Continent: Contemporary Religious Change in Latin America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 75.

²⁷⁵ Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Religious Extremism: Origins and Consequences", *Contemporary Jewry*, Vol.20, No. 1 (December 1999), 9.

²⁷⁶ Germán McKenzie, *Interpreting Charles Taylor's Social Theory on Religion and*

regarding how religious actors and people interact with one other. Drawing from “the Chicago School of economics; in this approach, a rational, voluntary, religious actor will consistently seek out the religious option with the compensatory system that best suits her. Individual religious freedom is maximized in a religious marketplace where multiple firms exist.”²⁷⁷ The religious market, it is argued, passes for God in religious economies approach.²⁷⁸ Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge’s seminal work has elaborated on the dynamics of the religious market according to rational choice theory in the following way:

Secularization [...] is driven by the fact that social inequality introduces variation in individuals’ ability to secure rewards rather than settle for “compensators” those who are privileged, i.e., who have more rewards, require fewer compensators, fewer promises of future rewards in exchange for religious piety. Consequently, upward social mobility will push religious organizations in the direction of downplaying the supernatural elements in their theology and ritual. They will become more worldly, offering fewer compensators based on supernatural assumptions... Becoming more worldly, however, means that religions diminish their appeal to individuals in two ways. First, less privileged individuals, with fewer worldly rewards and therefore more desire for compensators, will not be satisfied with these secularized religions and will seek out more otherworldly organizations. Second, certain rewards are inherently empirically unattainable (e.g., assurance of eternal life), which means they are only available via compensators. So, even large segments of the relatively privileged will favor supernatural versus worldly religion, since only there do they find the compensators for what Stark and Bainbridge believe to be universal but unattainable human wishes ... Sects and cults, therefore, constantly arise to take up religious slack produced by the older, secularized religions. As these new groups age, however, they also will secularize as their membership, via upward mobility, comes to include greater proportions of the relatively privileged. The cycle begins again. In this way, secularization is “a universal phenomenon always occurring in all religious economies.” it is a *self-*

Secularization: A Comparative Study (Springer, 2017), vii.

²⁷⁷ Courtney Bender, “The Power of Pluralist Thinking,” in *Politics of Religious Freedom*, ed. by Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Saba Mahmood, and Peter G. Danchin (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 69.

²⁷⁸ Andrew M. McKinnon, “Ideology and the Market Metaphor in rational choice theory of Religion: A Rhetorical Critique of ‘Religious Economies’”, *Critical Sociology*, 39 (4), 2.

limiting process that generates countervailing responses elsewhere in religious economies.²⁷⁹

The economic approach to religion is also called supply-side approach as opposed to secularization and neosecularization theories which constitute the demand-side. The logic of this appellation rests on the fact that, the latter takes into account as their unit of analysis societies as a whole whose demand for spiritual services, or lack thereof, is the determinant dynamic of the religious configuration in any given society; whereas the former emphasizes the role of providers of religious services. The economic approach proposes that any long-term change in the observed levels of religiosity among costumers is ascribable to the changing behavior of religious firms, and not to a perceived decline in consumers' demand for religious goods and services as a result of modernization as argued by secularization theory.²⁸⁰ Consequently, the main argument of religious economies approach is that secularism is the key to vigor, not decline, of religion as secularism ensures freedom and pluralism in the religious market whereby competition among religious firms, that is religious organizations vying for consumers' doctrinal, ritualistic, monetary, and temporal commitment, forces them to improve the quality of services they offer.

Defining a religious economy as “all religious activity going on in any society”, Stark and Iannaccone propose a number of arguments to identify its characteristics and conditions.²⁸¹ The first argument concerns the dichotomy between the supply-side approach of religious economy as opposed to the demand-side approach of secularization and neosecularization theories. The former, unsatisfied by the demand-side explanations regarding the reasons for change in religious preferences over time, proposes that “religious demand is

²⁷⁹ Mark Chaves, “Secularization”, 757-758, emphasis in original.

²⁸⁰ Rodney Stark and Laurence R. Iannaccone, “A Supply-Side”, 232.

²⁸¹ Rodney Stark and Laurence R. Iannaccone, “A Supply-Side”, 232.

very stable over time and that religious change is largely the product of supply-side transformations.”²⁸² Secondly, the monopolistic quality of the market and state intervention comes under criticism: “The capacity of a single religious firm to monopolize a religious economy depends upon the degree to which the state uses coercive force to regulate the religious economy.” Thirdly, the inverse relationship between regulation and pluralism is set forth: “to the degree that a religious economy is unregulated, it will tend to be very pluralistic.” Fourthly, an account of the consequences and benefits of a pluralistic, unregulated religious market is offered: “to the degree that a religious economy is pluralistic, firms will specialize. To specialize, a firm caters to the special needs and tastes of specific market segments.”²⁸³ Nevertheless, no matter how monopolistic a religious economy is, the monopolizing actor is never able to fully control and monopolize the market. According to Stark and Iannaccone:

It becomes clear that religious economies never can be fully monopolized, even when backed by the full coercive powers of the state. Indeed, even at the height of its temporal power, the medieval church was surrounded by heresy and dissent of course, when the repressive efforts of the state are sufficiently intense, religious firms competing with the state-sponsored monopoly will be forced to operate underground. But, whenever and wherever repression eases, pluralism will begin to develop.²⁸⁴

Pluralism in the religious market, in turn, begets high levels of participation to religious services. As mentioned by Stark and Iannaccone “to the degree that a religious economy is competitive and pluralistic, overall levels of religious participation will tend to be high. Conversely, to the degree that a religious economy is by one or two state-sponsored firms, overall levels of participation

²⁸² Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 193.

²⁸³ Rodney Stark and Laurence R. Iannaccone, “A Supply-Side”, 233.

²⁸⁴ Rodney Stark and Laurence R. Iannaccone, “A Supply-Side”, 233.

will tend to be low.”²⁸⁵ The rationale for the positive correlation between competitive religious markets and high levels of religious participation is associated with the incorporeal and temporally prospective distant nature of the goods offered by the firms operating in the market. Due to stiff competition, and the intangible nature and temporal remoteness from the present of religious good, religious firms need to resort to dynamic marketing to win consumers. However, Stark and Iannaccone argue that state-sponsored firms are not known for their creative marketing strategies; in fact, they are notoriously inefficient.²⁸⁶ The corollary is that state-sponsored religious firms, which usually come in the form of monopolies, and state-supported religious firms, as opposed to religious firms operating in a free religious market, are poor marketers of their own goods, whereby overall levels of participation to religious services remain low. Stark and Iannaccone here allude to Adam Smith’s treatment of religious freedom which has long been overlooked at the expense of his other, more well-known arguments. Adam Smith argued at the *Wealth of Nations* that, enjoying the relative comfort of benefices without running the risk of competition, members of established, state-sponsored and monopolistic religions lacked the incentives to reach out to people of lower social status, much like state monopolies lacked the incentive to market their goods to people. Emerging religions, therefore, have the advantage of the established religions in terms of devotion, industry, vigor, and zeal in exerting influence over man in the street, that is, consumers.²⁸⁷ According to Adam Smith,

The clergy of an established and well-endowed religion frequently become men of learning and elegance, who possess all the virtues of gentlemen, or which can recommend them to the esteem of gentlemen: but they are apt gradually to lose the qualities, both good and bad, which gave them authority and influence with

²⁸⁵ Rodney Stark and Laurence R. Iannaccone, “A Supply-Side”, 233.

²⁸⁶ Rodney Stark and Laurence R. Iannaccone, “A Supply-Side”, 233.

²⁸⁷ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations* Edited by Edwin Cannan (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., [1776] 1904), 1049-1050.

the inferior ranks of people, and which had perhaps been the original causes of the success and establishment of their religion.²⁸⁸

Thomas Jefferson has acknowledged in a private correspondence in 1820 the positive correlation between pluralistic religious market and high levels of religious participation, arguing that with regard to religion, the maxim of civil government should be “[d]ivided we stand; united we fall.”²⁸⁹ The 19th century visitors to the United States of America too observed the same phenomenon.²⁹⁰ In fact, this essential proposition of religious economies approach stands in contrast to ‘the standard model’ of secularization theory, for the Durkheimian argument goes that “a chosen religion is weaker than a religion of fate because we are aware that we choose the gods rather than the gods choosing us.”²⁹¹ Thus, according to Durkheim religious pluralism was detrimental to religious vitality because pluralism exposed the human origins of religion. In a vein similar to Durkheim, Peter Berger argues in *Sacred Canopy* that, the ‘sacred canopy’, the illusory reality society created by the agency of religion around people which confer their lives a sense of stability, meaning, and balance, is threatened by pluralism introduced by modernity, which in turn destabilizes the monolithic and monopolistic ‘sacred canopy’ leading inevitably to secularization.²⁹² Similarly, as mentioned by Bender, Robert Bellah argued in *Civil Religion in America* that

²⁸⁸ Adam Smith, 1050.

²⁸⁹ Robert M. Healey, “Jefferson on Judaism and the Jews: ‘Divided We Stand; United We Fall!’” *American Jewish History*, Vol. 73, No. 4 (June 1984), 360-361.

²⁹⁰ Rodney Stark, “German and German American Religiousness, 183.

²⁹¹ Rodney Stark, Roger Finke and Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Pluralism and Piety: England and Wales 1951”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Dec., 1995), 432.

²⁹² Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*

pluralistic religious market in the United States debilitated healthy sectarianism.²⁹³

As stressed by Iannaccone, Adam Smith also argued that the absence of government regulation promoted religious toleration among religious groups, for low entry costs to the market induced numerous small firms to compete in the market and many firms in stiff competition were thus compelled to tolerate one another.²⁹⁴ Smithian argument contradicts with Humean approach which exerted influence on the early thinkers of secularization theory. According to Iannaccone, Hume believed that religious pluralism created negative externalities, for religious firms would propagate superstition and intolerance towards established churches which led him to propose that the alternatives available to potential customers be limited by way of promoting established religion.²⁹⁵

It has become conspicuous by now that the religious economies approach stands in opposition to the orthodox form of secularization theory in every argument generated with regard to religion. The underlying reason that accounts for this polarity lies in the classical dichotomy between ‘structure and agency’ to which religious economies approach and secularization theory offer opposite insights. Drawing from the methodological individualism of rational choice theory, religious economies approach prioritizes agency over structure where “individual decision-makers, who are not only regarded as their own ‘sovereign artificers’ but are also credited, along with others like them, with making their society too –

²⁹³ Courtney Bender, 68.

²⁹⁴ Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Toward an Economic Theory of ‘Fundamentalism’”, *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics (JITE) / Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft*, Vol. 153, No. 1, The New Institutional Economics Religion and Economics (March 1997), 112.

²⁹⁵ Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Toward an Economic Theory of ‘Fundamentalism’”, 111.

through the aggregate effects of their decisions”²⁹⁶ negate the structural determinism of secularization theory. Secularization theory in its orthodox version, in turn, denies actors, that is, religious firms, any agential power that may be at work. Therefore, it would not be misleading to say that religious economies approach, accentuates the agency of both religious firms seeking to serve the religious markets and customers in search for religious goods to satisfy their spiritual needs. With regard to the former, religious economies approach claims that, once religious *laissez-faire* and pluralism is guaranteed in a given market, the degree to which each rational actor carries out its operations in line with consumer preferences will determine whether the firm in question will fare well in the market by attracting customers and staying strong. As for the agency of customers, religious economies approach acknowledges the power and ability of rational individuals in the aggregate, that is, most people, to know what they want from a religious firm, to choose among the options the firm that maximizes the customer’s utility, and to influence with their preferences the content of religious products.²⁹⁷ Moreover, the varied religious preferences of the customers are not categorized as aberrant or unwanted but as needs seeking to be served. Secularization theory, on the other hand, emphasizes structural constraints, and tendencies which will limit the efficiency of the operations of religious suppliers, leaving them little to no room for agency. According to secularization theory, customers too are rendered passive whose preferences and needs show little variation, are rarely out of conformity with mainstream tendencies, and should they deviate from the norms, tastes, preferences, or needs ‘satisfied’ by the established religious firms, their divergent preferences are considered anomalous.

²⁹⁶ Margaret S. Archer, Jonathan Q. Titter, 7.

²⁹⁷ There are, however, several cases where strict rational action approach to religion has been accused of denying agency to religious consumers. For such a criticism, see Andrew Chesnut, Specialized Spirits: “Conversion and the Products of Pneumacentric Religion in Latin America’s Free Market of Faith” in Edited by Timothy J. Steigenga and Edward L. Cleary *Conversion of a Continent: Contemporary Religious Change in Latin America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 75-76.

Pluralist market in the religious field has significant consequences that further shape both religious actors and consumers. Firstly, “competition for religious market share introduces the crucial element of consumer tastes and preferences.”²⁹⁸ Appealing to consumer tastes and the firms’ ability to adapt to consumer preferences is key to survival in the face of stiff competition. Secondly, “the free market introduces the rationalization of religious enterprises.”²⁹⁹ In order to reduce costs while operating and marketing effectively, religious firms need to differentiate their spiritual affairs from non-spiritual ones and bureaucratize their business operations such as accounting and marketing, which compel them to adopt more rational modes of management.³⁰⁰ This phenomenon is in conformity with what Joseph Schumpeter called creative destruction, which is described by Young and Eastman as “a process in which all modes of production must be continually changed, modified and improved to drive the economic system and the culture constantly towards growth. All values need to be destroyed and reinvented to meet the demands of market participants and to continue to win against rival competitors.”³⁰¹ Accosted by fierce competition from the worldly - and tangible - benefits, religions need to adapt to the market needs and transform themselves into businesses and should be run like business establishments.³⁰²

The application of the rational choice theory to the study of religion as elaborated by Rodney Stark and Laurence Iannaccone rests on Dean Kelley’s strictness thesis dated 1972 to explain the negative correlation between

²⁹⁸ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 145.

²⁹⁹ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 139.

³⁰⁰ Andrew Chesnut, *Specialized Spirits*, 80.

³⁰¹ Christopher Young, Wayne Eastman, “The structural failures of heavenly markets”, *Rationality and Society*, 25 (1), 43.

³⁰² Christopher Young, Wayne Eastman, “The structural”, 43-44.

liberalism in social and political matters and church attendance. Kelley observed that the more demanding and stricter Evangelical churches remained strong while liberal, tolerant, and inclusive churches stagnated or even declined. According to Iannaccone, Olson, and Stark, Kelley identified strictness as demand on the part of churches of “complete loyalty, unwavering belief, and rigid adherence to a distinctive lifestyle.”³⁰³ He argued that parishioners “long for a robust sense of meaning that can only be found in high-expectation, high-commitment, and necessarily conservative religion.”³⁰⁴ Strict religions demand “adherence to a distinctive faith, morality, and lifestyle. They condemn deviance, shun dissenters, and repudiate the outside world. They frequently embrace ‘eccentric traits’ such as distinctive diet, dress or speech, that invite ridicule, isolation and persecution.”³⁰⁵

Lastly, another important component of the religious economies approach is the concepts of sacralization and desacralization. According to Stark and Iannaccone, in a highly monopolistic religious market the monopolizing religious firm will attempt to influence other institutions and aspects of life whereby sacralization of the society will occur. The authors define sacralization as the phenomenon where “the primary aspects of life, from family to politics, will be suffused with religious symbols, rhetoric, and ritual.”³⁰⁶ Politicians in such a context usually seek popular approval and to legitimize their actions by the help of leaders of the monopolizing religious firms who, in turn, desire to secure political support and coercive power of the state against competitors in the religious market. If a

³⁰³ Laurence R. Iannaccone, Daniel V. A. Olson and Rodney Stark, “Religious Resources and Church Growth,” *Social Forces*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (Dec., 1995), 705.

³⁰⁴ Jeremy N. Thomas and Daniel V. A. Olson, “Testing the Strictness Thesis and Competing Theories of Congregational Growth,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (December 2010), 619.

³⁰⁵ Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Toward an Economic Theory of ‘Fundamentalism’”, 104.

³⁰⁶ Rodney Stark, Laurence R. Iannaccone, “A Supply-Side”, 234.

religiously monopolistic society goes through deregulation, what ensues is desacralization where neither individual religious firms nor an assembly of religious firms competing in the market is able to sustain sacralization. Stark and Iannaccone argue that what most scholars mistake for secularization is in fact desacralization, that is, loss of or decline in influence of a monopolistic firm as a consequence of deregulation is erroneously taken for an overall decline in religious demand on the part of society.³⁰⁷

3.1.4.3. Dovetailing the Religious Economies Approach with the *Tablighi* Movement

So far, how secularization theory came into existence and how, in response, the rational choice theory has been applied to religion in the form of the religious economies approach, particularly to religion in the American context have been explained in detail. The dynamics of religious economies too have been explained in the previous pages. In what follows the author shall show how the religious economies approach relates to the case of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan and examine whether the central argument of this thesis, i.e., there exists in Kyrgyzstan an accommodative and collaborative relationship between the *Tablighi Jamaat* and the Kyrgyz state, is compatible with the arguments of religious economies approach.

Evidently, the foundations of the theory of religious economies have been laid by Western scholars on the basis of discrepancies observed in the Western context with regard to secularization theory using data collected in the United States.³⁰⁸ What empirical evidence the rational choice theory was initially based on came either from the United States or Europe. The Western outlook of the theory is also corroborated by the fact that Western Christianity is the religion which

³⁰⁷ Rodney Stark, Laurence R. Iannaccone, “A Supply-Side”, 234.

³⁰⁸ R. Stephen Warner, “Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States”, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 98, No. 5 (Mar., 1993), 1045.

constitutes the basis for arguments that both gave rise and, later, credence to the theory. In fact, it would not be misleading to argue that the rational choice theory is largely based on the developments regarding Protestantism in the United States and Stephen Warner has argued that the paradigm formulated by the rational choice theory should be limited to the United States, whereas Jeffery Hadden has argued in favor of its universality.³⁰⁹

Its origins embedded in Western Christianity notwithstanding, the religious economies approach should be and is applicable to an Islamic and Central Asian context firstly because it has a claim to universality by virtue of its roots in the liberal theory. Therefore, it is appropriate to expect that the theory of religious economies be relevant in the *Tablighi* case in Kyrgyzstan. Secondly, its arguments against the validity of secularization theory draw upon the phenomenon of the so-called ‘resurgence’ of religion which is observed globally, both in Western and non-Western contexts, including in the Islamic world,³¹⁰ in the entire post-Communist space, and in Kyrgyzstan at the intersection of both categories. Thirdly, the religious economies approach is no longer considered a theoretical approach unique to the study of religion in the United States. There is a growing body of literature which relies on the application of the rational choice theory to religion in order to explain the rapid expansion of Pentecostal churches in the traditionally heavily Catholic Latin America. However, the study of Islamic societies is yet to catch up with this theoretical shift from the ‘old paradigm’ to the ‘new paradigm’ as the scholarly works on Islamic societies within a framework of religious economies are too few in number.³¹¹ Fourthly,

³⁰⁹ Jeffery K. Hadden, “Religion and the Quest for Meaning and Order: Old Paradigms, New Realities”, *Sociological Focus*, Vol. 28, No. 1, February 1995, 85.

³¹⁰ Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Introduction”, 1465-1466.

³¹¹ Among the limited application to Islam of the rational choice theory is Brian J. Grim, Roger Finke, “Religious Persecution in Cross-National Context: Clashing Civilizations or Regulated Religious Economies”, *American Sociological Review*, 72 (4) in which Islam is treated along with other major religions. For a study devoted entirely to Islam with the author’s reservations,

regulated religious markets and deregulation of religion, both essential themes in the religious economies approach, are relevant to the transition from state atheism in the Soviet era to religious pluralism in the post-Soviet era in Kyrgyzstan. The religious economies approach is a very apt tool to analyze the dynamics of transitions and transformations in a religious market especially when the direction of transition is to deregulation and disestablishment from regulation. Lastly, I will argue that there exist several functional and practical parallelisms between the *Tablighi Jamaat* and the various Evangelical churches which, given the high frequency the latter appear in the studies of religious economies, render the approach all the more suitable for the present thesis.

While the *Tablighi Jamaat* and Evangelicalism have a myriad doctrinal difference, I am more concerned with the manner in which they function and reach out to people, where their convergence is easier to spot. Evangelicalism is an umbrella term for numerous Protestant churches which “adhere to a theology in which biblical orthodoxy, personal piety and missionary zeal are held paramount.”³¹² What the *Tablighi* movement and Evangelicalism have in common can be enumerated under three rubrics.

Firstly, both movements are entrenched in similar theological backgrounds in revivalism and social reform in their respective wider religious traditions. The *Tablighi Jamaat* is the fruit of the 19th century revivalist thought among Indian Muslim intellectuals in reaction to intensifying contact with the modern during British colonialism. It is possible to interpret the rise of the *Tablighi Jamaat* as a part and in the fashion of the wider *tajdid* tradition, “which suggests the process

see Gamze Çavdar, “Islamist Rationality: An Assessment of The Rational Choice Approach”, *Politics and Religion*, 5 (3) (December, 2012). For the application of religious economies model to Islam see Nile Green, *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840-1915* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and Nile Green, *Terrains of Exchange: Religious Economies of Modern Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

³¹² Omri Elisha, *Moral Ambition: Mobilization and Social Outreach in Evangelical Megachurches* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2011), 10-11.

of renewal and specifically commitment to the way of the Prophet.”³¹³ Modern Evangelicalism in its turn is indebted to and the continuation of the spiritual awakening movements in the North American context, the Second and the Third Great Awakenings, to be precise.³¹⁴ Another theological similarity is the centrality of the concept of reconversion to a religion to which one is already affiliated - which is sometimes referred to as being reborn. While this epithet is mostly used by Evangelicals, it is reported that some converts to the *Tablighi* movement refer to themselves as reborn Muslims.

Secondly, there are practical similarities between the two movements. The constant vilification of the *ancien régime* in favor of the self-fashioned reborn label is a major theme among the *Tablighis* as well as Evangelicals. This theme induces the reconverts to leave behind their ‘old’, ‘erring’ selves and to change their lives to become ‘better’ and ‘righteous’ individuals which they usually fulfill.³¹⁵ Other common practical characteristics are as follows: rapid worldwide growth, large membership numbers, grassroots activism, worshipping in big congregations on a regular weekly basis, strictness, and what Omri Elisha calls *moral ambition*, that is, the aspiration pertaining to what one desires for oneself as well as to what they desire that others do, including secular and nonevangelical people.³¹⁶

As a last comment, I should like to remark that these common attributes render both Evangelical churches and the *Tablighi Jamaat* outliers among their

³¹³ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982), 4.

³¹⁴ Roger Finke and Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Supply-Side Explanations for Religious Change”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 527, Religion in the Nineties (May, 1993), 32.

³¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 452-453.

³¹⁶ Omri Elisha, *Moral Ambition*, 2.

respective, more mainstream religious milieus. For instance, Evangelical churches stand apart from what is considered mainline churches, i.e., conservative Protestant churches, as the latter “tend to be less directly engaged with their social and civic environment.”³¹⁷ In a similar fashion, the *Tablighi Jamaat* is an outlier in the wider orthodox Islamic world, as it is engaged with its target population in a much more direct, door-to-door ‘door-belling’ manner, than its rivals. Its *modus operandi* was so successful in Pakistan that its *Barelwi* rival *Dawat-e Islami* copied its structures and activities.³¹⁸

The parallelisms I have drawn between the Evangelical Churches and the *Tablighi Jamaat* is where the religious economies approach constitutes a bridge between the two revivalist movements. As it has already elucidated the rapid growth, popular outreach, and the overall success of Evangelical churches worldwide, it is also useful for accounting for the *Tablighi* strength in Kyrgyzstan. What the approach is able to explain in the worldwide Evangelical context, I believe, is also relevant for the *Tablighi* case in Kyrgyzstan. That is the theory explains why, of all Islamic movements operating in Kyrgyzstan, the *Tablighi Jamaat* is the strongest and enjoys the most popular and most successful outreach. This point is strongly relevant to the present thesis because it explains the appeal on the part of the Kyrgyz state apparatus of its existing collaborative and accommodative state of affairs with the *Tablighi Jamaat*.

3.1.5. Limitations of Rational Choice Theory

Looking at rational choice theory from the perspective of the dilemmas between structure and agency on the one hand and between micro and macro levels on the other, Mouzelis argues that rational choice theory emerged in response to “the reifying and teleological tendencies of both Parsonian and Marxist macro

³¹⁷ Omri Elisha, *Moral Ambition*, 4.

³¹⁸ Thomas K. Gugler, “The New Religiosity”, 127.

theories.”³¹⁹ To overturn the undue emphasis in the social sciences on structure, the rational choice theory places emphasis on the agency of individual, rational actors. The main criticisms leveled against rational choice theory are two-fold. Firstly, its very basic assumptions embodied in the concept of *homo economicus* draw criticism for being flawed and unrealistic and rational choice theory fails to explain in a satisfactory manner how micro-level decisions are transitioned to the macro-level:

In real life situations, micro actors do not conduct themselves in the manner assumed by rational-choice theorists, so that theories trying to explain concrete macro phenomena in terms of the ideal-typical rational behaviour of actors are inevitably flawed. For example, to base a macro-economic theory on assumptions derived from a *homo economicus* model of individual consumers or entrepreneurs will show that they do not operate perfectly rationally, and that there are a great many factors that weaken or completely destroy their capacity for acting in an even moderately rational manner.³²⁰

Secondly, rational choice theory has been criticized for being transhistorical, transcultural, and over-generalizing, resulting in its having little context-bound value. Rational choice theory, by its nature, runs into a dilemmic situation because when it does not take into account context its theorizing rigor leads to error or trivial; when it takes context into consideration it fails to retain the generalizing power of the theory. Rational choice theory:

tends to link micro with macro levels of analysis via logico-deductive methods that result in the neglect of ‘emergent’ phenomena and/or the various socio-historical contexts within which rationality takes its specific forms. In that sense it comes up against the following dilemma: in so far as its mainly logico-deductive theorizing refuses to take into account ‘emergence’, history and context, its statements (like all transhistorical, universalistic statements) tend to be either wrong or trivial. On the other hand, when rational-choice theory does

³¹⁹ Nicos Mouzelis, *Sociological Theory: What went wrong? Diagnosis and Remedies* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 5.

³²⁰ Nicos Mouzelis, 28.

seriously consider institutional context, it loses its distinctive profile and its logico-deductive elegance.³²¹

Therefore, it can be said that criticism of rational choice theory centers around what is seen as its reductionism stemming from its abstraction of *homo economicus* and unverified assumptions due to lack of empirical evidence, as well as absence of context-bound postulations arising from its generalizing nature. Rational choice theory critics argue that the theory promises to establish meaningful linkages between micro and macro levels, and has a claim to transcultural and ahistorical applicability, but fails on both accounts. Both points are relevant to the religious economies approach as well for it is based on rational choice theory.

3.1.6. Limitations of the Religious Economies Approach

The criticism raised against rational choice theory, as a corollary, are relevant to the religious economies approach in a general manner, but certain criticisms have been put forward against the model in particular due to the subject it theorizes about, i.e., religion. A versatile and comprehensive theoretical tool for understanding how religion, politics and social structure interplay in a given society though the religious economies approach is, it comes with possible limitations particular to microeconomic study of religion, nonetheless.

As far as the presence and activities of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan are concerned, the limitations of the religious economies approach are manifold. The first possible handicap of the approach relates to its defining and fundamental characteristics, that is, the emphasis placed on the analogy between the religious space and the marketplace derived from microeconomics and the purported prevalence of marketplace dynamics in the religious decision-making process. Closely related to the first limitation, the second one relates to the criticisms by some sociologists of religion that the approach ascribes limited agency to the

³²¹ Nicos Mouzelis, 5.

demand-side actors, that is, people. The third shortcoming of the approach can be attributed to the heavy reliance of its literature's on the Protestant and Catholic Christianity which resulted to a large extent in omission of non-Christian religions so far. The fourth limitation of the approach is the absence of literature with regard to apolitical religious firms as the religious economies approach has mostly been employed to study politically vocal religious firms. The fifth limitation of the approach is that Rodney Stark and Laurence Iannaccone's presupposition that market deregulation is a *sine qua non* for religions to flourish is not empirically sound. Olivier Roy for one argues that religions and denominations such as Pentecostalism thrive in hostile environments with less than completely free religious markets including North Africa and Central Asia, all the while conceding that marketization of religions occur on a global scale.³²² From a scope conditions perspective, an argument shall be made that the religious economies approach stands highly relevant and applicable to the case of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan as examined in the present thesis, the abovementioned fourfold shortcomings notwithstanding. In what follows, each potential critique shall be discussed separately.

3.1.6.1. “Beware of Economists Bearing Gifts”: Application of Microeconomics to Religion

The application of rational choice theory of religion which is referred to as religious economies approach in the present study has drawn criticism on various levels. The criticisms center on the arguments that studying religious activities in the model of economics where actors behave rationally and strive to achieve utility maximization was reductionist, misguided in using mundane tools and concerns to understand religious belief, as well as unable to deliver what it promised to, and ultimately, in Steve Bruce's words, such economic models

³²² Olivier Roy, *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways* translated by Ros Schwartz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 161.

“obscure more than they illuminate.”³²³ The logic central to the approach has come under criticism from different angles and even the validity of empirical evidence has come into question.

Alles admits that the approach offered a starkly different alternative to the then existing theories of religion all the while setting the philosophical basis of religious economies approach as formulated by Rodney Stark against that of secularization theory in its various forms:

Against the entire Kantianesque cognitive-scientific gambit that religion reflects the structures of the mind/brain, Stark persistently pushes the Lockeanesque pawn that, as far as the explanation of religion is concerned, the mind might as well be a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate; all that is needed are rational human beings, that is, people who act in their own self-interest as they understand it.³²⁴

According to Wallis and Bruce the religious economies approach as conceived by Bainbridge and Stark is inherently faulty. The concepts of rewards and compensators are particularly insufficiently defined and misconstrued, leading to internal logical flaws and an exceedingly simplistic model which debilitates the validity of the approach. Wallis and Bruce argue that the faulty logic inherent in the approach with regard to rewards and compensators brings about a rather atheistic view of religion, not to mention a remarkably materialistic one:

Stark and Bainbridge have implicitly assumed too simple a model of reward. They draw a sharp contrast between the concrete and immediate as opposed to the distant and intangible. It is clear that what they really believe is that rewards comprise only the former, and the latter are thus only something that people will accept if the concrete and immediate gratifications cannot be secured. Their conceptualization of human desires is a highly materialistic one. They fail to see that rewards may fall anywhere within the range defined by their poles of the immediate and the distant. What they identify as firmly opposed and sharply distinct are, at best, distinguished only as a matter of degree. If we desire wealth,

³²³ Steve Bruce, “Religion and Rational Choice: A Critique of Economic Explanations of Religious Behavior,” *Sociology of Religion* Vol. 54, No. 2, (Summer, 1993), 194.

³²⁴ Gregory D. Alles, “Religious economies and rational choice: On Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, Acts of faith (2000),” in *Contemporary Theories of Religion: a critical companion*, Edited by Michael Strausberg, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 84.

we desire it not only today but tomorrow and next year. Similarly, the desire for immortality is a desire not only to live forever, but to live today and tomorrow as well. Stark and Bainbridge assume that the promises of religion cannot be desired for their own sake, rather than as substitutes for something else. In their assumption that there is something inherently faulty or unsatisfactory in religion, that it could never be desired except as compensation for something better (because this-worldly and immediate), Stark and Bainbridge build into their theory premises which are substantively atheistic (rather than merely methodologically atheistic in Berger's sense). They thus repeat the reductionist errors of Durkheim, Marx and Freud in construing religion as reducible to mundane considerations.³²⁵

One of the backbones of the approach, i.e., the argument that religious competition leads to religious vitality, has been disputed as well. Mark Chaves and Philip Gorski, for one, argue that

[a]lthough religious pluralism is not identical with religious competition, pluralism has commonly been treated as an indicator of competition, and analyses of the relationship between religious pluralism and religious participation have been the primary source of evidence in favor of the idea that religious competition leads to increased religious vitality. [...] The empirical evidence does not support the claim that religious pluralism is positively associated with religious participation in any general sense.³²⁶

Hill and Olson, on the other hand, while contending that religious economies approach has been consistent in its prediction that small religious firms have higher levels of member commitment, argue that this phenomenon does not arise due to their desire to outperform and outcompete their larger rivals as suggested by the approach.³²⁷ Peterson, on the other hand, contests one other founding block of religious economies approach, arguing that despite the theorists' assumption that Adam Smith advocated a *laissez faire* approach to religion,

³²⁵ Roy Wallis, Steve Bruce, "The Stark-Bainbridge Theory of Religion: A Critical Analysis and Counter Proposals," *Sociological Analysis* Vol. 45, No. 1, (Spring, 1984), 14.

³²⁶ Mark Chaves, Philip S. Gorski, "Religious Pluralism and Religious Participation," *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 27 (2001), 262.

³²⁷ Jonathan P. Hill, Daniel V. A. Olson, "Market Share and Religious Competition: Do Small Market Share Congregations and Their Leaders Try Harder?," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* Volume 48, Issue 4, (December, 2009), 629.

Smith saw a state-regulated religious market a second-best option to free-market policy.³²⁸

Petzke, on the other hand, contends that the conceptualization of religious landscape as a religious marketplace open to competition plays out as a self-fulfilling prophecy for the encounters between Evangelical missionaries and indigenous religions of the colonized.³²⁹ According to him, Evangelical missionaries, armed with what Benedict Anderson calls “print capitalism”³³⁰ in the form of Bible translated to local vernacular languages, printed religious books and pamphlets, as well as a penchant for polemical public discourses targeting ‘false’ local religions, sought first to gain a foothold and later to outcompete local spiritual traditions, which they conceived as their rivals for market-share. Unaccustomed to a competitive religious market with the mechanics of a zero-sum game understanding where religions employ aggressive tactics to convert souls from one another, local religions and spiritual groups were initially unmoved about and indifferent to the challenge the Evangelicals posed.³³¹ In what is today’s Sri Lanka, for instance, the locals’ lack of response to Evangelical competition stemmed from the local welcoming and accommodative attitude to different spiritual traditions.³³² In Egypt, on the other hand, Evangelical missionaries violated a non-competitive religious landscape

³²⁸ Scot M. Peterson, “Rational Choice, Religion, and the Marketplace: Where Does Adam Smith Fit In?”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* Volume 48, Issue 1, (March, 2009), 185.

³²⁹ Martin Petzke, “Performing the religious economy in nineteenth-century evangelical missions: a “third-way” approach to studying religious markets,” *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* (December, 2019), 13.

³³⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and the Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 18.

³³¹ Martin Petzke, 11-12.

³³² Richard F. Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 176-177.

where Christians and Jews coexisted alongside with Muslims as long as they submitted to the hegemony of Islam.³³³ These disturbances soon killed the tolerance of the locals who took up the challenge which resulted in long-lasting repercussions. Christian missionaries were “gratified to see that Christianity and Buddhism were at last in open combat, to find that all, in the end, would be compelled to make a deciding choice between the opposing sides.”³³⁴ The local responses took the shape of “a widespread mimesis of Christian organizations [which] attested to the increasingly unquestioned self-perception as a religious contender in the same class as the Christian rival.”³³⁵ Therefore, Evangelical missionaries created competitive religious markets where it did not exist priorly, and their local contenders imagined and shaped themselves in the mold of Christian missionaries as rivaling firms operating a competitive religious marketplace. Petzke’s argument that a free-market religious landscape was forced upon by Evangelical missionaries upon indigenous societies with non-competitive religious arenas is of great importance for the present study. However, Petzke turns Stark, Iannaccone and et al.’s argument based in the 19th century American context that, due to the free religious market religious life proliferated, upside down, holding that through Christian missionaries “an economic theoretical ontology of the religious arena came before the actual emergence of the religious marketplace in foreign fields and shaped the same in its own image.”³³⁶ Petzke’s contribution to the supply-side discussion bolsters the religious economies approach in that it allows the context-based origins of the approach to become applicable to colonial and post-colonial contexts where

³³³ Heather J. Sharkey, “Arabic Antimissionary Treatises; Muslim Responses to Evangelism in the Modern Middle East,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* Vol. 28, No. 3, (July, 2004), 99.

³³⁴ Kitsiri Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society 1750-1900; A Study of Religious Revival and Change* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), 212-213.

³³⁵ Martin Petzke, 13.

³³⁶ Martin Petzke, 4.

British and American missionaries provoked reforms and restructuring in native religious traditions in the model of American competitive religious market. This point will be elaborated in Chapter 3.

3.1.6.2. Heavy Reliance of Existing Literature on American Christian Sects and Denominations, and Lack of Context-Bound Analysis

It has been suggested that the orthodox version of secularization theory was based on studies dealing with Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism, whereas religious economies approach was developed in the United States on the basis of Protestantism and American dynamics, thus characterized by a much narrower religious and ethnic diversity. Religious traditions other than Christianity are rarely referred to by scholars who use religious economies approach.³³⁷ John Simpson refers to religious economies approach as “gloriously American,” in the sense that at the heart of the theory lies “the autonomous, pragmatic actor who both uses and adjusts to each situation”³³⁸; reflecting the projection of the idealized, quintessential American values onto the study of religion. Such criticisms focus mostly on the ideological baggage that comes with religious economies approach and rational choice theory in general: capitalistic, individualistic, and anti-liberal³³⁹ characterization of the approach and its association of these values with the study of religion which are deemed, by critics, incompatible.

A parallel can be drawn between secularization theory and the religious economies approach in that the former is said to be characterized by

³³⁷ Stephen Sharot, “Beyond Christianity: A Critique of the Rational Choice Theory of Religion from a Weberian and Comparative Religions Perspective,” *Sociology of Religion* Vol. 63, No. 4, (Winter, 2002), 428.

³³⁸ Michael P. Carroll, “Stark Realities and Eurocentric/Androcentric Bias in the Sociology of Religion,” *Sociology of Religion* Vol. 57, No. 3, (Autumn, 1996), 227.

³³⁹ Anti-liberal in the American sense.

Eurocentricism whereas the latter by US-centricism or Protestant-centricism. In fact, Rodney Stark, one of the architects and most prominent proponents of the approach has been criticized on the grounds that the entire line of thought was “triumphalistically Christian, with an especial fondness for American Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism.”³⁴⁰ Courtney Bender, on the other hand, argues that the approach:

has often found it challenging to include data (often membership data) from religious groups that do not conform to a specific Protestant model of voluntary adult membership. And as others in history and religious studies have noted—insofar as Jews, Catholics, Native Americans, antebellum slaves, and others are uneasy fits—the religious economies model has quite explicitly advanced a theological norm within itself. Specifically, free-church Protestantism is the norm against which all other religious groups are measured as capable of being free and capable of forming the kind of religious actors who can defend “religious freedom.”³⁴¹

Therefore, religious organizations structurally different to Protestantism run the risk of being cast aside as flawed, stagnant, and lethargic by the religious economies approach. Chaves and Gorski, for one, argue that evidence from Catholic countries do not verify the generalizing assumptions of religious economies approach:

If one focused only on the Protestant-dominated polities of Northern and Western Europe, one might be tempted to support the religious economies proposition that pluralism and participation are positively related, since the lowest levels of religious vitality are to be found in the confessionally homogeneous and state-dominated religious economies of Scandinavia, with the more pluralistic and unregulated economies of Britain, the Netherlands, and Germany exhibiting higher levels of participation. When one turns to the Catholic-dominated countries of Southern and Eastern Europe, however, the picture is different. Despite their homogeneity, these countries display levels of religious belief and church attendance that are consistently higher than those found in the Protestant countries.³⁴²

³⁴⁰ Gregory D. Alles, 83.

³⁴¹ Courtney Bender, 70.

³⁴² Mark Chaves, Philip S. Gorski, “Religious Pluralism and Religious Participation, 270.

Large and hierarchically structured and highly doctrinal religious actors such as the Catholic Church the established branches of Protestantism like Lutheranism and the Anglican/Episcopal Churches are by nature disfavored by the approach. Conversely, religious organizations with unrigid structures as well as open-ended membership regulations and less centered around doctrinal rigor that maintain high levels of mobility are endorsed as ‘marketable’ and successful. According to religious economies approach, non-Western religious traditions such as Buddhism, so-called ‘private religions’ according to Iannaccone, that do not offer otherworldly rewards, i.e., credence goods, tied to devotion to a single deity are at a disadvantage with religions that do, like Abrahamic traditions, which according to Iannaccone’s framework are grouped under the rubric of ‘collective religions’, because such credence goods ensure long-term and exclusive commitment from adherents.³⁴³ That eastern religions do not conceive a relationship between otherworldly rewards and commitment to supernatural beings negates an integral part of the framework the religious economies approach has brought forth.³⁴⁴

This facet of the religious economies approach is not necessarily troubling for the present thesis, for the *Tablighi Jamaat* exhibits, in terms of fervor, *modus operandi*, and structure, more similarities with Evangelical Protestant churches and restorationist Christian movements like the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Latter-Day Saints than other Islamic groups. Certain characteristics of the *Tablighi Jamaat* makes it possible to identify the group along with the strict firms the religious economies approach considers better suited to today’s market-like religious space, in other words the *Tablighi Jamaat* is market-orientated like Protestant and particularly Evangelical churches.

³⁴³ Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Voodoo Economics? Reviewing the Rational Choice Approach to Religion,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Mar., 1995), 81.

³⁴⁴ Stephen Sharot, 436-437.

Firstly, like myriad Evangelical Protestant groups, the *Tablighi Jamaat* too is characterized by a highly flexible and less hierarchical structure. As the *Tablighi Jamaat* has no offices, official headquarters and membership, subscription fees, formally affiliated institutions, or bookkeeping practices and operates solely on the basis of voluntary participation, it adapts to local conditions and circumstances mostly without need to go through time-consuming official procedures where possible. Furthermore, as members participating in *da'wa* activities out of towns cover their own expenses, the operational costs of the *Tablighi Jamaat* are immensely low. Therefore, the *Tablighi Jamaat* proliferates even when other Islamic groups struggle to make ends meet.

Secondly, as there is no clergy, or complex, fixed, and standardized liturgy, any Muslim can join the group and lead proselytizing missions as long as they stand ready to commit themselves to it. This aspect of the *Tablighi Jamaat* empowers the laymen, rather than sustaining a professional clergy which creates an asymmetrical relationship between the missionaries and their target audience, rendering the former inaccessible to the latter. The *Tablighi* concept that salvation can only be attained through one's own efforts and no intermediary, in the form of Sufi leaders, can help attain that goal enhances the group's emphasis on individualism. Coupled with the emphasis placed on self-reform, the individualistic and personal quality of the *Tablighi Jamaat* gives it a distinct character, not unlike that of many Evangelical churches.

Thirdly, the *Tablighi Jamaat*, not unlike other *Sunni* revivalist/fundamentalist movements, share with Protestant churches a marked emphasis on day-to-day religious experience which is considered as a *sine qua non* of being part of a particular religious movement. Religious economies approach has been identified by critics as a theory which uses as the yardstick of religiosity Protestant individual, day-to-day religious experience characterized by

intensity.³⁴⁵ The day-to-day religious experience of Protestants, Evangelicals in particular, is marked by ecstasy stemming from one's repentance from past transgressions and personal communication with the deity, which may take the form of conversion, possession, glossolalia, and visionary experiences, which usually results in personal conviction that one is absolved and confidence in salvation, whereas the *Tablighi* experience arises from similar sentiments of compunction and desire to improve, but the individual is sober, i.e., no possession or trance, and is never assured of salvation or absolution, for the deity does not directly communicate with individuals which is a privilege of prophets. That one is never assured of absolution in Islam means that the *Tablighis* like other Muslims are supposed to incessantly repent, ask for absolution, and rectify their conducts and faiths in order to deserve to be absolved and to attain salvation. To this end, the *Tablighis* are robustly encouraged to observe in their daily lives *imitatio Muhammadi*, that is, imitate the words of the Prophet, and put into practice the Quranic injunction "Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong: They are the ones to attain felicity"³⁴⁶ and live their daily lives according to Quran. The *Tablighi* emphasis on living in accordance with the injunctions of Quran is reminiscent of the fact that Protestants are encouraged to 'live the Gospel of Christ' on a daily basis.³⁴⁷ This stands in contrast to Catholicism where "religion has historically been less a matter of day-to-day experience than a matter of important rituals performed at particular places during specific periods."³⁴⁸ Protestant religious experience is an interior experience, whereas Catholic religious experience is of an external character. In that sense, the

³⁴⁵ Michael P. Carroll, 227.

³⁴⁶ *Sura* 3:104 translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali.

³⁴⁷ However, Christianity in its various forms does not place a similar emphasis on *imitatio Christi*.

³⁴⁸ Michael P. Carroll, 228.

Tablighi experience too is of an internal character. The Catholic emphasis placed on rituals and specific places is somewhat reminiscent of the ritualistic characteristics of Sunni Islamic brotherhoods and Sunni folk Islam in particular. The elaborate rites as well as highly structured *dhikr* practices of the former, and the shrine visits of the latter bear similarities with the ritualistic religious experience of Catholics.³⁴⁹ It is noteworthy that the *Tablighi Jamaat* arose partly in response to what the 19th century Indian ‘*ulamā* saw as the degeneration of Islam in India due to the popularity of folk Islam. Also noteworthy, albeit to a lesser degree, is that, having largely borrowed its vocabulary from the *Chishti* brotherhood, the *Tablighi Jamaat* has later shed to a large extent this initial Sufi influence and assumed over time a more sober and less intellectually driven character. All in all, the *Tablighi* concept and praxis of religiosity is more akin to Protestant religious experience both being of internal character.

Fourthly, the *modus operandi* of the *Tablighi Jamaat* is reminiscent of the door-knocking proselytization practice the Latter-Day Saints and the Jehovah’s Witnesses are famous for and of the mid-18th-century Wesleyan concept of ‘open-air preaching’. Incidentally, the latter denomination was a part of a larger late 18th-century English Evangelical revivalist movement, also known as the Great Awakening in the American context, within the Church of England, which inadvertently set off a chain of events leading to the 19th century revival (*tajdīd*) movement among the ‘*ulamā* in Northern India which gave rise in its turn to the *Tablighi Jamaat*. The same bottom-up *modus operandi*, preaching reform directly to people, was used by Sayyid Ahmad, a member of the said 19th century revivalist ‘*ulamā* movement from India, as well, and inspired other Muslim *da‘wa/tabligh* movements in the 20th century, including the *Tablighi Jamaat*.³⁵⁰ This approach to missionary activity turns the previously mentioned asymmetrical relationship upside down, with the ‘salesman’ now going to the

³⁴⁹ Trance and ecstasy are a part of various Sufi traditions in Islam, as well.

³⁵⁰ Matthew J. Kuiper, 117.

‘client’ rather than the other way around which is the usual case. This particular *modus operandi* invigorates missionary activities and religious organizations, and the message they strive to pass on to the masses can be energetically delivered. Fifthly, both the *Tablighi Jamaat* and the aforementioned, Christian sects and denominations are strict, thus eliminating the free rider problem once and for all and, possibly, maximizing utility for clients. Therefore, the *Tablighi* behavioral and sartorial ways, based on *imitatio Muhammadi*, put the group on a similar footing as the Evangelical groups which demand similarly strict mannerism from their members. Lastly, the *Tablighi* indifference to politics is an indicator of the extent to which the group orients itself toward its ‘trade’, that is proselytization. Therefore, the *Tablighi Jamaat* fits relatively well into the rubric of dynamic, individualistic, self-help religious movements the religious economies approach is based on.

Despite the religious economies approach’s heavy reliance on Protestantism, the approach has been extended to the study of other religious groups as well. For instance, it has been used to explain the revitalization attempts of the Catholic Church in the form of Charismatic Catholicism Movement in Latin America to counter the encroachment of Evangelical Protestantism³⁵¹ or the dynamism of religious life in the Greco-Roman world.³⁵² While the literature of the religious economies approach is predominated by American religious experience, namely both non-Evangelical and Evangelical Protestantism, and, of Catholicism to a much lesser extent, other religious traditions too have been incorporated into the narrative of the religious economies approach.³⁵³ There is a small but growing

³⁵¹ Andrew Chestnut, “Specialized Spirits: Conversion and the Products of Pneumacentric Religion in Latin America’s Free Market of Faith,” in *Conversion of a Continent: Contemporary Religious Change in Latin America* ed. by Timothy Steigenga and Edward L. Cleary (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

³⁵² Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 198-199.

³⁵³ Rodney Stark’s *One True God* is a rare attempt to apply the religious economies approach to

body of scholarship studying Islamic communities and actors worldwide through the same lens.³⁵⁴ Nevertheless, it would not be misleading to assert that religious economic approach remains in essence centered around American Protestantism by virtue of its formulation to account for the sustained vitality of Protestant churches throughout the USA.

However, the imperfect, semi-liberal religious marketplace in Kyrgyzstan has some markedly different dynamics than Western Christian societies. The government still retains a hold on the workings of the religious market where potentially ‘harmful’ religious firms are either barred all together, or closely monitored to the point that they cannot operate. This is a particularly important

religious traditions other than Christianity.

³⁵⁴An inclusive but by no means exhaustive list of the small but growing body of religious economies literature devoted solely to Islamic societies and actors is as follows: Stathis N. Kalyvas’s study of massacre of civilians in Algeria in “Wanton and Senseless? The Logic of Massacres in Algeria,” *Rationality and Society*, Volume 11, issue 3, (August, 1999). Gill and Pfaff’s article on why Muslim communities in Germany fail to form nationwide interest organizations from a religious economies perspective in “Will a Million Muslims March? Muslim Interest Organizations and Political Integration in Europe,” *Comparative Political Studies*, Volume 39, Number 7, (September, 2006). Gamze Çavdar’s aforementioned article uses religious economies approach and is entirely devoted to studying behaviour of Islamists in “Islamist Rationality: An Assessment of The Rational Choice Approach,” *Politics and Religion*, 5 (3) (December, 2012). The jihadists’ dilemma as to domestic fighting or going abroad to wage war is examined by Thomas Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists’ Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 107, No. 1, (February, 2013). Jean-Paul Carvalho’s article analyzes the Islamic practice of veiling in Jean-Paul Carvalho, “Veiling,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 128 (1), (2013). The French ban on Islamic veiling and divergence regarding freedom between veiled Muslim women and official discourses are studied in Inés Valdez, “Nondomination or Practices of Freedom? French Muslim Women, Foucault, and The Full Veil Ban,” *American Political Science Review*, Volume 110, Issue 1, (February, 2016). The mechanism through which unequal economic development triggers religious revivalist movements is studied in Christine Binzel, Jean-Paul Carvalho, “Education, Social Mobility and Religious Movements: The Islamic Revival in Egypt,” *Economic Journal* 127 (607), (December, 2017). The question whether secularist party leads to diminished sectarian violence is responded in the positive in Gareth Nellis and Niloufer Siddiqi, “Secular Party Rule and Religious Violence in Pakistan,” *American Political Science Review*, Volume 112, Issue 1, (February, 2018). In Steven Brooke and Neil Ketchley, “Social and Institutional Origins of Political Islam,” *American Political Science Review*, Volume 112, Issue 2, (May, 2018), the authors argue that the existence of state and economic infrastructure was chiefly responsible for the diffusion and institutionalization of Islamic organizations. The rationality of suicide bombing is discussed by B. A. Thayer and Valerie Hudson in “Sex and the Shaheed: Insights from the Life Sciences on Islamic Suicide Terrorism,” *International Security*, Volume 34, Issue 4, (Mar. 2010); as well as by Andrew Greenland, Damon Proulx, and David A. Savage, in “Dying for the cause: The rationality of martyrs, suicide bombers and self-immolators,” *Rationality and Society*, Volume 32, issue 1, (January, 2020).

handicap as far as application of religious economies approach to Kyrgyzstan is concerned.

To recapitulate, the religious economies approach draws its empirical data extensively from American Protestantism, whereas non-Western religions are mostly overlooked. This is crucial as the approach's basic assumptions are based on the theology and structure of American Protestantism with the empirical slant giving way to theoretical bias. Nonetheless, the *Tablighi Jamaat*, despite being an Islamic movement, bears several similarities with American Protestant churches and congregations which absolve it of the said handicaps and render it more compatible with the framework of the religious economies approach.

3.1.6.3. Absence of Literature on Apolitical Religious Firms

As the religious economies literature is predominated by studies of politically active and vocal religious firms, the present thesis by employing the religious economies approach to the allegedly apolitical *Tablighi Jamaat* stands out as an outlier. Nevertheless, the absence of literature with regard to apolitical religious firms, however, does not render the religious economies approach incompatible with the apoliticism of the *Tablighi Jamaat*.

The rational choice theory as found in the literature of sociology of religion is concerned for the most part with various Protestant Evangelical churches which are invested in politics, though not necessarily motivated by it. Although Evangelical churches vary greatly from congregation to congregation with regard to their composition and ideological leanings, it can be generalized that they, like the Southern Baptist Convention, take positions in several contested subjects such as creationism, abortion, and LGBT rights. Consequently, most Evangelical churches act as advocacy groups and keep themselves involved in politics both on state and national levels as observed by Anthony Gill and Steven Pfaff: “[b]eyond promoting their own interests in evangelizing, religious organizations have long been influential actors in social and political advocacy movements,

many of which have influenced government policies across a wide swathe of nations.”³⁵⁵ Rodney Stark and Laurence Iannaccone argue that in monopolistic religious economies such as that of Sweden, political involvement of the monopolistic religious firms is a *quid pro quo* where the monopolist, the Lutheran Church of Sweden in that case, “bought continued [government’s] support at the cost of whatever autonomy it still possessed.”³⁵⁶ Under such conditions, David Martin argues, “as the establishment becomes more liberal or socialist the church adapts itself to the new situation.”³⁵⁷ For this reason, such monopolistic religious firms are more obliging to politically correct demands in the above-mentioned contested subjects. Smaller religious firms competing in unregulated economies, on the other hand, having little urge to please the politically correct demands, appeal to more conservative segments of the society, and accordingly become advocacy groups in order to promote their politically and socially conservative values.

The apolitical nature of the *Tablighi Jamaat* contrasts with the advocacy position of Evangelicalism. The religious economies approach does not offer specific insight into a setting where a religious firm is voluntarily and globally apolitical or indifferent to politics. I will argue that despite this limitation, the approach is still very relevant to the present thesis for a number of reasons. My argument stems firstly from the fact that Kyrgyzstan, as expressed in the introductory chapter, is pluralistic but hardly totally liberalized with regard to the religious marketplace. Therefore, desecralization is yet to fully take place in Kyrgyzstan, as it is to in the semi-liberal religious marketplace in Latin America. However, this does not automatically disqualify the approach in the context of

³⁵⁵ Anthony J. Gill and Steven J. Pfaff, “Acting in good faith: an economic approach to religious organizations as advocacy groups” in Aseem Prakash editor. ; Mary Kay Gugerty editor. *Advocacy Organizations and Collective Action* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 59.

³⁵⁶ Rodney Stark and Laurence R. Iannaccone, “A Supply-Side”, 238.

³⁵⁷ David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 23.

Kyrgyzstan because the religious economies approach is recently utilized to explain the rapid expansion of Protestant churches in various Latin American countries.

Secondly, some socio-political issues pertaining to the Western context, such as abortion, gun ownership, or LGBT rights, do not have the same relevancy in Kyrgyzstan. They are hardly ever mentioned in the mass media and they have little public visibility, if any. Abortion, for one, is less a divisive subject in Kyrgyzstan than it is in the USA. As for LGBT rights, “[p]ublic discourse on the rights of LGBT people in Kyrgyzstan occurs in a broader environment of socially entrenched prejudice, institutional discrimination, as well as violence and impunity for human rights violations and abuses,”³⁵⁸ which results in few people wanting to debate the situation, effectively rendering public discussion of LGBT rights next to impossible. However, there are social issues such as alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, and destructive gambling habits which are rampant in Kyrgyzstan as they are elsewhere. As a result, moral values promoted by the *Tablighi Jamaat* parallel to a great extent those upheld by Evangelical churches worldwide. Therefore, despite the divergent fault lines marking the populations targeted respectively by the *Tablighi Jamaat* and Evangelical Christianity, or any Christian advocacy group for that matter, both movements are based on similar moral concerns and respond in similar manner to certain common social triggers. It is also noteworthy that Evangelical Christian groups conduct vigorous proselytization activities in Kyrgyzstan in particular as well as in most of the Central Asian region in general at the expense and to the consternation of local Sunni Muslim and Orthodox religious establishments. These Evangelical groups target Muslims and Christians alike, aiming to appeal to the local populace through moral values such as emphasis on sobriety, hard-work, and possibility of improving one’s life by way of religious dedication

³⁵⁸ *Challenging hate: Monitoring anti-LGBT “hate speech” and responses to it in Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine*, Article 19, February 2018, 31, accessed 25.10.2020. https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/LGBT-Hate-Speech-Report-Central-Asia_March2018.pdf

commonly found both in Central Asian populations and Evangelical missionaries who hail either from Western societies or who are locals previously converted by Western missionaries. It goes without saying that this necessitates that Evangelical missionary groups adapt themselves to local conditions so that they offer solutions to local needs. Therefore, the *Tablighi Jamaat* and Evangelical groups compete for Kyrgyz bodies and souls, both addressing to similar socially destructive practices to which they both raise similar moral positions.

Thirdly, the claims both within and outside the *Tablighi Jamaat* of the *Tablighi* apathy towards politics should not be taken at face value. It is also quite possible that there may be another interpretation of the *Tablighi* apoliticism. Such a political quietism can also rather be interpreted as a tacit approval by the group of the government's policy, whatever it may be. One must, above all, bear in mind while contemplating claims of political apathy in Kyrgyzstan on the part of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, or on any religious organization for that matter, that Kyrgyzstan does not respect the freedoms of such religious organizations in full on the grounds of antiterrorism.³⁵⁹ Thus, by implicitly endorsing the government, the *Tablighi Jamaat* assumes the political stance of not challenging the powers that be and even siding with the *status quo* albeit in a passive way, enabling the group to 'legalize' its operations in Kyrgyzstan, *inter alia*. A further consequence of the tacit *Tablighi* endorsement of the government policy is that the *Tablighis* 'instrumentalize' themselves for the government so that the authorities find in the *Tablighi Jamaat* a silent and even willing partner to pursue the government's policies so long as the *Tablighi Jamaat* operates without hindrance and in accordance with its tenets. Whether such a 'symbiotic' relationship will succeed is a function of the degree to which the government and the *Tablighi Jamaat* align their respective agendas with one another. As might be expected, the *Tablighi* apoliticism is most likely to generate a symbiosis with authorities where interests, objectives, and shared values are easier to identify.

³⁵⁹ Franco Galdini and Zukhra Iakupbaeva, "The Strange Case of Jaysh al-Mahdi and Mr. ISIS: How Kyrgyzstan's Elites Manipulate the Threat of Terrorism for Their Own Benefit," *CAP Papers* 179 (October 2016), 5.

Nevertheless, one should see to it that the *Tablighi* avoidance of political involvement, their subsequent alignment with government policies, and their symbiotic relationship with the government should not be confused with the aforementioned Swedish case where the monopolist, the Lutheran Church of Sweden, has willingly relinquished its autonomy and been brought under control and influence of the government of Sweden in exchange for government support, both political and economic.³⁶⁰ In the latter case, the monopolistic religious firm has forgone its prior autonomy, and some of its core values or moderated them to adapt itself to the changing conditions, accepting a submissive position vis-à-vis the government with the clergy being paid out of taxpayers' pockets. While the relationship between the Church of Sweden and the government has a dimension of mutual benefit, it is officially hierarchical and asymmetrical in nature. In the case of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, on the other hand, the parties are not in an official relationship, hence the less pronounced asymmetry between the *Tablighi Jamaat* and the Kyrgyz government. Therefore, the *Tablighi Jamaat* has little incentive to tone down its core values for it does not seek to challenge the political structure or assert political power.

³⁶⁰ A recent study discussing the conflict within the Church of Sweden over same-sex marriage demonstrates that priests in parishes which are shareholders of church's properties protected by the state are more likely to publicly acquiesce than priest serving non-shareholding parishes, even if the former are populated by conservative members. For the said article: Niklas Bengtsson, "Are Religions for Sale? Evidence from the Swedish Church Revolt Over Same-Sex Marriage," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* Volume 58, Issue 2 (June, 2019).

CHAPTER IV

THE *TABLIGHI JAMAAT*: CONCEPTION, BIRTH, EVOLUTION

The present chapter is intended to elaborate on the historical and sociological dynamics that set off Maulana Ilyas to create the *Tablighi Jamaat* as well as to offer a background information with regard to his designs in doing so. Therefore, from a geographical point of view this chapter will focus on the Indian subcontinent whereas from a temporal standpoint the focus will be placed on the British Raj with the pre-1857 period getting attention mostly as the lead-up. This build-up will serve on the one hand to shed light on what the material world outside stands for the *Tablighis* and, on the mental and the behavioral mechanism they imbibe through their acculturation within the *Tablighi Jamaat* in response to the external world. On the other hand, and to a much lesser extent, this chapter will also serve to develop an inkling of what the *Tablighi Jamaat* may stand for various actors in the material world outside. The ultimate object of the chapter, however, is to help assign a meaning to the intentions and activities of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in the post-soviet Kyrgyzstan by way of explaining under which conditions did the unique *Tablighi* ethos come into existence along with the praxis attached to it and the mechanism that reproduces the same *Tablighi* attitude without temporal or spatial constraints.

4.1. The Complex Origins of the *Tablighi Jamaat*

The existing academic literature with regard to the *Tablighi Jamaat*, setting several superior studies aside, is dominated by the securitization paradigm which permeates even the studies outside the international relations discipline. The period after the September 11 attacks has created such an atmosphere that national and international security concerns came to overshadow all disciplines of social sciences and humanities which was inevitably accompanied with

reductionism. However, to perceive the *Tablighi Jamaat* exclusively from a national/international security point of view as yet another 20th-century trans-national Islamic movement or network with a view to identify possible radical elements either within its leadership or among the rank and file would do the sociology of religion a disservice by obfuscating the complex origins of the *Tablighi Jamaat*. This is a theme that has been dominant in Central Asian studies in particular, with the discussion of Islamic movements in the region reduced to a subset of the study of Islamic extremism. The securitization paradigm of the academics also plays into the hands of the existing political configuration both in Central Asia and outside the region, from China to Russian Federation to the United States to the European Union. While both political actors within and outside the Central Asia have a vested interest in the containment and eradication of Islamic extremism, it is undeniable that Central Asian power elite also need to sustain the ‘war against terrorism’ discourse alive in order to quell domestic opposition and secure foreign funds under the guise of waging that war.

It would be equally reductionist to treat the movement as a mere Islamic political actor with counterparts throughout the contemporary Islamic world. True, there are various Islamic movements that have gained large number of adherents throughout the Islamic world, such as the *Ikhwan* movement (the Muslim Brotherhood), the *Jamaat-e-Islami*, the *Deobandi* movement, and the *Hizb ut-Tahrir*. These movements can be argued to have common themes with the *Tablighi Jamaat*, and they are more extensively studied than it so far. However, the *Tablighi Jamaat* is distinguished from these contemporary trans-national Islamic movements by the fact that the former are all politically engaged, or at least politically motivated currents, to the extent that some of which are political parties per se, whereas the *Tablighi* movement is arguably uninvolved in political matters and describes itself as apolitical. Therefore, much like and in association with the need to sustain a clear space for the study of religious movements independent of securitization paradigm, the study of Islamic movements such as the *Tablighi Jamaat* should not be reduced to a subset of political Islam which would be very short-sighted move.

In fact, the origins of the *Tablighi Jamaat* are much more complex than meets the eye and, as such, the movement deserves a more profound examination in itself. The origins of the *Tablighi Jamaat* are as deeply entrenched in the history of colonial India as they are in the wider Sunni Islamic tradition. Therefore, it would not be misleading to call the birth of the *Tablighi* movement a vortex of complex dynamics, which eventually amalgamated the response the colonized formulated in the face of political and cultural encroachment of the colonial power and the *tajdīd* (renewal) tradition historically embedded in Sunni Islam. This combination, nevertheless, did not exclusively produce the *Tablighi* movement as we know it, for the parent movement the *Deobandi* school from which the *Tablighi Jamaat* sprang up too was the issue of the same dynamics, as did other similar Islamic movements from the sub-continent around the same period. Although the *Tablighi* movement evidently grew out of the *Deobandi* school, the former developed a distinct character, *modus operandi*, and even came to assume, to a certain extent, a worldview of its own, and has carved out itself a niche in the Islamic world which puts the *Tablighi Jamaat* in an almost unique position.

In what follows, the birth and the development of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in the colonial India will be set in its historical background to provide a more contoured sense of the dynamics that contributed to the making of the movement. To this end, the rest of the present chapter is divided into two sub-sections. The first section is devoted to what might be called the ‘prelude’, that is, the developments that laid the ground for the birth of the *Deobandi* movement in the 19th century British India which is the parent *tajdīd* movement which from an intellectual point of view nourished Maulana Ilyas who went on to establish the *Tablighi Jamaat* as a movement with an emphasis on a peculiar understanding of praxis that sets it apart from its parent. The second section dwells on this development, the dynamics that ultimately led Maulana Ilyas to grow dissatisfied with the state of affairs of his time and provoked him to start his own movement with its peculiar *modus operandi* in order to address what he understood as a persistent lack on the part of the Islamic renewal movement to which he adhered,

that is, the *Deobandis*, in the British Raj of outreach to large, uneducated, scattered, and principally rural masses. In other words, the second section aims to explore the outgrowth of the *Tablighi Jamaat* as an Islamic renewal group closely related to yet distinct enough from the *Deobandi* movement from whence it set forth and, the dynamics and the reasons which galvanized Maulana Ilyas to take up such a new initiative.

4.1.1. Reinvigoration of the Faith: *Tajdīd* in the Sunni Tradition in South Asia

The terminology regarding Islamic revivalism is rich and varies. *Ihyā*, *tajdīd*, and *islāh* are all terms used to refer to one form of religious reform or the other. *Ihyā* denotes revival, *tajdīd* renewal, and *islāh* correction and amelioration.³⁶¹ These terms refer to cleansing the faith by removing fabrications and innovations and to restoring the Islamic community, which has gone astray from the path of Quran and the *sunna*, to its original state through these ‘correct’ sources.³⁶² Such diverse Islamic historical figures as Umar bin Abdulaziz, the eighth Umayyad caliph, Abu Hanifa, Maulana Jalaladdin ‘Rumi’, al-Gazali, Ibn Taymiyah, and Ahmad Sirhindi are usually counted among the *mujaddid*, which means renewer of the faith or renewalist, which are said to ‘come’ every hundred years to purify the faith and invite Muslims back to ‘correct’ beliefs and practices. The term reform, however, is met with much skepticism among Muslim scholars who believe that the term reform is laden with references to Protestant Reformation and should be used only in that context, despite the fact that it is synonymous with *tajdīd*.³⁶³ Büyükkara, for one, argues that reform in its Christian context refers to altering the very original state of religion, whereas *tajdīd* refers to

³⁶¹ Mehmet Ali Büyükkara, *Çağdaş İslami Akımlar* (İstanbul: Klasik, 2016), 21.

³⁶² Mehmet Ali Büyükkara, 23.

³⁶³ Mehmet Ali Büyükkara, 24.

restoring the religion to its original state, also adding that reform implies an external intervention whereas *tajdīd* is internally driven.³⁶⁴

The issue of revival and renewal in Islam is not unique to modern times. Indeed, renewal of the faith is a common theme throughout the history of Islam. However, the Islamic revivalism of the modern era differs from that of pre-modern times in that modern time revivalism arose as a response to both internal factors and cultural, political, economic, and military encounters with the ‘other’ due to the geographical expansion the West achieved and trade colonies they established in various Eastern states as a consequence, which were lacking in the era prior to Western geographical expansion. The Western expansion soon turned into political intervention and then gave way to political, military, and economic domination of the East by the West, which soon culminated in cultural domination as well. This series of predicaments created among the ‘*ulama* a sense of urgency because for the first time in history most Muslim populations such as Muslims in today’s India, Indonesia and Central Asia came under non-Muslim rule which, along with Western military and technological hegemony, delivered a serious blow to the status quo of many Muslim societies. From the Muslim ruler to the revered ‘*ulama* realized that their unquestioned positions were under threat by external forces, and this undermined the political and cultural capital they each traditionally possessed respectively. Under these conditions, the ‘*ulama* from the colonized Muslim communities had to devise revivalist strategies which would address to both internal and external threats. Scholarship has shown that the ‘*ulama* in South Asia have been very resilient to the challenges of colonial rule and modernity, maintaining their public visibility if not cultural dominance.³⁶⁵

³⁶⁴ Mehmet Ali Büyükkara, 24. It is saddening that Büyükkara, an expert in Islamic movements, has misunderstood Christian Reformation, completely missing its drive to restore Christianity to its original form. This is a very common misperception among students in Turkey.

³⁶⁵ Bruce B. Lawrence, “Foreword,” in Moin Ahmad Nizami, *Reform and Renewal in South Asian Islam: The Chisti-Sabris in 18th–19th Century North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3-4.

Moin Ahmad Nizami points out to the fact that modern scholarship on South Asian Islam has erroneously separated the *'ulama* from the Sufi on the belief that Sufism became stagnant as Muslim communities encountered modernity in the 18th century, that it was a medieval thought and ill-suited to the modern era.³⁶⁶ The so-called Decline Theory postulated that Sufism was stuck in the mire of superstition, innovation, and ignorance, only appealing to the uneducated masses, and the *'ulama* stepped in as a response to stop the decay of Muslim societies by reviving the faith and educating people. This vein of scholarship has recently met with criticism, spawning a new wave of research that approached the relationship between Sufism and Islamic revivalism with a more nuanced eye. It has come to light that Sufism and the *fiqh*-centered revivalism were not always hostile to each other. Thus, it has been acknowledged that Sufi tradition harboured a profound variety in South Asia, with certain movements spearheading revivalism by combining Sufism and *madrassa* culture.³⁶⁷

4.1.2. *Tajdīd* in the Colonial Times: Muslim Response to External Encroachment During the British Rule and the Birth of the *Deobandi* School

4.1.2.1. The Changing Role of the *'Ulamā* in the 18th and the 19th Centuries

The single most important event in the Mughal Empire in the 18th century was arguably the invasion and the sacking of Delhi, the imperial seat, by Nadir Shah of Persia in 1739 that left a lasting imprint not only in the future of the Mughals but also that of the entire sub-continent.³⁶⁸ What ensued was the break-up of the political structure that kept together North India more or less under same

³⁶⁶ Moin Ahmad Nizami, "Introduction," in Moin Ahmad Nizami, *Reform and Renewal in South Asian Islam: The Chisti-Sabris in 18th–19th Century North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017), 5-7.

³⁶⁷ Moin Ahmad Nizami, 5-6.

³⁶⁸ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 25.

imperial banner since the second half of the 16th century. Emboldened by the disintegrating and the already overstretched Mughal political and military power, local kingdoms and states sprang up in various parts of North India, rendering the Mughal emperor but a shadow of the past.³⁶⁹ Also expanding its power base was the British East India Company which extended its rule from Bengal to Bihar to the south of the Deccan Plateau especially due to Arthur Wellesley's military success.³⁷⁰ The source of political legitimacy of both the British East India Company and various semi-independent Muslim princes was Mughal emperors who, at least nominally, continued to act in the role of suzerain till 1857.³⁷¹ The rapid disintegration of the Mughal authority everywhere and the proliferation of successor power loci in the periphery proved beneficial to the religious leadership which existed in the form of the *'ulamā* and the Sufi leaders.³⁷² Traditionally, local Sufi leaders whose *baraka* (charisma) based on *silsila* (chains of succession) going back to the Prophet found patronage in Muslim rulers to whom Sufi blessings lent legitimacy.³⁷³ The *pirs*, local Sufi leaders, who before the Mughal Empire broke-up acted as intermediaries between common people and the local power holders who themselves acted as the representatives of the Empire, expanded their authorities as local notables, and, in the case of the *Chishti* order, as keepers of the religious tradition with the

³⁶⁹ Matthew Kuiper, *Da'wa and Other Religions*, 112-113.

³⁷⁰ Sheikh Jameil Ali, *Islamic Thought and Movement in the Subcontinent: A Study of Sayyid Abu A'la Mawdudi and Sayyid Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld Ltd., 2000), 115.

³⁷¹ Gail Minault, *The Khilafat Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 5.

³⁷² Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 25.

³⁷³ Barbara Metcalf, "Introduction", in *Islam in South Asia: In Practice* ed. by Barbara D. Metcalf (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 8.

gradual demise of the Mughal power in the Sindh and Punjab regions.³⁷⁴ Having lacked the local base the *pirs* enjoyed, the '*ulamā* naturally sought to restore the status quo between themselves and powerholders, while calling for stricter observation of Islamic law and Sunni orthodox practices, to the absence of which they attributed the political instability.³⁷⁵ For instance, Shah Waliyullah, the most important *tajdīd*-minded scholar of the 18th century berated the imperial administration for failing to suppress rebellions and the rulers' lavish lifestyles.³⁷⁶ They served local kings and *nawabs* alike as they did Mughal emperors and established new schools with innovative curricula. However, their endeavors and appeals addressed to a restricted audience, the financially secure and the intellectually gifted. The dissemination of knowledge and reinvigoration of the faith - *tajdīd*- remained an elite concern, as was customary, and an occupation for the learned and the descendants of the first Muslims to arrive in India, the *ashrāf*, in the 18th century. The large number of uneducated, Muslims from the local stock, the *ajlāf*, were left to their own devices as they were during the Mughal Empire. The 18th century Indian Islamic revivalism was more local in its orientation and context than being trans-regional and had little in common with its contemporary Wahhabi *tajdīd* movement.³⁷⁷

The 19th century '*ulamā*, which Barbara Metcalf calls the '*ulamā* in transition,³⁷⁸ were more troubled with the popular plight and more disposed to focus on the

³⁷⁴ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 27.

³⁷⁵ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 28-29.

³⁷⁶ Vasileios Syros, "An Early Modern South Asian Thinker on the Rise and Decline of Empires: Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi, the Mughals, and the Byzantines," *Journal of World History* Vol. 23 No. 4 (December 2012), 818.

³⁷⁷ Ahmad Dallal, "The Origins and Objectives of Islamic Revivalist Thought, 1750-1850." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* Vol. 113, No. 3 (Jul. – Sep., 1993), 341-342.

³⁷⁸ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 46.

beliefs and practices of ordinary people. This change is attributed to the consolidation of the British military power throughout North India. According to Metcalf, with new land surveys poor Muslim tillers in Bengal lost their rights to land to wealthy Hindu landowners, Muslim *waqf* deeds supporting the '*ulamā*' were obliterated, Muslim princely armies were disbanded, and new government employment patterns emerged, which, in toto, necessitated that the '*ulamā*' shift their attention from the learned elite to the improving fortunes of individuals.³⁷⁹ Furthermore, as the expanse of land that came under British rule expanded, the British administration sought to codify Islamic and Hindu laws to secure 'rule of law'. The codification endeavors brought about a frozen understanding of Islamic law, the so-called Anglo-Muhammadan law, which came to be administered not by Muslims but by British administrators as offenses against the said law became a concern of the British administration. This change meant that *fatwas* traditionally issued by Muslim courts to the judges were directly given to the believers in the British India.³⁸⁰ With the disappearance of Muslim rulers and courts, and the ever-intensifying intervention of the British administration in legal matters, the '*ulamā*' came to position themselves as the keepers of Muslim law touching everyday life under alien rule. Thus, the issuance of *fatwas* to ordinary believers became an important matter in the dissemination of Islamic knowledge and ensuring popular adherence to the Sharia, particularly with the aid of the printing press that became available during the post-Mughal period under the British rule.³⁸¹

The encounter between Muslims and Christian missionaries starting from the first half of the 19th century proved to be a contentious subject for Muslims, and also for Hindus for that matter, due to the fears that mass conversions to

³⁷⁹ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 49.

³⁸⁰ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 49-50.

³⁸¹ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 52.

Christianity might ensue. It also had an immense bearing on the shape the 19th and 20th-century *tajdīd* movements would take in the sub-continent. It was not only the ‘*ulamā*’ which went through a transformation in the 19th century. In fact, it was the gradual transformation of the British policy in India in matters of culture and civilization that provoked Muslim scholars to reassess the future of Islamic landscape in India, only to arrive at the bleak conclusion that need for renewal was of immediate urgency. The 18th-century British policy of non-interventionism in cultural and religious affairs in India was abandoned in the next century as the British sentiments of *mission civilisatrice*³⁸² and desire to bring uniformity to the lands that fell to the administration of the East India Company started operating which brought about Britain’s own reformist agenda.³⁸³ Religions of India became a target for British efforts, which resulted in, among others, the codification of Hindu and Muslim laws, outlawing ‘uncivilized’ customs and practices, and the introduction of western education.³⁸⁴ Governed by principles of pragmatism, the East India Company traditionally

³⁸² While the French term is used in general to refer to a policy of all colonial powers of hierarchizing the colonized and colonizer according to racist views dominant in the 19th century, the concept, perhaps, found its quintessential expression in the words of Jules Ferry, the Republican Prime Minister of the Third French Republic. While addressing to the Chamber of Deputies in 1884, he declared that ‘superior’ races had a right over ‘inferior’ ones arising from the former’s obligations to the latter to which education was the key. There were certain members of the audience who believed that ‘inferior’ races were beyond redemption for whom education would serve not as a means to make them equal to ‘superior’ races, but to bring them closer to, but never to the same level as, the model of the more ‘advanced’ races. “Il y a un second point que je dois aborder : c’est le côté humanitaire et civilisateur de la question [...] Les races supérieures ont un droit vis-à-vis des races inférieures. Je dis qu’il y a pour elles un droit parce qu’il y a un devoir pour elles. Elles ont le devoir de civiliser les races inférieures. Ces devoirs ont été souvent méconnus dans l’histoire des siècles précédents, et certainement quand les soldats et les explorateurs espagnols introduisaient l’esclavage dans l’Amérique centrale, ils n’accomplissaient pas leur devoir d’hommes de race supérieure. Mais de nos jours, je soutiens que les nations européennes s’acquittent avec largeur, avec grandeur et honnêteté de ces devoirs supérieurs de la civilisation.” For a treatment of this discourse and the French colonial civilizing mentality, see: Pierre-Jean Luizard, “La politique coloniale de Jules Ferry en Algérie et en Tunisie,” in ed. Pierre-Jean Luizard, *Le Choc Colonial et l’Islam* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006).

³⁸³ For an account of how a private commercial enterprise comprising British overseas merchants transformed in the aftermath of the Battle of Plassey (1757) into an arm of the British Crown in India, see John Keay, *The Honourable Company: a History of English East India Company* (London: Harper Collins, 1993).

³⁸⁴ Matthew Kuiper, *Da ‘wa and Other Religions*, 115-116.

paid little attention to and resisted missionary calls to evangelize the lands it controlled up until well into the end of the first decade of the 19th century. Nevertheless, with the Evangelical frenzy at home and in other colonies as well as London's decision to exert greater influence on the affairs of the Company caught up with the administration, it was left with little option but to acquiesce.³⁸⁵ Inspired by the electrification through reforms of the Christian landscape brought in the British colonies by the Great Awakening of the previous century, the British Parliament forced the East India Company to admit Christian missionary activities with the Charter Act, heretofore consistently and deliberately opposed by the Company in India, in the lands it administered in 1813.³⁸⁶ These developments forced upon the *'ulamā* and the commoners alike, for the first time, encounters with an alien culture in their everyday lives. The zeal of Evangelical missionaries, coupled with their not-before-seen *modus operandi*, such as salesman tactics of going to the target population in lieu of calling them to come and learn, public religious debates, sending female missionaries into homes to preach women, using vernacular languages to preach common people, and making use of printing presses to produce pamphlets in grand quantity were novelties for Muslims of India.³⁸⁷ These novel techniques, styles, and zealous efforts compelled the *'ulamā* to turn to itself and set off a self-assessment process. Islam not only was no longer the privileged religion of the ruling elite but also was relegated to the position of the religion of the ruled, and through codification of Islamic law to private sphere. To add insult to injury, Islam was now to compete with other religions as equals in a religious market which necessitated that the goods 'on sale' be appealing and comprehensible to the potential customers and the salesman be ready to seek customers in the

³⁸⁵ H. V. Bowen, *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756-1833* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 132.

³⁸⁶ Ali Riaz, "Madrasah Education in Pre-colonial and Colonial South Asia," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 46(1) (November, 2010), 77.

³⁸⁷ J. S. Grewal, "Christian Presence and Cultural Reorientation: The Case of the Colonial Punjab," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 51 (1990), 538-539.

streets. The new state of affairs fomented a reform in the field of education as well, given the need to train *'ulamā* adopting western techniques and concepts. The reform attempts in this field gave rise to both the *Deobandi* school and the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College which is now known as the Aligarh Muslim University.

Like most 19th century Islamic renewal movements, the *'ulamā* in India too emphasized that believers should avoid 'local Islam' marred with local practices and 'alien', 'impure' influences. People were called to adhere to the Scripture instead, which the *'ulamā* considered as the 'untarnished' and 'pure' version of Islam. A common theme in renewal movements throughout the Islamic world was an ambivalent attitude on the part of the *'ulamā* towards Sufism which was interpreted by its strictest opponents as a vehicle of Hindu, Greek, and other pagan elements. However, *tajdīd* movements throughout the Islamic world had varying degrees of aversion to Sufism.³⁸⁸ The *Wahhabis* from the Najd region in today's Saudi Arabia and the *Fara'izi* movement of the East Bengal, today's Bangladesh, strictly opposed to Sufism in any form, considering Sufi practices as *kufr*.³⁸⁹ Most *'ulamā* in India, however, did not denounce Sufism *in toto*, but sought to weed out what they considered as 'improper' and 'un-Islamic' beliefs and practices found in various branches of Sufi Islam.

Such a member of the *'ulamā* was Ahmad Sayyid Barelwi who is an important figure for the present narrative both as an early name in the buildup of a non-elitist version of Islamic renewalist scholarship in the 19th century India and as a champion of *jihad* against the non-believers which, on both accounts, left an impression on the next generation of scholars, including both the *Deobandi* school and Maulana Ilyas himself. Determined to ridding the Muslim community

³⁸⁸ Martin van Bruinessen, "Sufism, 'Popular' Islam and the Encounter with Modernity," in ed. Muhammad Khalid Masud, Armando Salvatore and Martin van Bruinessen, *Islam and Modernity, Key Issues and Debates* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 125.

³⁸⁹ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 57.

of popular practices, Ahmad Sayyid was one of the first scholars who saw the base of *tajdīd* initiative not in the learned elite but in common people, a shift which is referred to as the ‘*ulamā*’s “turn to the *ajlāf*”.³⁹⁰ He argued that “false Sufism, Shi‘i doctrine and practice, and popular custom”³⁹¹ threatened *tawhīd*, oneness of God in Islam. His opposition to popular customs was based on both theological and practical reasons. He denounced lavish ceremonies arguing that such wasteful customs would harm the spiritual and the worldly states of Muslims alike.³⁹² It was also him who started touring through the countryside in North India accompanied by his followers to convey his reformist message to people, a practice which Maulana Ilyas would systematize and incorporate into his own *tajdīd* initiative almost a century later. Ahmad Sayyid’s tours helped him forge a network of religious leaders in a particular region around Delhi, including the towns of *Deoband* which itself would, in the few decades to come, become the site of one of the most significant and well-known renewalist movements in India, and *Kandhla* from whence Maulana Ilyas would hail later. He and his followers assumed an itinerant mode of preaching to common people in public places by imitating the British missionaries with whom they encountered after 1813 when the British East India Company was forced to allow Christian missionaries into the lands it controlled.³⁹³ The tours in North India also served Ahmad Sayyid as a means to gain new followers among the learned for his cause and rally supporters for the *jihad* he planned to wage against the Sikh rulers in the Punjab region because he came to the conclusion that to reform the people and reinvigorate the faith, preaching alone would not

³⁹⁰ Matthew Kuiper, *Da‘wa and Other Religions*, 10.

³⁹¹ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 57.

³⁹² Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 59.

³⁹³ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 64.

suffice.³⁹⁴ The 19th century witnessed lengthy discussion among the *'ulamā* as to whether India under the British rule would fall under the rubric *daru'l-harb*, lands of war, or should still be considered *daru'l-Islam*, lands under Muslim rule. With the presence of a nominal Mughal ruler in Delhi, this was a debate difficult to settle. Ahmad Sayyid decided that waging *jihad* in the lands now administered by the British would not be *jihad* in the prophetic tradition due to the only-in-name Mughal rule. Instead, he settled for Punjab which was independent and ruled by the Sikh. The *jihad* effort lasted between the years 1826-1831 and proved fatal for Ahmad Sayyid and his followers, and disastrous for those who hoped for a post-Mughal Muslim statecraft through arms. In Kuiper's words, Ahmad Sayyid's *jihad* was a turning point for the *tajdīd* movement in India in that:

it is important to note that 1831 is one of two dates which stand out as critical in terms of the widespread adoption in India of the quietist (bottom-up), madrasa- and fatwa-based approach to Islamization or *da'wa*, represented by 'Abd al-Azīz, as opposed to the military (top-down) approach of the later Sayyid Ahmad.³⁹⁵

No matter how ill-fated Ahmad Sayyid's *jihad* proved to be, his predilection to occupy himself with the reformation of common people's religious practices and his desire to outreach them directly through his innovative itinerary model of preaching laid the groundwork for later *tajdīd* movements in the British India, notably the *Deobandis* and their offshoots the *Tablighis*, which emphasized the need for addressing common people than elites with an aim to 'renew' their faiths, and to 'rectify' and 'purify' their syncretic beliefs and practices. Another transformation of the renewalist thought in India began with Ahmad Sayyid's disastrous resort to violent *jihad* for the purpose of *tajdīd*, and brought to full development with the bout of extreme violence unleashed during the Indian Rebellion of 1857 -also known as the Sepoy Mutiny- which convinced the

³⁹⁴ Matthew Kuiper, *Da'wa and Other Religions*, 118.

³⁹⁵ Matthew Kuiper, *Da'wa and Other Religions*, 118.

mujaddid that the time of *tajdīd* through strength of arms was over and that it was time to win hearts through peaceful means such as persuasion. Ahmad Sayyid's unsuccessful attempt to fight the Sikhs not only resulted in the demilitarization of the concept of *jihad* but also helped shift the focus of *jihad* from converting or fighting against non-Muslims, the external, to re-converting Muslims, the internal, and to bringing them back to the fold.

If Ahmad Sayyid's defeat and demise in 1831 was the first step towards the abandonment of a concept of a violent *jihad*, the fateful events during and after the Rebellion of 1857 were the ultimate end for any such hopes. In spite of the fact that the Rebellion was initiated by a mixture of resentful Muslim and Hindu elements, and that there was little concerted action on the part of Muslims many of whom remained either loyal to the British or indifferent to calls for *jihad* by several '*ulamā*', the blame fell disproportionately on Muslims whom the British suspected of having plotted to re-capture India.³⁹⁶ That the harsh punitive measures ensuing the Rebellion were inflicted largely on Muslim scholars "confirmed the quietist, grassroots, *jihād-as-da'wa* shift which was being consolidated among the '*ulamā*' after the demise of Ahmad Sayyid in 1831."³⁹⁷ The post-Mutiny British punitive actions was felt in many towns in North India where the hammer-stroke fell hardest which created an atmosphere of fear among the '*ulamā*' for material and non-material reasons. *Deoband*, one such Muslim dominated town, was almost laid waste:

In the period of post-Mutiny repression, three neighboring villages were burned to the ground and the holdings of many landed families were confiscated. Deoband thus shared the fate of many qasbahs during the period of late Mughal and early British rule. The decline of the qasbah left its mark not only on the

³⁹⁶ For instance, *Madrasah-yi Rahimiyyah*, established by Shaikh 'Abdu'r-Rahim in Delhi was demolished by the British troops in 1857. It was an important locus of Islamic teaching since the early 18th century where Shah Waliyullah -the famous *mujaddid* of the 18th century in the sub-continent- succeeded the founder, his father, as the head. His descendants also served there in various capacities till the demolition of the *madrasa*.

³⁹⁷ Matthew Kuiper, *Da'wa and Other Religions*, 118.

material situation of many Muslim families but also on their outlook; they feared for the fate of their class and culture.³⁹⁸

The mounting pressure on the *'ulamā* convinced them even further that if any Islamic renewal movement was to succeed in India, it would have to avoid confrontation with the British administration, use peaceful means, compete with other religions on equal footing without the political aegis, and adapt itself to modern techniques and new tactics in order to reach the *'ajlāf* as did their Evangelical rivals with some success, especially in the aftermath of the famine of 1837-1838 which provoked a heightened level of missionary activity specifically targeting Muslim population.³⁹⁹ The so-called 'conversion scare' that started in the mid-1850s also precipitated the *'ulamā*'s adoption of the bottom-up approach for the they became alarmed in earnest for the first time that the advent of Evangelical missionary efforts permanently disturbed the pre-existing religious landscape which was divided between Hindus and Muslims with both sides enjoying little competition from the other.⁴⁰⁰ The increasing public presence of Evangelical missionaries forced the *'ulamā* to conclude that Muslims had to fight fire with fire. One of the first measures to this end was the establishment of a *madrasa* in *Deoband*, known as the *Dār al-'Ulūm Deoband* to train Muslims better who would in turn help ordinary people renew their faith. Before studying in detail the *Deobandi madrasa* in the next section, a brief history of British educational reform in India is in order now to put into perspective how colonial/external and Islamic/internal cultural reform initiatives interacted with one other.

The East India Company came increasingly under stress in the late 18th and early 19th centuries as London called to reform its economic and political

³⁹⁸ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 91.

³⁹⁹ Kenneth W. Jones, *The New Cambridge History of India: Socio-religious Reform Movements in British India* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 53.

⁴⁰⁰ Matthew Kuiper, *Da'wa and Other Religions*, 119-120.

administration in order to bring it into more harmony with imperial ambitions and current reforms taking place in Britain:

The need for economy, simplicity, and uniformity in the Company's overseas administration continued to be writ large in the letters sent to India, and this helped to ensure that by the 1830s the Company was moving along with gathering currents of reform which laid great emphasis on the need for efficient institutions of government. Repeated drives for retrenchment, which culminated in the period 1828-33, mirrored the moves towards 'cheap government' that were being implemented by ministers in Britain, and a desire for rational and well-ordered administration struck some of the same notes sounded by utilitarians and others who saw the efficiency of bureaucratic systems as to key to securing 'good government' for as many people as possible.⁴⁰¹

The establishment of the *Dār al-'Ulūm Deoband* along with other *madrasas* founded in the mid 19th century can be attributed directly to the reforms the British colonial administration gradually but steadfastly introduced in the course of the 19th century in economic, educational, administrative, and cultural affairs. Already in 1792 Charles Grant, Chairman of the British East India Company and an Evangelical himself, argued that:

darkness had fallen on India, and Hindus (by which he meant Indians) were to be blamed for their plight. Grant suggests, 'the communication of our light and knowledge to them would prove the best remedy for their disorders' (quoted in McCully, 1966: 11). By 'light' Grant meant Christianity, and by 'knowledge' English education. Thus, his suggestions included the introduction of English as the medium of instruction, the establishment of schools to provide education to local elites who would then pass on the education to the commoners, and the replacement of Persian with English as the official language.⁴⁰²

⁴⁰¹ H. V. Bowen, 202-203.

⁴⁰² Charles Grant belonged to a group called Clapham Sect which comprised social reform-minded Christian humanitarian members of the Church of England which advocated that it was a moral obligation for Christians to abolish slavery and improve the lives of the destitute regardless of ethnicity. The emancipated and socially elevated would, it was hoped, convert, realizing that Christianity was on a higher moral ground than their own 'backwards' faiths. It was through their efforts that Slavery Abolition Act was eventually passed by Parliament in 1833.

The Macaulay Minute on Indian Education, penned by Thomas Babington Macaulay, himself the son of another member of the Clapham Sect, in 1835 argued that western education was superior to oriental education, and English only should serve as medium of education at the expense of local languages, including Persian, in India in order to culturally and intellectually ‘elevate’ local people.⁴⁰³ As a consequence, the British administration ceased to support *madrasas* and English became language of education at the institutions founded by the British which were destined for the children of the local elites. Moreover, the same year the colonial administration dropped Persian as the official language in favor of English at higher courts, the former being relegated to lower courts which struck a decisive blow at traditional *madrasa* graduates who became unemployable at the British East India Company.⁴⁰⁴ In 1854, the Administration decided that the gradual and top-down approach be abandoned and all education in India under Company rule be administered by the government with English being the sole language of education for the elites and commoners alike. This overnight move contributed to the further marginalization of traditional *madrasas* because in order for an educational institution to become eligible for aid the government:

required adoption of a curriculum focused on math, science, and language, and removal of all reference to religion to a discrete ‘religion’ class. It also required that educators receive formal teacher training, which gradually shifted teaching from respected local figures, often religious authorities who did not teach as a primary occupation, to full-time educators with teaching certificates issued by colonial authorities.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰³ Ali Riaz, 78.

⁴⁰⁴ Hayden J. A. Bellenoit, *Missionary Education and Empire in Late Colonial India, 1860-1920* (London: Pickering&Chatto, 2007), 2.

⁴⁰⁵ Vickie Langohr, “Colonial Education Systems and the Spread of Local Religious Movements: The Cases of British Egypt and Punjab,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 47(01) (January, 2005), 162.

The long term repercussions of the educational reforms of the British colonial administration were twofold. Firstly, the colonial administration created in Yoginder Sikand's words an educational dualism in which two realms – secular and religious – came into existence and stood in opposition to one another.⁴⁰⁶ In this scheme, religion was recognized as an autonomous sphere of life which was restricted to the private life where *madrasa* education obtained, in contrast to the public sphere in which secular education became the sole -legal- means of general education. As a corollary, the colonized and the colonizer alike came to perceive this dichotomy also in the shape of sacred versus profane and the otherworldly versus the worldly, which resulted in the *'ulamā* to see *madrasas* and religious education in general as a means to resist colonization.⁴⁰⁷ Secular education at government-sanctioned institutions, representing this world, maleness, work, outside, and mundane concerns, touched the body, that is, what is material and tangible. Religious education in *madrasas*, conversely, came to represent opposite values, namely domesticity, femaleness, culture, the intangible, spiritual and superior qualities. As such, the *'ulamā* arrived at the conclusion that bodies might have been colonized but souls would remain intact and be kept uncolonized so long as religion remained intact.⁴⁰⁸ This binary divide forced the subjects of the East India Company, and the British Crown once the Company Rule was abolished and authority was transferred to the Queen, to view secular education at missionary institutions through a pragmatic

⁴⁰⁶ Yoginder Sikand, *Bastions of the Believers. Madrasas and Islamic Education in India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2005), 65.

⁴⁰⁷ Ali Riaz, 79.

⁴⁰⁸ P. T. Raju contends in *Idealistic Thought of India* that Hindu *Weltanschauung* that came into being in the colonial era was hostile to material world. Rajni Kothari, on the other hand, argues in *Politics in India* that the negative sentiments found among Hindus due to their defeat to Britain provoked a milieu of fatalism and other-worldliness. The Hindu pessimistic outlook is similar to Muslims' sentiments of the time which triggered a new wave of spiritual revivalism in both religious traditions. Being products of modern times, both Islamic and Hindu revivalist movements sought to instill an understanding of agency in their respective audiences, with a belief that the humiliation of the time was not fate but could be overturned should believers take the initiative and act in unison as a close-knit community.

lens.⁴⁰⁹ On a side note, the educational duality and the ensuing dichotomization of values in the abovementioned manner worked mostly to the disadvantage of women in the colonial India.⁴¹⁰ Ayesha Jalal argues that this trend was a continuation of pre-colonial practices of Muslim polities to ‘protect’ domestic life from non-Muslim influence:

The two-pronged approach adopted by the forefathers of contemporary Muslim society in the subcontinent - the dialectic of accommodations with members of other religious communities on the one hand, and a continuing social conservatism in the domestic sphere on the other - was reinforced further with the imposition of the British Raj. Now more than ever, it was necessary to raise the shield of Muslim cultural resistance: the Faithful were not merely hopelessly outnumbered but state power had slipped out of the hands of their co-religionists.⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁹ Although there is a large body of work in various disciplines which notes that British imperial policy went hand in hand with Evangelical and, to a lesser extent, Catholic missionary activities, there also exists a literature, mostly from contemporary Britain, which remarks that missionary work tried to and was mostly able to claim its autonomy from imperial direction, sometimes at the risk of crushing bureaucratic ambitions, all the while not denying the unmistakable overlap between missionary and administrative mindsets as well as actions. For a study that recognizes missionary agency amidst British imperial policy and reviews academic literature for and against the said counter-argument, see Geoffrey A. Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793-1900* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006). In addition, the manner in which the British rule was established in a given territory had a bearing on how Indian people came to see colonial rule and missionaries. In Bengal where the East India Company was able to limit missionary activities and put some distance between them and the company, the natives, apparently held a sense that the government and the missionaries were separate entities. In Punjab where the British rule was established through military intervention at a much later date, missionaries were seen as one and the same as government. As government officials openly supported and associated with missionaries, the native opinions were not totally unwarranted. For a short discussion of this matter, see J. S. Grewal, “Christian Presence and Cultural Reorientation: The Case of the Colonial Punjab,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 51 (1990).

⁴¹⁰ For Hindu reformers, a woman’s being able to afford not to work and stay at home became a signifier of virtue and ‘proper’ womanhood, with *Dalit* (outcaste) women who had to labour and work outside their homes were denied womanhood. For a study of how outcaste women were gendered by *Arya Samaj* and other Hindu elites, see Charu Gupta, *The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print of Caste* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016).

⁴¹¹ Ayesha Jalal, “The Convenience of Subservience: Women and the State of Pakistan,” in ed. Deniz Kandiyoti *Women, Islam and the State* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), 80.

To this end, Muslim reformers, particularly Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the great 19th century Islamic reformer and the founder of the Anglo-Oriental College, also known as Aligarh Muslim University, in 1875,

avoided broaching issues that involved fundamental changes in the Islamic world view nurtured and sustained by the domestic structures of Muslim society. Political accommodation with the colonial masters was acceptable, indeed desirable, but only so long as it did not entail adjustments in the established status quo of the private domain... So while urging Muslim men to secure Western education and jobs in the colonial government, Sayyid Ahmad Khan remained adamantly opposed to women's education outside the religious mode. Just as there was no question of allowing the colonial state to tinker with the Shari' ah, particularly as it affected the structure of the family, education for women had to begin and end within the secure walls of the domestic arena.⁴¹²

Secondly, as religion and religious education were cast aside to make way for secular education,⁴¹³ religious movements carved themselves out a space where their educational and intellectual institutions helped create and give shape to identity to Muslim community, enhancing their influence over the 'ummah through political activism enabled by educational dualism.⁴¹⁴ This twofold pattern was not unique to the Islamic community of South Asia, for similar colonial dynamics begot similar developments on the part of the colonized people in various settings, such as the *Arya Samaj* movement, of which more shall be heard in the following sections of the present chapter, which was established and operated around the same time in India in the second half of the

⁴¹² Ayesha Jalal, 81.

⁴¹³ The British colonial administration first promoted, then pushed, secular education on its Indian subjects, and subsequently had Oriental religious texts dropped from curricula altogether, but all the while categorized missionary schools under the rubric of secular educational institutions. As such, Christian missionary schools received aid from government. The 'religious marketplace' that came into existence thanks to the British was an arena for competition where, on paper, all religions were equal, but, obviously, some were more equal than others.

⁴¹⁴ Ali Riaz, 79-80.

19th century, and the Muslim Brotherhood in British Egypt in the early years of the 20th century.⁴¹⁵

On a side note, alarming though the level of evangelical missionary activities through western education was for Muslim scholars throughout India, missionaries themselves were not satisfied with the fruits of their efforts, complaining that conversions to Christianity were not as high as they hoped. According to the report of Punjab Missionary Conference dated December 1862 and January 1863 attended by numerous missionary groups and laymen from Britain and the United States, the attendees concurred that:

[t]he primary purpose of Christian presence in the Punjab, as in the rest of Indian subcontinent, was evangelical. [...] Experience had shown, however, that their optimism notwithstanding the actual success of the Christian missionaries in converting Indians to Christianity was rather small, though not insignificant.⁴¹⁶

The missionaries at the same conference called into question the very efficiency of missionary schools in converting the natives:

⁴¹⁵ For a study that discusses the ‘unintended consequences’ of the British reforms in India and Egypt which gave rise to the *Arya Samaj* and the Muslim Brotherhood and helped them galvanize masses and forge religious-political identities around the secular/religious and ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomies, see Vickie Langohr, “Colonial Education Systems and the Spread of Local Religious Movements: The Cases of British Egypt and Punjab,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 47(01) (January, 2005). The Third French Republic met a similar religious-nationalist resistance in Algeria which Paris’ cultural and educational policy created, but the British and French cases differ in that France did not consign the education and the acculturation of the indigenous to missionary schools. The French cultural policy was as much characterized by *laïcité* as it was inimical to colonized people’s cultures, determined to crush any indigenous culture that might be. To that end, the French administration applied to Algeria the same laws in vigor in France, depriving *madrasas* of their traditional *waqf*-related holdings as a consequence of which *madrasas* declined in time. In that respect, the British administration never went to such great lengths to destroy the indigenous cultures in India and was certainly less militant than the French. For an analysis of decline of Islamic institutions during the French rule in Algeria, see Anna Bozzo, “Islam et citoyenneté en Algérie sous la III^e République: logiques d’émancipations et contradictions coloniales (l’exemple des lois de 1901 et 1905),” in ed. Pierre-Jean Luizard, *Le Choc Colonial et l’Islam* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006).

⁴¹⁶ J. S. Grewal, 537.

Both directly and indirectly, western education was believed by the Christian missionaries to be the best means of evangelization. At the Punjab Missionary Conference, C.W. Forman of the American Presbyterian mission expressed the view that schools were doing ‘a great preparatory work’, but since education was absorbing much of the energy of the missionaries, ‘yielding but little fruit in the way of actual conversions’, it was necessary to go into the question of how schools could be made in the highest degree auxiliary to the work of evangelizing the country.⁴¹⁷

Similar observations were made by other missionaries at various occasions, arguing that:

[m]ission students rarely engaged in the spiritual and religious conversations which their headmasters and teachers hoped to foment. Teachers were particularly confounded by their students’ strikingly secular and materialistic orientation. This is not to be overly-reductionist. Indian society certainly did bear witness to significant religious ‘revivalist’ movements such as the Arya Samaj and the Deoband School of Islamic thought. But most mission teachers found their students, in the classroom and immediate educational context, secular and worldly in outlook.⁴¹⁸

While missionaries were not very impressed by the results, the possible role of missionary schools and western education in general in the acculturation of Indians remained a highly likely one for them and Muslim scholars alike. Acknowledging the advantages of western techniques of education, sensing the need for reforming Muslim education to adapt to the new realities, and to better train Muslim youth to combat and ‘foil’ evangelical activities, some ‘*ulamā*’ took the initiative in acting upon them, founding the *Dār al-‘Ulūm Deoband*. It was, thus, through a combination of external -introduction of missionaries and western education techniques, political upheaval- as well as internal -the time-honored Muslim concept of *tajdīd*- factors that the *Deoband* movement, and the *Tablighi Jamaat* as its offshoot decades later, came into existence.

⁴¹⁷ J. S. Grewal, 538.

⁴¹⁸ Hayden J. A. Bellenoit, 102.

The extent to which the colonial rule encroached upon the diverse population of the lands under its jurisdiction and the transformation this population went through due to its exposure to the instruments of modern state can be observed in the manner the native faith groups re-conceived themselves. Prior to the advent of modern technologies such as printing press and novel concepts like census and the British reforms, the organization of people in the sub-continent was more centered on their geographical, political, and economic station than on the faith they adhered to. For instance, Muslims in the pre-colonial era hardly considered themselves or non-Muslims, the adherents to Vedic faiths, a single community.⁴¹⁹ Alliances between elites were created on the basis of political interests of the parties involved in which religion played little role. Similarly, the commoners too were bounded by socio-economic pre-conceptions that shaped the society where the social category one belonged to had more bearing on that person's lot in life than one's faith did. Religion, as such, had a very limited, if any, role in determining in which rung one stood in the social hierarchy. Instead, the society was traditionally organized according to the *varnas*, castes and *jātis* to which people belonged, regardless of their religious beliefs. Therefore, to a Muslim in the pre-colonial era, the concept of Islamic community had little to no transclass connotation. Furthermore, what little that concept might mean to Muslims, its geographical scope did not go much beyond that person's purview. For members of *'ulamā* it meant nodes of scholarly network throughout North India; for the military elite, territories under control or adjacent territories, at most. Given the poor means of communication and transportation prior to the advent of railroads, mass scholarization, telegraph, photograph, and printing

⁴¹⁹ The term Vedic faiths here encompasses many a spiritual tradition that came into existence in the sub-continent, from many sub-groups of Hinduism to Buddhism to Jainism to Sikhism. The term Hinduism poses many problems for such a term did not exist prior to the British presence in the sub-continent. In fact, it was a nomenclature invented and put into circulation by the British to refer to a basket of faiths and practices they encountered and pigeonholed in India. The term is now considered reductionist because it ignores the wealth of faiths catalogued under a single rubric and suggests uniformity. However, even the term Vedic faiths seems to be an improper nomenclature for, apparently, there exist creeds and beliefs that are non-Vedic but still considered to be a part of 'Hindu' religions.

press, even the most learned *'ālim* or the most battle-hardened *jagirdar*⁴²⁰ had a limited sense of or concern for Muslims outside one's immediate surrounding and social status.

The expansion of the British presence and the accompanying bureaucratization of its administration in the sub-continent transformed, among others, the pre-colonial ideas about community. The reforms introduced the British administration and the modern bureaucracy they established in India perceived Muslims in a way remarkably different than Muslims did themselves, and, eventually, Muslim self-perception too adapted to the colonial categorization. Census was one such novel instrument available to the colonial administration which deeply impacted Muslim self-perception. The first all-India census carried out in 1871 had fixed demographic, social, and cultural categories according to the British perceptions of Indian society. In Michael Mann's words, the census was designed to serve "the administrative needs of the British than [reveal] the social reality for the people of British India."⁴²¹ For the first time in history, not only were Indian people subjected to a head count but also pigeonholed in accordance with what the 18th and 19th-century British mind considered 'science' to categories conceived by colonizers without the consent or contribution of the people they categorized notwithstanding the existing native power structures. These categories rested on British observations of their Indian subjects, deepening and freezing existing differences between Muslims and practitioners of Vedic faiths.⁴²² The British desire to categorize its people according to religion and caste rested on the belief that these were primordial identities in

⁴²⁰ A fief holder in Muslim India, not necessarily a Muslim, though.

⁴²¹ Michael Mann, *South Asia's Modern History: Thematic Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 169.

⁴²² Peter Gottschalk, *Religion, Science, and Empire: Classifying Hinduism & Islam in British India* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6.

India.⁴²³ According to Middle Age Christian thought, the world was populated by adherents of four religions: Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Heathen, which suggested to early European voyagers to India that the non-Christian and non-Muslim inhabitants of India were of one confession, that is, Hindu religion.⁴²⁴ The colonial administration, thus, implemented an over-arching social structure regardless of the ordering of the people they came to rule:

the British sought self-consciously to separate their state from the cultural ordering of Indian society and from the Muslim community, seeing the colonial state as standing above a society defined by a multiplicity of parochial communities. The separation of the state from society was further reinforced by British attempts in the late nineteenth century to objectively define and fix indigenous communities through vast ethnographic surveys and through the Indian census. The image of the Muslim community that emerged from these efforts was one of a large social community defined independently both of the state and of structures of power.⁴²⁵

Subjects of the British Raj were assigned by the census fixed identities indicating what the colonizers believed to be one's religious affiliation and the social class one belonged to. As such, people were assigned by the administration to mostly non-mutable categories without paying attention to the subtleties of the existing social structure or the finesse such a delicate enterprise required. A case in point was the formulation of the religious identity of Hindu which in fact served as a basket term for the British administration to categorize adherents to a great multitude and variety of Vedic traditions as a single confessional community.⁴²⁶

⁴²³ Darakhshan Haroon Khan, *Fashioning the Pious Self: Middle Class Religiosity in Colonial India*, unpublished dissertation thesis, 2016, 21. Accessed at <https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4172&context=edissertations>

⁴²⁴ Heinrich von Stietencron, "Hinduism: on the Proper Use of a Deceptive Term," ed. Günther-Dietz Sontheimer, Hermann Kulke *Hinduism Reconsidered* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), 34-35.

⁴²⁵ David Gilmartin, "A Networked Civilization?," in ed. Miriam Cooke & Bruce B. Lawrence *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 56.

⁴²⁶ Peter Gottschalk, 88.

While the term Hindu was originally used by Persian historians to refer to all inhabitants of the lands to the east of the river Indus regardless of their faith, Europeans appropriated the term to refer to people of India who were not Muslims which gave rise to an imagined, singular religion where a myriad faiths existed.⁴²⁷ The unscrupulousness and lack of accuracy involved in the census-making process on the part of the British administration notwithstanding, the results of the census led the *'ulamā* to realize, for the first time, how utterly outnumbered Muslims were as opposed to non-Muslims, particularly Hindus.⁴²⁸ This realization also contributed to the re-shaping of Muslim self-perception. The changes introduced by the British both rested on and disrupted the pre-existing order since the Mughal period. The administrative reforms and the census moulded the multitude of Muslim communities formerly organized around social, economic, linguistic, and geographical spheres into a single, 'imagined' Islamic community of India. Given the loss of Muslim political domination in India in the aftermath of 1857, the newly 'discovered' demographic imbalance suggested that Muslims needed to consider themselves as a part of a single entity with common economic, political and cultural concerns to be defended against the encroachment of the British and the Hindu majority. The Muslim community had to become, first and foremost, a community for itself:

Here was also a crucial difference separating the British colonial state from its medieval Muslim forebears. While the British created a power structure in which lineage and patronage connections were central to local Muslim influence, just as they were in many medieval Muslim societies, the British bureaucracy, and particularly the census, also defined the Muslim community in a new and powerful way—as a reified, bureaucratically defined entity bounded by the administrative reach of the state. Shaped by administrative definitions, the Muslim community in India was a distinctively Indian entity. Perhaps even

⁴²⁷ Heinrich von Stietencron, 33-34.

⁴²⁸ In a similar vein, census heightened consciousness about numerical supremacy among Hindu sects, with sects having larger number of followers gaining political importance. For a brief discussion of the impact censuses had on Hindu sects, see Romila Thapar, "Syndicated Hinduism," ed. Günther-Dietz Sontheimer, Hermann Kulke *Hinduism Reconsidered* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001).

more important, the census defined an image of the Muslim community as a homogeneous entity in which elite and common Muslims counted equally. This image represented a sharp break from the networked model that had shaped medieval thinking, and it is little wonder that it generated considerable ferment in Muslim thinking in India.⁴²⁹

The categorization of Indian subjects according to their religious affiliation entailed that any Muslim, regardless of their religiosity, was officially considered as a part of Muslim community. Tariq Rahman argues that this policy provoked among Muslims an “increasing significance of appeals to Islam as part of the Indian Muslim experience of modernity.”⁴³⁰ While the ‘imaginary’ nature of this community first emerged in the minds of the colonial administration, the Muslims elites came to adopt it and soon acted upon it. This is the very backdrop which led Muslim scholars to come to the conclusion that to survive amidst the ‘sea of Hindus’ and Christian missionaries, Muslims needed to ‘realize’ the Islamic community that existed in the imagination of the colonial administration so far, forge a common Muslim identity beyond existing class divisions, emphasize the doctrine of *tawhīd* and strict adherence to orthodox Sunni values, establish, in the absence of an Islamic political authority, cohesion and unity among Muslims against external threats in the shape of western culture and the impending Hindu nationalism through the *Arya Samaj*, and reach out to as many members as possible of this community with urgency.⁴³¹ This is how and why the *Deobandi* movement came into existence.

⁴²⁹ David Gilmartin, 57.

⁴³⁰ Tariq Rahman, *Interpretations of Jihad in South Asia: An Intellectual History* (Boston: De Gruyter 2018), 190.

⁴³¹ Francis Robinson, “Islamic Reforms and Modernities in South Asia,” in ed. by Filippo Osella, Caroline Osella *Islamic Reform in South Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 28-29.

4.1.2.2. The *Dār al-'Ulūm* and the *Deobandi* Movement

According to Kenneth Jones, encroachment of modern techniques and concepts through British colonial rule coupled with native socio-religious resistance produced two types of native movements.⁴³² The first type, which he calls 'transitional', denotes movements entrenched in the culture of the pre-colonial era with little colonial influence. Such movements usually arose before modern ideas penetrated the colonial society. As such, 'transitional' movements were not concerned with amalgamating the pre-colonial culture and the novel ideas brought by the British. Consequently, this type of movements were limited in success as British influence diffused every sphere of life in the colonial milieu. Shah Waliyullah and Ahmad Sayyid typified 'transitional' Islamic movements which were ephemeral themselves, but left lasting imprint on the coming reform movements. These later reform movements exemplify the second type, the 'acculturative' socio-religious movements which were attempts by the *'ulamā* to adjust to the modern concepts, all the while keeping the faith intact. Exposed to English culture and familiar with English language, techniques, and institutions, followers of 'acculturative' movements accepted British supremacy, and sought ways to accommodate modern life and their Islamic heritage. The *Deobandi* movement is an example of such 'acculturative' movements in South Asia as was most other late 19th century-reform movements among Muslims of India. After all, the 'acculturative' *Deobandis* were but one among many such Islamic reformist groups throughout the Islamic world in the 19th century, as expressed by Leor Halevi that

[u]nlike eighteenth-century Islamic revivalists who owed nothing to Europe, Muslim reformers in the era of European dominance readily recognized Europe's commercial and technological superiority, and they agreed that Muslims had much to learn from Europe in order to thrive. Their broad goal was to modernize medieval educational systems and legal institutions and to

⁴³² Kenneth W. Jones, 3-4.

encourage the global Islamic community to rise -upon overcoming religious disunity- toward political independence and world power.⁴³³

Established by *tajdīd*-minded *‘ulamā* who drew inspiration from Ahmad Sayyid and Imdādullāh, among others, in 1867, the *Dār al-‘Ulūm Deoband* was just one of the many *madrāsas* that came to be founded around the same period in various small towns dotting North India, to be sure. What made it stand out among others was its adoption of modern, British educational techniques such as curricula and classrooms, heretofore unknown to Islamic education in India, to train students in traditional Islamic subjects like *hadith*, constituting a quintessential case of the nascent Islamic modernity.⁴³⁴ Another distinct feature of the *Dār al-‘Ulūm Deoband* was its administrative structuring in that “[w]hile earlier seminaries were loosely organised, *Deoband* had a rector (*sarparast*), a chancellor (*muhtamim*) and the chief instructor (*sadr mudarris*).⁴³⁵ Its income was derived from popular contributions.”⁴³⁶ Also, the *madrasa* came with a library of its own, and students were examined by scholars which stood in contrast to the traditional *madrasa* which was noteworthy from a financial point of view, as well. Earlier Islamic learning institutions during the Mughal Empire were funded either by courts at imperial or state level, or by other wealthy patrons mostly through *waqf* holdings. Acknowledging that they could not depend on the patronage of Muslim rulers anymore due to the removal by the Raj of the last nominal Mughal emperor, the founders of the *Dār al-‘Ulūm Deoband* from its inception depended on financial contribution by Muslim

⁴³³ Leor Halevi, *Modern Things on Trial : Islam’s global and material reformation in the age of Rida, 1865-1935*, (New York, NY : Columbia University Press, 2019), 18.

⁴³⁴ Matthew Kuiper, *Da‘wa and Other Religions*, 121.

⁴³⁵ Kenneth W. Jones, 59.

⁴³⁶ Tariq Rahman, “The madrassa and the state in Pakistan.” *Himal* October 2016. Available at : <https://www.himalmag.com/the-madrassa-and-the-state-of-pakistan-tariq-rahman/>

community.⁴³⁷ This fact was an indication that the *'ulamā* was aware of the shift of power from individual level to community level. In fact, later developments proved that the *Deobandi* model of funding turned out to be better suited to the changing times. Muhammad Qasim Zaman argues that *madrāsas* that adhered to the traditional mode of funding found their financial base, patronage from Muslim princes and notables, as well as their family networks around Sufi shrines, erode, which:

contrasts markedly with the disembeddedness – to adapt a term from sociologist Anthony Giddens (1990) – of the *Deobandi* scholars, their ability to adapt their 'reformist' orientation, anchored in the Islamic foundational texts, to varied contexts.⁴³⁸

Deobandi emulation of British educational, organizational, and administrative techniques stood in contrast with the earlier *madrāsa* model in which:

family members taught students in their own homes or in a corner of a mosque. There was no central library, no course required of each student, no series of examinations. A student would seek out a teacher and receive a certificate, a sanad, listing the books he had read, then move on to another teacher or return home. The 'ulama in such a setting depended primarily on revenue from their endowments and on the largesse of princes whose courts they graced and for whom they trained government servants. Such 'ulama were part of the larger structure of a Muslim state.⁴³⁹

Furthermore, the institution was independent of any mosque or other parent institution. Therefore, both from an administrative, organizational, and educational point of view, the *Dār al-'Ulūm Deoband* was conceived and run as an innovative establishment. In fact, the novel model was so alien to the public that the administration had to explain it in the annual reports many times. Asking

⁴³⁷ Kenneth W. Jones, 57.

⁴³⁸ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "The Ulama and Contestations on Religious Authority," in ed. Muhammad Khalid Masud, Armando Salvatore and Martin van Bruinessen, *Islam and Modernity, Key Issues and Debates* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 216.

⁴³⁹ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 94.

the public for financial contribution and publishing annual reports of the *madrasa*, both innovative for any Muslim educational institution of the time, indicated that introduction of these Western techniques was accompanied as a corollary by another Western concept: public accountability.

The teaching philosophy at the *madrasa* was influenced by “scholastic-Sufism,” or what Marshall Hodgson called “Shari‘ah-minded Sufi,”⁴⁴⁰ a version of Sufism compatible with *sharī‘a* “which was strongly opposed to Shrine-Sufism,”⁴⁴¹ a practice common among the *ajlāf* for whose benefit the reformed education at the *madrasa* was formulated. The emergence of scholastic-Sufism was indebted in particular to a few scholars, namely, Shah Waliullah who called his reformed version of Sufism *Ihsan*⁴⁴² and Imdādullāh. The latter managed to bridge *Chishtī* and *Naqshbandī* orders, the two main Sufi orders of North India. According to Bruce Lawrence, the dynamics that married *sharī‘a* and Sufism in the scholastic-Sufi formulation are truly of North Indian origin and should not be sought in the British influence or outside local conditions:

The Sūfī-‘ālim or ‘ālim-Sūfī was not a strange schizophrenic personality but an evolving hybrid, one adapting to colonial norms without accepting its values—either linguistic, cultural, or religious. To the extent that Hājī Imdādullāh embraced a moderate reform of Sūfī practices, while also stressing *ijtihād* (creative rethinking of Islamic norms) within the Muslim community, he was culminating a tradition with deep roots in North India; it is not a novelty of British origin or foreign inspiration.⁴⁴³

⁴⁴⁰ Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 219-222.

⁴⁴¹ Matthew Kuiper, *Da‘wa and Other Religions*, 121.

⁴⁴² Md. Quamruddin, “Relevance of Shah Waliullah Dehlawi’s Thoughts in Modern Time,” in *Ulama, Post-Madrasa Education, Muslim Youth and Contemporary Challenges* (Mumbai: Markaz Media and Publications Pvt. Ltd., 2019), 184.

⁴⁴³ Bruce B. Lawrence, 3-4.

The founders of the *madrassa* did not officially oppose English language or western scholarship, but the curriculum did not include either.⁴⁴⁴ Instead, the curriculum included traditional Islamic sciences, with a heavy emphasis on *hadith*, and was based on the Farangi Mahall of Lucknow, a court-affiliated center of learning established in which trained *'ulamā* in the traditional sense, and systematized a modified version of syllabus, which has remained in use in many *madrassas* throughout South Asia to this day, but did not seek to reform Islamic teaching by combining it with western knowledge.⁴⁴⁵ Among the founders of the *Dār al-'Ulūm Deoband* were a number of government servants who were exposed to western style education at the Delhi College and somewhat familiar with the activities of missionary schools throughout the Gangetic Plain who became instrumental in adopting their methods and techniques to combat their influence on Muslim population.⁴⁴⁶ Among the founders were famous scholars Rashid Ahmad Gangohi (1829-1905) and Muammad Qasim Nanautawi (1833-1877), both from *ashrāf* families in the historical Doab region, who were exposed to a mixture of traditional Islamic scholarship and western style education at the said Delhi College which they attended.⁴⁴⁷ In addition, they

⁴⁴⁴ Kenneth W. Jones, 60.

⁴⁴⁵ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 31.

⁴⁴⁶ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 94.

⁴⁴⁷ The Delhi College started as Madrasa Ghaziuddin Khan in 1792 and was originally named after its founder, a commander of Aurangzeb. The English East India Company transformed it in 1829 into a reformed *madrassa* where both traditional Islamic sciences as well as English language and literature were taught. The name behind this transformation was Charles Trevelyan, none other than the brother-in-law of Babington Macaulay who would go on to pen in 1835 what came to be known as Macaulay's Minute to which a reference has already been made in the present chapter while covering the British educational reforms of the 1830s. Both Trevelyan and Macaulay were Evangelicals who attempted to 'elevate' spiritually, intellectually, and materially the natives of India through acculturation and, ultimately, conversion to Christianity. Current scholarship attributes high number of casualties during the Great Famine in Ireland (1845-49) to the reluctance of on the part of Trevelyan, who was responsible for administering aid efforts at the time, to intervene and distribute food as he saw the Famine as a divine injunction on the Irish people. Thomas Babington Macaulay's father, Zachary Macaulay was an abolitionist and the governor of British Sierra Leone where he advocated the abolition of slavery and the transformation of black slaves into free peasantry. For a review and criticism of the relationship

were both disciples of Imdādullāh, the reformist *‘ālim*–Sūfī, as well. Like their *pir* Imdādullāh, the early *Deobandi* scholars subscribed to a reformed school of the *Chishtī* order, namely, the *Chishtī* -*Sabirī* branch. In fact, the *Chishtī* connection is alive even today albeit in a less visible manner:

[e]ven Muslims with a reformist or even an anti-Sufi attitude have connections with the Chishtiyya. Islamic scholars at the scripturally oriented academy of Deoband trace their teachers through the Chishti lineage even as they denounce the basic Chishti religious practices-especially tomb pilgrimage and listening to music-as forms of idolatry.⁴⁴⁸

Most *Deobandis* were simultaneously members of the *‘ulamā* and Sufis who belonged mainly to *Qadīrī* and *Naqshbandī* orders. As such, the association between *Deobandis* and their followers could come in the shape of the commonplace teacher-student linkage as well as *pir* and *murīd* relationship based on Sufism.⁴⁴⁹ As the latter relationship involved a more personal and robust bond and loyalty between the parties, *Deobandi* influence spread to a much larger audience than the well-connected but smaller class of *ulamā*.

The *Deobandi* tradition has always traced its reformist intellectual roots back to the prolific 18th-century *mujaddid* Shah Waliyullah who inspired a diverse number of 19th-century reformers in the sub-continent, including Sayyed Ahmad Khan.⁴⁵⁰ Thus, the origins of the *Deobandi* tradition are well entrenched in the 18th and 19th-century reformist movements of the sub-continent. The *Deobandi* movement became soon a force to be reckoned with which filled the void in the

between commercial abolitionism and capitalism see Bronwen Everill, *Not Made by Slaves: Ethical Capitalism in the Age of Abolition* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2020).

⁴⁴⁸ Carl W. Ernst, Bruce B. Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 4.

⁴⁴⁹ Gail Minault, 27.

⁴⁵⁰ Brannon D. Ingram, *Revival from Below: The Deoband Movement and Global Islam* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 24-25.

Muslim community of India by reifying it. The concept of Muslim community of India already put on paper by the British colonial administration had to be realized by making each and every member of this theoretical entity a conscious and willing participant to communal sentiment. This was not an easy task, for it entailed addressing to a socially, linguistically, and geographically diverse audience which lacked, among others, a *lingua franca*. Meant to facilitate the communication among the multi-ethnic elite, Persian, the *lingua franca* of the Mughal era, was incomprehensible to the masses who were mostly illiterate, anyway. Therefore, the reification of the Indian Muslim community required a reach-out to the man on the street who made up a great majority of the community-to-be-made. The meaning of community had to be expanded to include the plight, concerns, and interests not only of the elite, the *ashrāf*, as it used to be, but also those of the commoners. The commoners, the *ajlāf*, became not only a major concern for the reformist agenda of the *'ulamā* but also its intended audience:

Given the structure of the colonial state, with its ability to bureaucratically conjure the existence of religious communities encompassing elite and common people alike, the Deobandi *'ulama* also developed an important commitment to spreading a sense of moral community—and of commitment to shari'a—among the common people ... But just as important as their change in attitude was a new commitment by the *'ulama* to participation in—and increasing reliance on—the new public realm of publication and print, itself a product of changes brought to India by British colonialism. Although connections of personal allegiance and discipleship no doubt continued to be important in shaping their influence, the *'ulama* relied increasingly on published tracts, treatises, and printed fatwas in Urdu to draw their dispersed nodes of teaching and influence into a larger framework of common imaginings. In using an indigenous language, Urdu, to spread their message, the *'ulama* demonstrated their concern with a distinctively Indian Muslim community, a community now encompassing the entire Muslim public of British India. This was a community that was imagined as morally independent of the state and yet at the same time defined by the colonial boundaries of India.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁵¹ David Gilmartin, 58.

The repercussions of the intensification of Christian missionary activity throughout the Raj and the level of activism it unleashed on the part of Indians, such as the *Deobandi* movement, became visible as the *'ulamā* took the reformist initiative and the *Dār al-'Ulūm Deoband* and similar educational institutions came into existence. It was not only Muslims who became involved, though. Already in the late 19th century it was observed in India that aggressive Christian missionary activities sparked equally aggressive counter-missionary responses and reform movements among various Indian faiths. Adherents to the religions of India came to develop a different view with regard to faith and community. Reports from the Punjab region, for one, indicated an elevated level of community involvement on the part of the natives as a response to Christian missionaries:

the Christian instance on the Bible as the repository of truth brought the Quran, the Vedas, and the Adi Granth into parallel prominence as the sources of revealed truth, which introduced a certain degree of fundamentalism and orthodoxy into the fresh interpretations of faith, with great emphasis on theism. The Christian programme of conversion called forth a keen response in terms of shuddhi, tabligh, and baptism of the double-edged sword (*khande ki pauhl*), catering especially to the lower castes. The protagonists of reform movements entered the lists against Christian missionaries through public debate and even bazar preaching. It was observed by *The Tribune* of 30 March, 1889, for instance, that street preaching was very much in vogue: 'All along Anarkali, Hindu, Mohammedan, Christian, Arya and Brahma preachers may be seen earnestly expatiating on the excellences of their respective creeds, surrounded by crowds of apparently attentive listeners'. The Punjabi reformers established their own printing presses to produce tracts and pamphlets as well as serious re-interpretations of their faith to counteract the actual or potential Christian influence. They undertook social reform in general, and established their own orphanages and relief work. They founded schools and colleges for boys and girls, in which religious education of their own was imparted along with western education through Anglo-Islamic, Anglo-Vedic or Anglo-Sikh institutions.⁴⁵²

⁴⁵² J. S. Grewal, 539-540.

4.1.2.3. The Road Not Taken: Syed Ahmad Khan and the Aligarh Movement

Before turning our attention to the genesis of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, one final mention of another Muslim reformist movement in the British Raj about the same time as the *Deobandi* movement is in order. Any exploration of the 19th-century Islamic reformism in India would remain incomplete, no matter how little a claim to thoroughness such a study might profess, without the acknowledgement of Syed Ahmad Khan, the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College he established, and the so-called Aligarh Movement that came to be identified with both. Therefore, it is imperative to refer, at least briefly, to this branch of Islamic reform attempt which left its unique impression on the reformist thought in India from the 19th century onwards.

Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) hailed from a well-connected North Indian family belonging to the *ashrāf*. Despite his elite familial background, the quality and breadth of the traditional Islamic education he received during his childhood lagged behind those of his peers which, to some scholars of Indian reformism, proved much later to be more a fortunate event for him than a disadvantage, as thanks to his lack of proper Sunni education his mind was not closed to novel ideas which opened up for him a new world upon his familiarization with Western sciences.⁴⁵³ Employed in various administrative and judicial capacities by the British East Indian Company throughout India, Syed Ahmed Khan showed little interest in Western sciences or civilization till 1857 which proved to be a watershed in his life as it was for the entire Muslim community of India. In fact, were it not for the Rebellion in 1857, his accomplishment and reputation would probably amount no more than to modest achievements of a local Muslim learned man with little in the way of distinction.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵³ Şaban Ali Düzgün, *Seyyid Ahmed Han ve Entellektüel Modernizmi* (Ankara: Akçağ, 1997), 32.

⁴⁵⁴ Hafeez Malik, "Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Doctrines of Muslim Nationalism and National

Having suffered both material and non-material losses during the Indian Rebellion at the hands of the British and the Sikh alike, he dedicated his life to unite the divided nation under the same banner. His task was multifold. He was, on the one hand, to induce among the Muslim population of India a genuine desire to adapt to the new political realm in the post-Rebellion era and trust the British regime by eliminating the inter-religious distrust and friction among Muslims and Christians. His second and equally difficult task was to induce the British administration to sympathize with the plight of the Muslim population and have them develop a trust for their Muslim subjects.⁴⁵⁵ His overall desire was to put a stopper on the decay of Muslim political, economic, and cultural presence in India. To this end, he decided that the best course of action for Indian Muslims was first to accept as a fact British political supremacy and to remain loyal to it. Subsequent to this, Muslim intellectuals were to modernize India and its Muslim population by ridding them of what he considered as ‘false’ and ‘noxious’ beliefs and practices. Firmly convinced that Western political and economic supremacy was closely linked to Western scientific advancement and culture, Syed Ahmad Khan advocated adoption not only of Western scholarly techniques but also of English language education and Western sciences. Thus, he was hoping that Muslims would better adapt to the changing times in India, and their marginalization and isolation, due largely to their resistance to learning English, their insistence on sending their children to traditional schools, and their abhorrence of modern education, would come to an end.⁴⁵⁶

His voyage to and seventeen-month long stay in Britain in 1869 only bolstered his conviction that the fortunes of the Muslims of India laid with Britain while the British ruled India and also that Muslims had to reform themselves in

Progress,” *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1968), 222.

⁴⁵⁵ Şaban Ali Düzgün, 35.

⁴⁵⁶ Hafeez Malik, 221.

emulation of Western advancements like secular education and democracy as well as in ridding their practices of Hindu influences to regain their power.⁴⁵⁷ Syed Ahmad Khan's devotion to what he considered as the positive aspects of British administration came at a time when Muslims of India became ensnared in a delicate plight where their loyalty to the trans-national Islamic community and their expected loyalty to British administration increasingly proved to be incompatible. For Muslims of India, consequent to the decay of Mughal rule and ascent of British administration, the Ottoman caliphate became a symbol for perseverance of Muslim political and military might in an age of defeat and dissolution.⁴⁵⁸ Therefore, Indian Muslim elite developed a profound interest in the well-being of the Ottoman Empire and the caliphate which became a surrogate for Mughal power for them. In the age of printing machine, telegraph, railroads, and better means of transportation and communication, the affairs of the far-flung caliphate and the Ottoman Empire became more accessible to the Indian Muslim public. As long as Britain and Ottomans were in good terms and caliphs could be manipulated to side with British interests for assuaging Indian discontent, Muslim loyalty to Istanbul could be tolerated to a certain extent for the former. For instance, Lord Wellesley secured a letter from Selim III addressed to Tipu Sultan in which the sultan encouraged the ruler of the Kingdom of Mysore to make peace and friends with the British rather than fighting them.⁴⁵⁹ Britain also managed to exploit pro-Ottoman sentiments among the Muslims of India thanks to the sultan who proclaimed that Indian Muslims should remain loyal to Britain during the Rebellion of 1857.^{460,461} Nevertheless,

⁴⁵⁷ Hafeez Malik, 226.

⁴⁵⁸ Gail Minault, 5.

⁴⁵⁹ Rosina Nasir, "Contradictions in the Khilafat Movement & Transformations in Abul Kalam Azad: A Historical Analysis of Muslim Politics in India – 1912-1947", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* (2020), DOI: 10.1080/13602004.2020.1783768, 4.

⁴⁶⁰ Gail Minault, 6.

it always posed a risk for Britain that loyalties of its subjects lied outside the territories it controlled. For that reason, the British administration grew wary of the divided loyalties of its Indian Muslim subjects particularly after the Rebellion of 1857. The fact that learned and powerful Muslims were more and more looking up to the Ottoman Empire was coupled with the suspicion that Muslims were trying to restore the Mughal power. Syed Ahmad Khan was among those Muslim elites who realized that trans-national identities such as religion came with divided loyalties, putting the future of Muslim influence and power in India, which were already in a state of steady and rapid decline, into even greater risk.⁴⁶² To Syed Ahmad Khan, turning to Istanbul instead of Calcutta⁴⁶³ prevented Muslims of India from integrating into the wider Indian community under British rule. Moreover, if the *ashrāf*'s commitment could not be shifted from the caliph to the maturation in India of a self-contained Islamic community in and for itself, Muslims would not gain agency but remain passive against Britain and Hindus. Therefore, Syed Ahmad Khan declared various times that Indian Muslims should beware of pan-Islamist overtures of the caliph which wanted to reduce them into an instrument of Ottoman foreign policy. Instead, he proclaimed that Indian Muslim community should strive to become a unified

⁴⁶¹ Britain followed a similar course in the Cape Colony, modern day South Africa, in 1862. The Crown asked the caliph Abdülmecid I to send a Muslim scholar to solve the cultural and religious problems of Cape Malay Muslims and to prevent them from starting a revolt. To appease the disconcerted Muslims of the region, the caliph sent Ebubekir Efendi -known as Abu Bakr Effendi in Afrikaans- who managed in his eighteen-year long mission, among others, to pacify Muslims and ensure their loyalty to Britain. Nevertheless, the 21st-century Turkish scholarship has chosen to focus on Ebubekir Efendi's cultural contribution to the survival of various Islamic communities in the region, turning a blind eye to the real motive of his dispatch to and stay in the Cape Colony. Incidentally, one of the first written samples of Afrikaans, which was at that time looked down at by European colonists because it was considered a non-written, and 'adulterate' version of Dutch, was traced back to Ebubekir Efendi who used a modified version of Persian scripture to write a catechism in Afrikaans for the benefit of Cape Malays. For more information about and a discussion of Ebubekir Efendi's mission, see Martin van Bruinessen, "A 19th-century Kurdish scholar in South Africa", in Martin van Bruinessen, *Mullas, Sufis and heretics: the role of religion in Kurdish society. Collected articles* (Istanbul: The Isis Press, 2000).

⁴⁶² Şaban Ali Düzgün, 44-46.

⁴⁶³ Calcutta served as the capital of the British Raj from 1858 to 1911.

nation and remain loyal to Britain which respected and protected religious freedoms of Muslims.⁴⁶⁴

The culmination of Syed Ahmad Khan's reformist thought materialized in the form of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College which he established in the North Indian city of Aligarh in 1875 which later expanded into a university after the lifetime of Syed Ahmad Khan and is today known as the Aligarh Muslim University.⁴⁶⁵ The reformist thought of Syed Ahmad Khan and the reformist movement shaped around his principles and his educational enterprise in Aligarh came to be known as the Aligarh movement which was characterized by, among others, a staunch loyalty to British rule.⁴⁶⁶ Modeled after the renowned Cambridge University, the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College came with two departments, namely, English and Oriental Sciences, in which the student body was offered courses in English, politics, economy, philosophy, history, mathematics, chemistry, and physics where, upon the closure of the Oriental Sciences department due to absence of interest on the part of students, Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit courses were added to the curriculum.⁴⁶⁷ Interestingly, religious courses were taught by instructors affiliated with the *Deobandi* movement which stood in firm opposition to the principles and values promoted by the Aligarh movement.⁴⁶⁸ This contradictory policy can be attributed to Syed Ahmad Khan's desire to allay resistance on the part of more traditionalist Muslims to his reformist and pro-British principles as well as to lack of modern-minded Muslim instructors at the time.

⁴⁶⁴ Şaban Ali Düzgün, 45.

⁴⁶⁵ Symbolically, the said college was founded on the same day as Queen Victoria's 56th birthday.

⁴⁶⁶ Gail Minault, 10.

⁴⁶⁷ Şaban Ali Düzgün, 145.

⁴⁶⁸ Şaban Ali Düzgün, 145.

Apart from the *Deobandi* movement, the Aligarh movement represented an influential chapter of the 19th-century Islamic reformism in South Asia. Usually, the Aligarh movement has been contrasted with the *Deobandi* movement by scholarship, suggesting that they clashed with each other. Gail Minault, however, argued that this was highly unlikely:

Basically, there was little conflict of interest between Deoband and Aligarh, for they were meeting different needs: the one was preserving the traditional sciences without condemning acquisition of the new, and preparing men for religious service; the other was providing Western education for Muslims who desired posts in government and the professions.⁴⁶⁹

While Syed Ahmad Khan's reformist agenda and the subsequent Aligarh movement showed a remarkable divergence from the *Deobandi* school, it is noteworthy that the Aligarh and *Deobandi* movements had as many similarities as they had differences. Firstly, both movements emanated from a genuine concern to surcease any further decay in Muslim power in India and to reverse it, if possible. Secondly, there was an unmistakable common leitmotif, construction of an ideal, but long-lost past in the shape of the age of bliss (*'asr sa'ādah*) to which both movements recurred to base and promote their respective concepts of reform. Thirdly, their common leitmotif of glorious but long-lost past was well entrenched in the wider Sunni tradition of *tajdīd*. According to this vision, the glorious past stood in stark contrast to the present time which was characterized by decay and ignorance, harkening back to the Islamic concept of the age of ignorance (*jāhilīyyah*). Therefore, both the *Deobandis* and the Aligarh movement contrasted the Muslims of India under British rule in the 19th century to the early Muslims, arguing that the former had to return to their roots to restore themselves to the robust power of the past. Fourthly, both movements realized that Western technology, ideas and techniques, such as printing machine, could be of great value for their respective causes and may help restore Muslims to their glorious days. Fourthly, both movements put great emphasis on education and scholarization to achieve their reformist agendas. Fifthly, both movements

⁴⁶⁹ Gail Minault, 26.

originated among the *ashrāf*, but were not exclusive to them. In fact, the plight of the *ajlāf* was a common theme to the *Deobandis* and the Aligarh movement. Sixthly, like is the case in most modernization projects, the elite, the *ashrāf* to which *Deobandis* and the Aligarh movement belonged, saw themselves as the owners of the reform, i.e., reformers, as opposed to the *ajlāf* which they saw as the target population that needed to be reformed. Therefore, both movements were designed as top-bottom initiatives, and, as such normalized and replicated the existing culturally hierarchical configuration of the Muslim community of India. In this schema, the people to be reformed were conceptualized as passive, non-subjects which the reformers, the subjects, were to act upon. Seventhly, both the Aligarh movement and the *Deobandi* school were shaped by and emerged as a response to the heavy toll Indian Muslims suffered in the aftermath of the Rebellion of 1857. Last but not the least, reformism of Syed Ahmad Khan did not extend to education of Muslim women who, to him, were to be trained and educated better, but simply in traditional lore. He envisaged no western-style education for women whom he considered as the gate-keepers of the Islamic culture and heritage. In that sense, Syed Ahmad Khan's vision of Muslim women converges with that of the *Deobandi* school who saw women as the masters of the domestic domain for whom any education beyond domestic life and Islamic knowledge not only was unnecessary but also unwelcome. Thus, both movements re-produced the male-dominated social and cultural milieu of the previous ages, despite their common design to reverse the wrongdoings of their present age.

Despite many points of convergence, the two reformist movements have essential differences as well, which is an evidence of the richness of Islamic reformist movement in the 19th-century South Asia. The source of their differences can be narrowed down to the respective remedies each followed to reverse the decay of contemporary Muslim community in India. Arguably, it is possible to break down their over-arching divergent perspectives into four inter-related subsets, namely, the question of British rule, the concept of *tajdīd* and

modernity, the demarcation of the Islamic community, the question of caliphate, and content of education.

One of their most significant points of departure was the question of where Muslims should stand vis-à-vis British rule. Syed Ahmad Khan was firmly convinced that should Muslims of India remain loyal to Britain they would benefit politically, economically, and culturally from this subservient association from which they would eventually spring up. While Syed Ahmad Khan did not venture into political activism to the point that he was seen apolitical by some Muslims of his age, his loyalty to Britain and educational policy were contentious subjects even among the members of the Aligarh movement where disagreement arose as to the extent of loyalty with regard to education.⁴⁷⁰ The *Deobandis*, on the other hand, were averse to any such political submission, both to the British and Muslim princes, which they considered un-Islamic and destructive. This aversion was manifested in their policy they inherited from Shah Waliyullah of relying on financial patronage of Muslims of all walks of life, rather than politically or economically powerful elites who would exert influence on the educational policy of the *madrasa*.⁴⁷¹ The Aligarh movement after the death of Syed Ahmad Khan, apparently, had no such qualms, for Aga Khan, the religious leader of the Isma'ilis and an extreme loyalist himself, became a dedicated supporter and patron in the early years of the 20th century.⁴⁷² The Aligarh movement in the post-Syed Ahmad Khan era instrumentalized politics to bridge the social and cultural gap between Muslims and the British, whereas the *Deobandis* made strenuous efforts to retain what appeared not only to the British administration but also the *Deobandis* themselves as irreconcilable cultural

⁴⁷⁰ Gail Minault, 14-15.

⁴⁷¹ Gail Minault, 25.

⁴⁷² Gail Minault, 18.

differences between the British rulers and their Muslims subjects.^{473,474} However, the *Deobandi* leaders mostly refrained from overt political gestures in order to avoid any imperial entanglements, with the memories of the catastrophic repercussions of the Rebellion of 1857 still fresh. The question of caliphate was a related matter which caused some friction between Aligarh and *Deobandi* circles. In fact, their divergence on caliphate stemmed from their divergent focuses on Islamic community. The *Deobandis* were more attached to the transnational idea of *'ummah* and consequently their concern for the plight of Muslims went beyond the Muslim communities living outside of the Raj. As the last independent Muslim state, the Ottoman Empire became a source of solidarity, pride, and admiration for the *Deobandis* as it did among other learned circles throughout the Islamic world. The heretofore symbolical post of caliphate of little political import to Ottoman sultans became a tool for the empire to counter Western advances and to further its own agenda. As the Balkan and North African territories of the Ottoman Empire gradually fell prey to European imperialism, the future of the caliph became linked to that of the weakening empire and came to symbolize a last bastion of independent Muslims.⁴⁷⁵ Therefore, for the *Deobandis* the caliph occupied a mostly symbolic but a dignified position the survival of which remained a concern. It was for this reason that the early 20th-century Indian *Khilafat* Movement (1919-1924) which sought to mobilize Muslims of India as a unified constituency and preserve the

⁴⁷³ One cannot help but recall *The Ballad of East and West* by Rudyard Kipling, dated 1899, in which the poet pronounces in the much-cited, but often misunderstood opening line: "Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." Seldom do readers deign to read the rest of the poem where Kipling immediately assumes a much more cooperative tone than suggested in the first: "Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat/But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,/When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!"

⁴⁷⁴ Not satisfied with Syed Ahmad Khan's apolitical strategy, certain influential graduates of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College called for a more political stance on the part of the movement which resulted in the establishment of Muslim political organizations, the All-India Muslim League which was founded in 1906 being the most prominent one.

⁴⁷⁵ Gail Minault, 6-7.

caliphate was supported by members of *Deobandi* circles, among others. The Aligarh movement during Syed Ahmad Khan's lifetime was, as noted earlier, more concerned about the state of Indian Muslims, and remained wary of the pan-Islamist initiatives of Ottoman sultans. To counter pan-Islamist thought espoused by the Ottoman Empire and Jamaladdin Afghani, one of the prominent renewalists of the time, Syed Ahmad Khan advocated territorialization of Islamic communities, arguing that the Ottoman sultan was the caliph of the Muslim inhabitants of the territories he ruled and that Muslims of India were not his subjects.⁴⁷⁶ It must be remarked, however, that after his death the movement assumed a more political stance and its prominent members participated in the *Khilafat* Movement as a consequence of the expedience created by the deterioration of Ottoman power as a result of the Balkan War.

A second contested matter, closely linked to the first, concerned how each movement conceptualized reform or *tajdīd*. While both movements agreed upon a need to return to a perceived 'glorious' past, it was the present time that they disagreed about. The *Deobandis* believed that a return to what they considered as the original message entailed only ridding Islamic practices of non-Islamic influences and putting into practice that original body of message. Muslims' failure to conform to Islam's message was the root of all problems, because the 'age of bliss' had everything Muslims needed from a cultural and social point of view. Technological or scientific supremacy of the West was seen by the *Deobandis* as a non-essential matter, culture being the essence, which could simply be solved by adopting such novelties without 'emulating' the West. Hence the *Deobandi* cultural isolationism all the while approving of and adopting British educational techniques. For Syed Ahmad Khan, however, the situation was more ambiguous. According to him, moral decadence stemming from contemporary Indian Muslims' deviation from Islam could partially be solved by purifying Islamic practices, but simply returning to the 'original' state of affairs, self-regeneration, would not be sufficient for Muslims to turn the

⁴⁷⁶ Tariq Rahman, 192-193.

tables. Muslims needed to end their self-incurred isolationism because certain modern ideas, cultural forms, and practices such as democracy were ‘compatible’ with Islam and as such should be adopted as a part of reform.

The third point of divergence concerned what constituted Islamic community. Syed Ahmad Khan’s definition of Islamic community was broader than that of the *Deobandi* school. Consequently, Syed Ahmad Khan included the Shia community as a part of the wider Indian Muslim community which the *Deobandis* did not. For the *Deobandis*, the Shia Muslims were not Sunnis where they drew the line, therefore converting them to Sunni ideology was out of question and was not a point debated much among their circles. This was probably a wise if divisive move for otherwise the *Deobandis* would draw the ire from the Shia population that would exacerbate the already contentious relations between the Shia and Sunni communities of India.

Yet another divergence issued from their respective approaches to the content of education for Muslims. Syed Ahmad Khan saw secular education in the model of British scholarship indispensable to the amelioration of the plight of Muslims of India which was an anathema to the *Deobandi* school. Nevertheless, Syed Ahmad Khan was not totally against teaching religious subjects at schools, as *Deobandi* instructors taught religious courses at the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College which can be interpreted as a compromise and his search for an understanding between different factions of Islamic modernizing actors in India.

There seems to be a lack of consensus among scholars as to the classification of contemporary Islamic movements. In the prior chapters Farish Noor has been cited for lumping the *Deobandi* school and the *Tablighi Jamaat* with *Salafi* groups, calling all of them *Salafis*. However, identifying the *Tablighi Jamaat* with Salafism can be disputed. According to Büyükkara’s classification of contemporary Islamic movements, for one, the *Deobandi* movement and its offshoot *Tablighi Jamaat* are distinct from *Salafi* movements. Büyükkara has classified contemporary Islamic movements under three rubrics: traditionalists

(*gelenekçiler*), reformists (*ıslahatçılar*), Islamic modernism (*İslami modernizm*). Reformists, according to Büyükkara come in two forms: cultural and political reformists. Despite their apparent differences in method (*usul ve yöntem*), they share many common traits. Firstly, reformists believe that the current corrupt situation Muslims are found does not stem from Islam itself; but its origins are to be found at the mistaken and erroneous ways Muslims have taken to. Non-Muslims, on the other hand, as a virtue of their exploitation of the wayward Muslims are the real culprits of the collapse of Muslim societies. Therefore, cultural or political struggle should be waged to overcome these evil forces. However, unlike modernist Islamic movements which call for a critical appraisal of religion, reformists do not engage in such initiatives because Islam is perfect and any negative situation is to be blamed on Muslims. Secondly, as reformists believe that false traditions play a great role in the current collapse of Muslims societies, reformists do not seek to preserve traditions nor respect them. This is a point of divergence with traditionalists who are conservatives and respect tradition. However, reformists are also pragmatic for they do not emphasize criticism of tradition as this might alienate the masses. At this point, reformists differ from modernists who prioritize a critical appraisal of traditions. Thirdly, reformists are very critical of westernization and modernization; but do not object to benefit from the modern world in an eclectic and pragmatic way. Fourthly, reformists try to strike a balance between divine inspiration (*nakil*) and rationality (*akıl*). Fifthly, reformist movements are characterized by dynamism and organization; meaning that actions take precedence over ideas and practice over theory. Sixthly, activities and organizations are geared towards politics, economy, and education, rather than religious and intellectual matters.⁴⁷⁷

Islamic modernists, on the other hand, differ from traditionalists and reformists on many levels. Firstly, modernists raise a powerful set of criticisms towards traditions, claiming that the debacel of Muslim societies stem not from foreign forces or Muslims but primarily from what has come down till modern times as

⁴⁷⁷ Mehmet Ali Büyükkara, 135-138.

Islam. Therefore, they call for a profound re-appraisal of Islamic sources, methods, and the time-honoured Islamic traditions. Secondly, modernists emphasize rationality over divine inspiration. To this end, their relationship with religious texts are not based on the literal meaning of them but on contextuality of the said texts. Thirdly, modernist movements are weak in terms of organization and action but accenuate discussions and written materials. Therefore, they are more theoretical than reformists. Fourthly, Islamic modernists prioritize the cultural over the political. Fifthly, modernists usually draw among intellectuals and academicians which is not unexpected. Fazlurrahman is the most important figure among the Islamic modernist movements. Muhammad Abduh, Mohammed Arkoun, and Ali Shariati are other prominent modernists.⁴⁷⁸

The traditionalists are marked by their reverence of and attachment to the tradition which they consider holy. Rooted in history, tradition is what bestows upon its reverents a sense of self-confidence and identification of a stable culture which in turn reinforces in-group ties. Therefore, reform, innovation, and change imply a rupture from the tradition, inciting suspicion and aversion to them among traditionalists. Nevertheless, traditionalists are not impervious to change, and their ability to change and adapt to new conditions, no matter how slow or little it seems, accounts for their perseverance in the modern times.⁴⁷⁹ Büyükkara divides traditionalists under three rubrics: *Salafi* traditionalists, *madrassa* traditionalists, and *tarikati* traditionalists.⁴⁸⁰ Despite having shared roots in the past and having converged in certain ways in contemporary world, the three traditionalist schools rely on different sources with the *Salafi* traditionalism being based on *hadith*, *madrassa* on *fiqh* and *tarikati* on Sufism which sometimes

⁴⁷⁸ Mehmet Ali Büyükkara, 211-213.

⁴⁷⁹ Mehmet Ali Büyükkara, 49.

⁴⁸⁰ Mehmet Ali Büyükkara, 51.

pit them one against the other. The *silsila*, chain, is a common term to both three traditionalist schools, with *Salafis* having a chain of *hadith* reporters, the chain of *madrassa* traditionalists is based on the learned men of *fiqh*, and *tarikah* traditionalism has a Sufi chain. Both three schools are text-centered but they differ in which texts they focus on. *Salafis* attach importance to certain *hadith* reports, *madrassa* traditionalists are centered around the main texts of the *fiqh* 'ulama they follow, and *tarikah* traditionalists draw heavily from Sufi texts.⁴⁸¹ According to Büyükkara, the *Khâlidî* branch of *Naqshbandî* order, of which we shall mention in the next pages, is particularly associated with *madrassa* traditionalism which has always been strong in India and Anatolia.⁴⁸² The *Deobandi* school is the quintessential *madrassa* traditionalists in the contemporary Islamic world. Therefore, while there is a lack of consensus among scholars as to classification of Islamic movements, the *Deobandis* and the *Tablighi Jamaat* on the one hand, and the *Salafi* groups, such as *Wahhabi* Salafism, on the other seem to cluster differently despite their commonalities and superficial similarities. In that respect, Büyükkara argues that the *Tablighi Jamaat* is not a *Salafi* group but a subset of *madrassa* traditionalists like the *Deobandis* whereas the *Tablighi Jamaat* stands apart from other *madrassa* traditionalists in that the former do not subscribe to a particular sect and they are apolitical.⁴⁸³

4.1.2.4. Arya Samaj, the Birth of Hindu Nationalism, and the Shuddhi Movement

The onslaught of modern ideas through British colonialism had an immense impact on the 19th-century Indian society. Encounters with European colonialism

⁴⁸¹ Mehmet Ali Büyükkara, 52-60.

⁴⁸² Mehmet Ali Büyükkara, 85.

⁴⁸³ Mehmet Ali Büyükkara, 104.

had repercussions and left a lasting imprint on Muslims as well as myriad Hindu communities throughout the British Raj. Like Indian Muslims, Hindus too were faced with new power relations and an innovative as well as aggressive cultural campaign in the shape of Christian missionaries. It is, therefore, not surprising that encounters with the British provoked among the Hindus various responses and ideas similar to Muslim reactions to British incursions. Among the challenges Hindus found themselves faced with were Christian missionary activities which, along with the colonial administration, promoted democratic and egalitarian ideas which undermined Hindu practices and traditions.

Activities of Evangelical missionaries that began in earnest in the early 19th century have brought by the mid-century destabilization to Hindu religious configuration as it did to the Muslim community due to the zeal and innovative methods missionaries employed. Moreover, Hindu social fabric came under scrutiny of missionaries who realized that their message was more likely to strike a chord with the *Dalits*, the outcasts, who were an extremely disadvantaged population:

Protestant missionaries, in particular, adopted a variety of techniques for propaganda among the Dalits, including bazaar preaching, itinerant sermons in villages, open services in public places, religious festivals and *melas*, visits to homes, and the distribution of scripture extracts and tracts in mostly the vernacular.⁴⁸⁴

Challenged by Christian missionaries, *Brahmins*, not unlike the *'ulamā*, were thus forced to step down from their dais to concern themselves with more practical plights of common people and debate with the more egalitarian missionaries. Modern developments such as popular education promoted, regulated, and delivered by administration and railroads rendered certain Hindu practices, such as prohibition of physical contact between members of castes and the Dalit population or women's limited exposure to life outside their immediate

⁴⁸⁴ Charu Gupta, *The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print of Caste* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 247.

surroundings, difficult to maintain.⁴⁸⁵ Furthermore, nationwide census in India which was born out of British desire to count, categorize, manipulate, and manage the immensely heterogeneous populations that came under their rule posed new challenges for the existing social and cultural milieu of Hindu elites. Lumping together various Vedic and non-Vedic practices and beliefs under the rubric of Hinduism, census-makers, counted and treated the *Brahmin* and the *Dalit* alike as equals belonging to the same faith, thus ironing out intra-faith distinctions and varieties. While the census-induced equality of all Hindus irrespective of their caste affiliation remained mostly on paper and did not translate into immediate reformative action on part of the British or the Hindu elites, it, coupled with the frenetic activism of Evangelical missionaries, did nevertheless force Hindu elites to re-imagine what constituted being of Hindu identity along democratic and egalitarian principles much in the way their Muslim peers had to forge a new Muslim identity.

The impact the census made on Hindu elites accentuated what missionaries triggered in the first place. Social inequality inherent in the Hindu tradition that missionaries began to exploit to their advantage came with a promise to open up to *Dalits* and other disadvantaged Hindu groups venues to upgrade their social status should they elect to convert to Christianity. Most conversions to Christianity involved *Dalits* and other disadvantaged groups.⁴⁸⁶ Moreover, Western education which was mostly accompanied by missionary efforts too offered better job opportunities and possibility of upward movement to masses who were, for the first time, became exposed to a relatively egalitarian and less rigid social configuration were gradually drawn to Western culture. The problem of on-going cultural developments among middle-class and outcaste Hindus, an already worrisome trend for the *Brahmins* as it was, soon transformed into a state of alarm among the Hindu elite that as the census had shown, or so they believed,

⁴⁸⁵ Charu Gupta, *The Gender of Caste*, 36.

⁴⁸⁶ Charu Gupta, *The Gender of Caste*, 246.

Hindu population was rapidly dwindling on account of Christian and Muslim proselytism.⁴⁸⁷

It was against this backdrop that in 1875 a group of elite Hindus founded *Arya Samaj*, a reform association which sought to modernize and rationalize Hindu tradition all the while unifying the diverse Hindu peoples into a politically self-contained and empowered nation. This they attempted to achieve, both consciously and unconsciously, by following the example of Evangelical forms of Christianity to a great extent and the institutions of *Arya Samaj* were fashioned by Christian missionary models.⁴⁸⁸

Having studied Hindu religious traditions both on *Brahmin* and popular levels, certain influential missionaries in the late 18th and early 19th centuries came to the conclusion that Hinduism existed in two major forms, one for the learned, and the other for ignorant masses.⁴⁸⁹ In this scheme, the learned had exclusive access to sacred texts which, missionaries believed, constituted the ‘genuine’ and ‘original’ essence of Hinduism as opposed to the unlearned masses who remained ignorant of the scripture. Thus, scripture-based practices, doctrines, and beliefs of *Brahmins* were privileged by missionaries who, by extension, downplayed the devotion-based practices of illiterate people. Missionaries, among them female missionaries on what was called “women’s mission to women”⁴⁹⁰ hoping to improve the lot of native women in colonies through inoculation of evangelical Christian ideas, during the Company rule when the

⁴⁸⁷ Charu Gupta, *The Gender of Caste*, 250-251.

⁴⁸⁸ Romila Thapar, “Syndicated Hinduism,” ed. Günther-Dietz Sontheimer, Hermann Kulke *Hinduism Reconsidered* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), 65.

⁴⁸⁹ Geoffrey A. Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793-1900* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), 150-151.

⁴⁹⁰ Claire Midgley, “British Abolition and Feminism in Transatlantic Perspective”, edited by Kathryn Kish Sklar & James Brewer Stewart *Women’s Rights and Transatlantic Antislavery in the Era of Emancipation* (New Haven, NJ: Yale University Press, 2007), 128.

policy of religious neutrality was in effect put increasingly more pressure on the Company as to what they saw as the abysmal state of Hindu masses who indulged themselves in such popular practices as *sati*, a widow's self-immolation after the death of her spouse, and infanticide. Abhorred by the 'ignorant' and 'uncivilized' nature of Hindu practices on popular level, missionaries argued that banning such 'barbaric' acts did not injure the religious neutrality of the Company as such practices were not found in the sacred texts of Hinduism, branding as false popular Hindu practices. Consequently, the British East India Company acquiesced to the demands of missionaries by abandoning its religious neutrality policy.

This line of thought and the ensuing Company action provoked among certain, but not all, Hindu elite circles a desire to reform Hinduism. Influenced by Christianity, the reformist agenda of *Arya Samaj* entailed an intense emphasis on monotheism and indispensableness to Hinduism of scripture which together called for a return to the purported, 'unsullied' origins of Hinduism found arguably in the sacred texts harkening back to a Vedic 'Golden Age' image, hostility towards popular forms of Hindu practices and beliefs, such as worship of idols, which in reaction to Muslim and Christian criticism of Hindu idol worship were seen 'corrupting' and 'impure', as well as an attempt to improve social inclusiveness for all Hindus including *Dalits* without seeking to abolish caste altogether.⁴⁹¹ The main objective of *Arya Samaj* was thus threefold: firstly to prevent further numerical decline of Hindus by bringing back into the fold *Dalits* and other disadvantaged groups who converted *en masse* to Christianity and Islam, and secondly to reform Hinduism to achieve this end. Thirdly and ultimately the objective was to create a unified Hindu identity and draw *Dalits* into political activism by way of cultural, social, and religious reforms

⁴⁹¹ Romila Thapar, 66.

addressing their predicaments.⁴⁹² Political motives, it seems, were more potent than social concerns regarding re-conversion of lower castes and *Dalits* for:

there was a difference of opinion among some members of the upper castes in the early twentieth century on whether such groups can be counted as Hindus even prior to "conversion". The proponents of Hindutva have had contrary views about this. What is important for Hindu missionaries is that these communities declare their support for the *dharmā* and be ready to be labelled as Hindus in any head count of either a census or a support to a political party. That this conversion does little or nothing to change their actual status and that they continue to be looked down upon by upper caste Hindus is of course of little consequence.⁴⁹³

Arya Samaj was not interested in converting back to Hinduism members of privileged castes because former Hindus of such background converted to Christianity and Islam on account of political alliances and marriages in the first place.⁴⁹⁴ More numerous than upper castes, members of lower castes and outcastes, on the other hand, converted to other religions on account of hopes that their new communities would embrace them without caste prejudice and offer them better opportunities to blend in an egalitarian milieu, which did not always materialize, for prejudices and caste membership were transferred to their new identities.

Politically and socially motivated reformist interventions of *Arya Samaj* gave rise to what came to be known as the *shuddhi* (purification) and *sangathan* (consolidation) campaigns whose objective was to bring *Dalits* and other disadvantaged former Hindus lost to Islam during the centuries-long Muslim rule back to the fold.⁴⁹⁵ Conversion and re-conversion to Hinduism was a novel idea,

⁴⁹² Charu Gupta, *The Gender of Caste*, 17.

⁴⁹³ Romila Thapar, 62.

⁴⁹⁴ Romila Thapar, 64.

⁴⁹⁵ Jan A. Ali, Elisa Orofino, "Islamic Revivalist Movements in the Modern World: An Analysis

a true modern development because prior to the campaign “worship was so closely tied to caste and recruitment to caste was by birth, the question of conversion became irrelevant.”⁴⁹⁶ *Arya Samaj* in imitation of the Other adopted certain Western qualities like individualism, albeit in a limited and eclectic manner, which were believed to account for the might of the colonizer. The *shuddhi* campaign constituted a step further in the eclecticism, as:

[h]itherto this term had described a purification ritual undertaken by individuals belonging to high castes who had suffered pollution from an impure contact. Since Hinduism lacked conversion techniques, the Arya Samaj reinterpreted this ritual as a means of countering Christian proselytism by imitating its conversion practices.⁴⁹⁷

4.1.3. Change of Strategy not Heart: The Outgrowth of the *Tablighi* Movement from The *Deobandi* School

Maulana Ilyas graduated from the *Dār al-‘Ulūm Deoband* where he studied with a number of early *Deobandi* scholars, including Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, one of the original founders of the *madrassa*.⁴⁹⁸ Upon graduation, he took up teaching positions in various *madrassas* where his activities and career would seemingly follow the path of any *Deobandi* scholar of his time. However, Maulana Ilyas soon realized that the *Deobandi* approach to reforming the Muslim population of India did not address to the necessities and social realities of the time, achieving

of Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun, Tabligh Jama’at, and Hizb ut-Tahrir”, *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 31 (1, 2018), 33.

⁴⁹⁶ Romila Thapar, 68.

⁴⁹⁷ Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s* (London: Hurst & Company, 1996), 15-16.

⁴⁹⁸ Mani Hammad el-Cüheni, *Çağdaş İnançlar Düşünceler: Dinler, Mezhepler, Cemaatler, İdeolojiler, Edebî, Felsefî ve Siyasî Akımlar* tercüme M. Beşir Eryarsoy (İstanbul: Beka Yayıncılık, 2016), 407.

little progress.⁴⁹⁹ Consequently, what Maulana Ilyas and other reformist *ahsrāf* considered as the dismal situation the *ajlāf* was found in from a cultural and religious perspective necessitated a new approach which forced him to redraw his own path to reform Muslims of India.⁵⁰⁰ Maulana Ilyas developed an acute awareness of the fact that as the majority of Muslims throughout India lived in myriad scattered villages, and were illiterate or semi-literate, as well as poor, reforming their ‘non-Islamic’ way of life by way of higher education institutions such as *madrasas* was not feasible. In İhtişam’u Hasen Kandehevi’s own words, such “Islamic institutions of higher learning are not sufficient to meet the needs of our time.”⁵⁰¹ He explains that such institutions catered to the religious people who already demanded to deepen their understanding of Islam through institutional learning, whereas ordinary Muslims, so lacking in religious sentiments showed no desire to be trained in these institutions and they even developed a hatred for religion.⁵⁰² As such, attending *madrasas* was both beyond the means of the majority of the *ajlāf* and they did not have the necessary desire to attain such advanced levels of Islam. Furthermore, the sophisticated topics covered in the curricula of *madrasas*, regardless of whether these *madrasas* adhered to the classical *madrasa* system or to the European methods, would be incomprehensible to the *ajlāf* and offer little help. Hence, even the innovative *Deobandi* school approach which focused on “training of ulama,” who were expected to “disseminate reformist Islam to the masses,”⁵⁰³ too remained short of its goal of elevating the religious state of the *ajlāf*. After having kept himself

⁴⁹⁹ Muhammed Manzûr Nûmânî, *Melfûzât: Mevlâna Muhammed İlyâs Kandehevi'nin Davet ve Tebliğ ile İlgili Nasihatleri* (İstanbul: Gülistan Neşriyat, 2014), 209-211.

⁵⁰⁰ İhtişam’ul Hasen Kandehevi, *Zilletin Tek İlacı* tercüme Hayri Demirci (İstanbul: Gülistan Neşriyat, 2011), 36.

⁵⁰¹ İhtişam’ul Hasen Kandehevi, 36.

⁵⁰² İhtişam’ul Hasen Kandehevi, 36-37.

⁵⁰³ Matthew J. Kuiper, *Da‘wa: A Global History*, 122.

busy first with teaching at various *madrasas* and then with teaching the practice of Sufi *dhikr* to a few select students, he became dissatisfied with lack of results, and abandoned these enterprises altogether. The *ajlāf*, Maulana Ilyas came to conclude, needed to be reached out where they lived and that the transmission of Islamic knowledge destined for them should dispense with the intricate discussions typical of the *madrasa* tradition and should instead be concise, and based on oral rather than written communication. This new approach was to be carried out not by religious professionals as the *Deobandis* foresaw, but by laymen just like the *ajlāf* they would seek to reform, coming up with an innovative and effective modification of and a new direction to the bottom-up *da'wa* approach of the *Deobandis*. According to Kuiper, Maulana Ilyas's approach can be traced back to his father whose wont was to go streets in the Mewat region to invite ordinary Muslims to come to the mosque and to teach them prayers and other Islamic practices.⁵⁰⁴ Maulana Ilyas acknowledged that through emphasis on popular *da'wa* by laymen, every Muslim would embody *madrasa* and Sufi lodge, which is reminiscent of the Protestant principle of "priesthood of all believers" during the Reformation.⁵⁰⁵

Although Maulana Ilyas became disillusioned with regard to the efficacy of *madrasas* in reforming the *ajlāf*, he did not repudiate them altogether. Indeed, he came to believe that his innovative approach was best suited for Muslims with the most elementary level of religious knowledge in the Mewat region where he served, the better versed Muslims were destined to be educated at the *madrasa* level. It was during his second pilgrimage in 1925 that Maulana Ilyas claimed that God spoke to him to convey the rudimentary blueprints of *tabligh* work which he put into work upon his return to India.⁵⁰⁶ Thus, the defining

⁵⁰⁴ Matthew J. Kuiper, *Da'wa: A Global History*, 141-142.

⁵⁰⁵ Matthew J. Kuiper, *Da'wa: A Global History*, 145-146.

⁵⁰⁶ Matthew J. Kuiper, *Da'wa: A Global History*, 147.

characteristics of the birth of the *Tablighi Jamaat* can be discerned from Maulana Ilyas's own account: first his preoccupation with what he saw as the dismal situation the Muslims of Mewat were in, and secondly, his divine calling during the pilgrimage.⁵⁰⁷ While Maulana Ilyas's biography written by his colleague Sayyid Abul Hasan 'Alī Nadwī does not explicitly mention the Hindu mass conversion campaign, the *shuddhi* as a major factor contributing the launching of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, Kuiper argues that the omission was a deliberate act on the author's part for publicizing polemical arguments against Hinduism would do little good to the nascent *Tablighi Jamaat* or to Muslim population in India, for that matter.⁵⁰⁸ Maulana Ilyas's concern for the ignorance of Muslims of Mewat can be accounted for his conviction that Mewat was a microcosm for both India and the rest of the world, as, he believed, Muslims everywhere were in a state of ignorance (*jāhiliya*) and needed to be guided through *tabligh*.⁵⁰⁹ Also noteworthy is that Maulana Ilyas sees contemporary Muslim 'degeneration' as a consequence of internal factors, namely Muslims' neglect and ignorance of what Islam ordered; whereas external threats to Muslims always lurk behind.⁵¹⁰

Be that as it may, the India of 1920s, and the Mewat region in particular, was a battleground for numbers for Muslims and Hindus alike. Just as the budding *Tablighi Jamaat* attempted to educate the poorly-versed Meo Muslims in the basic tenets and practices of Islam to stop them from further assimilating into their Hindu neighbors and converting to their religion, the *shuddhi* movement associated with the *Arya Samaj* constantly sought to bring back to the fold souls 'lost' to Islam, and to Christianity to a much lesser extent. While the *shuddhi*

⁵⁰⁷ Matthew J. Kuiper, *Da'wa: A Global History*, 147.

⁵⁰⁸ Matthew J. Kuiper, *Da'wa: A Global History*, 147.

⁵⁰⁹ Matthew Kuiper, *Da'wa and Other Religions*, 151.

⁵¹⁰ Matthew Kuiper, *Da'wa and Other Religions*, 160.

movement started out as a process where lower caste Hindu individuals who lost their ritual purity due to association with non-Hindus were re-instated into their castes, it evolved into a conversion campaign *en masse* in the first half of the 20th century.⁵¹¹ This time, however, the *shuddhi* movement aimed to re-convert Hindus of marginal caste status or the ‘untouchables’ who had converted to Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism earlier. There was strong evidence to suggest that the new character of the *shuddhi* movement had less to do with a concern for the ‘salvation’ of ‘lost’ co-religionists or with popular desire to re-integrate them as equals than for political motivations with little if any popular backing. Charu Gupta argues that the re-converts were not readily accepted into Hindu society by members of high castes who did not allow them to be treated as equals and barred them from certain practices which were only reserved for higher castes.⁵¹² Jaffrelot notes that the *Arya Samaj* was characterized by two founding principles constantly in clash with each other: its emphasis on social hierarchy as a cornerstone of cultural equilibrium of Hindu religion and its imitation of such Western ideals as individualism.⁵¹³ The re-converts of *Dalit* association, that is, the ‘untouchables’, were considered by the *Arya Samaj* as polluted and unequal to higher castes all the while attempting to reform Hindu religion by improving the standing of the ‘untouchables’.⁵¹⁴ The ambivalence with regard to the *Dalits* created by the *Arya Samaj* stood in contrast to the egalitarian and welcoming message of the nascent *Tablighi Jamaat* which invited the ‘untouchables’ to the ‘religion of equality’ around the towns of Agra and Meerut in 1925.⁵¹⁵ Maulana

⁵¹¹ Yoginder Sikand. <https://www.milligazette.com/Archives/15012001/Art26.htm>

⁵¹² Charu Gupta, “Anxious Hindu Masculinities in Colonial North India: Shuddhi and Sangathan Movements”, *Cross Currents* Volume 61 (4), December 2011, 444.

⁵¹³ Christophe Jaffrelot, 15-16.

⁵¹⁴ Charu Gupta, *The Gender of Caste*, 38-39.

⁵¹⁵ Charu Gupta, *The Gender of Caste*, 250.

Ilyas explicitly mentioned the *shuddhi* movement as one of the two threats that awaited Muslims of India.⁵¹⁶

It is noteworthy that Maulana Ilyas did not refer to the movement he launched as the *Tablighi Jamaat* but as *Tahrik-i Imaan*, that is stimulating the faith, a self-appellation which is still preferred by members of the movement. This preference points to the notion Maulana Ilyas had and shared by the *Tablighis* today that the *Tablighi Jamaat* is not a distinct movement or concept that requires a unique name.⁵¹⁷ Behind this set of mind is that belief that what the *Tablighis* do is what all Muslims are required to do for it was what Muhammad did. The firm *imitatio Muhammadi*, according to Maulana Ilyas, was not only a way to become a quintessential Muslim but the only way to achieve it. Therefore, any epithet attached to Maulana Ilyas's initiative suggesting a distinct entity, creed, praxis or path among the *'ummah* would also denote a divergence among Muslims and a deviation from Muhammad's way. In other words, Maulana Ilyas considered the principles and the praxis of the initiative he took as the essence of Islam and the norm which would be all encompassing for and welcoming all Muslims, whereas to him discussions and divergences relating to or stemming from varying approaches to *fiqh* were mere details of secondary importance. Therefore, Maulana Ilyas was accepting to his initiative of all Sunni Muslims regardless of *madhab* differences,⁵¹⁸ hence Maulana Ilyas's avoidance of any other epithet. In fact, he was quoted as saying that "our movement is to give to the enemy and to forbid our friends. Anyone who wishes to come with us, let

⁵¹⁶ Muhammed Manzûr Nûmânî, 119-120.

⁵¹⁷ I have been told by a Turkish member of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in the Turkish town of Tavşanlı in July 2021 that the *Tablighis* preferred to call themselves *cami cemaati*, meaning mosque attendants in Turkish, to denote that they see themselves nothing but as everyday Muslims practicing what Islam commanded who needed no further appellation. Admitting that they constituted a distinct entity among other 'mosque attendants' due to their unmistakably unique *modus operandi*, he expressed that should they have to refer to themselves they called their group *Tahrik-i İman*, meaning stimulation of the faith in Turkish, the same as above.

⁵¹⁸ Dietrich Reetz, "Sûfi spirituality fires reformist zeal: The Tablighî Jamâ'at in today's India and Pakistan," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 135 (juillet – septembre 2006), 33.

him come.”⁵¹⁹ The extent to which Maulana Ilyas’s initiative met with success can be inferred from the fact that the number of the attendants to the *Tablighi Jamaat*’s conference held in the Mewat region in 1941 reached twenty five thousand.⁵²⁰

While the *Tablighi Jamaat* became an Islamic force in its own right in the 20th century India and developed certain characteristics that made it clearly distinct from the *Deobandi* school from which it grew out, it is still possible to discern in the *Tablighi* principles and the *modus operandi* some continuity on intellectual level with the *Deobandis*. Matthew Kuiper said of Maulana Ilyas that he was

connected to the Deobandi tradition not just in general terms, but intimately. That his training combined traditional study with initiation into reformist Sufi spirituality fits the South Asian pattern of reformist ‘ulamā’-cum- Sufis, which goes right back to Shāh Walī Allāh and Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī.⁵²¹

The *Deobandi madrasas* combine *fiqh*, which has always been the essence of all Sunni *madrasa* tradition in Islam, and Sufism, which has not necessarily been a part of *madrasa* culture and has indeed been treated with contempt and suspicion by Arab *madrasa* tradition in particular, a combination not unlike the Ottoman *madrasa* tradition. Therefore, teachers at the *Deobandi madrasas* acted also as *murshid* to their students in the Sufi manner. The *Deobandis*, however, adopted a much sober version of Sufism, dispensing with ostensive and loud *dhikrs*, and banning tomb visits which they deemed contrary to Islam.⁵²² Unlike the majority of Sufis who operated at the Sufi lodges called *khanqah* in the Indian tradition,

⁵¹⁹ Muhammed Manzūr Nūmānī, 231.

⁵²⁰ Mumtaz Ahmad, “Islamic Fundamentalism in South Asia: The Jamaat-i Islami and the Tablighi Jamaat of South Asia.” In *Fundamentalisms Observed*. Edited by Martin E. Marty and Robert S. Appleby. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 512.

⁵²¹ Matthew Kuiper, *Da‘wa and Other Religions*, 143.

⁵²² Mehmet Ali Büyükkara, 88.

the *Deobandi* teachers preferred to train their students and contribute their the ‘purification’ in *madrasas*. According to the *Deobandi* tradition which they inherited from Shah Waliyullah, the role of the *murshid* is to help their disciples to develop and purify spiritually, not to act as intermediate, *tawassul*, between God and the disciples.⁵²³ In this regard, it is possible to argue that the *Tablighi* emphasis on personal effort to correct oneself and strict avoidance of intermediacy of others to this end can be traced back to the *Deobandi* approach to Sufism. Therefore, the *Deobandi* approach to Sufism replaced the traditional Sufi reliance on the spiritual guidance of *shaikhs* with that of Muhammad, emphasizing both on spiritual and practical matters an uncompromised *imitatio muhammadi* which Maulana Ilyas incorporated intact into the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Also incorporated into the *Tablighi* mentality by Maulana Ilyas was the *Deobandi* political quietism. However, whereas the *Deobandis* remained active in political matters without ostensive hostility towards the British administration or the Hindu activism, Maulana Ilyas took quietism to the extreme by keeping politics completely out of his *da’wa* activities and forbidding his disciples any discussion of disputed matters and religious controversies during *tabligh* related activities.⁵²⁴

4.1.3.1. Systematization of the *Tablighi* Principles and the *Modus Operandi*

If Maulana Ilyas fathered the *Tablighi Jamaat*, it was Muhammad Yusuf Kandhlawi (1917-1965), his son and successor as the leader of the movement, who systematized the principles of the *Tablighi Jamaat* and conceived its distinctive *tabligh* method which has been employed by all *Tablighis* worldwide ever since.⁵²⁵ What started out as a local pious initiative in the Mewat region of

⁵²³ Mehmet Ali Büyükkara, 86.

⁵²⁴ Christian W. Troll, “Two Conceptions of Da’wa in India: Jamā’at-i Islāmī and Tablīghī Jamā’at,” *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 87, (July-September, 1994), 124.

⁵²⁵ Mehmet Ali Büyükkara, 102.

British India in 1925 expanded into a mass revivalist movement with a remarkable presence worldwide at the death of Muhammad Yusuf Kandhlawi.⁵²⁶ There are six principles, *sifats*, of the movement which Muhammad Yusuf Kandhlawi laid down in the book *Muntakhab Ahadith* which he claimed to “have been derived from Quran and *sunnah*,” which he referred to as *cheh bātein*.⁵²⁷ The six principles as they appear in the English translation are as follows:

Kalimah Tayyibah: This is the classical Islamic formula which acknowledges that “none is worthy of worship but Allah; Muhammad is the messenger of Allah”⁵²⁸ It is considered the most essential and succinct expression of Islamic monotheism and the affirmation of Muhammad’s prophecy by believers. Therefore, it is considered the pillar of faith which is the reason this principle is also called *īmān* (faith). According to Maulana Ilyas, the prosperity, honor, and superiority of a Muslim stems from and dependent on but his *īmān*.⁵²⁹ In order for a Muslim to reinforce his *īmān* he has to invite others to faith and tell them of Allah, and, when alone, he has to reaffirm what he preached others.⁵³⁰

Salah: Also referred to as *namaz*, it refers to the prayers performed five times a day. In order to please Allah and benefit from his blessings, as well as to follow the way of Muhammad, *salah* is the most important action.⁵³¹

Ilm and Dhikr: *Ilm* means knowledge and *dhikr* refers to remembrance of Allah. In the *Tablighi* context *ilm* refers “to the formation in a Muslim the question as

⁵²⁶ Eva F. Amrullah, “Seeking sanctuary in ‘the age of disorder’: women in contemporary Tablighi Jamā‘at,” *Contemporary Islam* 5(2), (July 2011), 139.

⁵²⁷ Hazrat Maulana Muhammad Yousuf Kandhlawi, *Muntakhab Ahadith* (Delhi: Maktaba Faiz, undated), v.

⁵²⁸ Hazrat Maulana Muhammad, 1.

⁵²⁹ İhtişam’ul Hasen Kandehelevi, 10.

⁵³⁰ Muhammed Yûsuf Kandehevî, *Kandehevî’den Mektup: Altı Sıfat ve Tebliğ Metodu Hakkında* tercüme: Hayri Demirci (İstanbul: Gülistan Neşriyat, 2014), 13-14.

⁵³¹ Hazrat Maulana Muhammad, 121.

what Allah wants from me.”⁵³² A Muslim is to acquire the knowledge revealed by Allah in order to please Him.⁵³³ Remembering at every step that Allah is seeing is also necessary to fulfil holy Commandments.⁵³⁴

Ikram e Muslim: To be considerate of fellow Muslims to please Allah. This is to respect the dignity of every Muslims regardless of status.⁵³⁵ This principle emphasizes that particularly the ‘*ulama* are to be treated with utmost respect.⁵³⁶

Ikhlās e Niyat: Sincerity of intention meaning that a Muslim is to aim only to please Allah at every step.⁵³⁷ Seeking to please others and receive their blessings through good deeds is insincere. One’s acts will be judged not by their wealth or status but by the sincerity of their hearts.

Da‘wat and Tabligh: Also referred to as *tafreegh-e waqt* which means allocating time in Urdu. *Dawat* and *tablighi* means inviting Muslims towards Allah in the *Tablighi* terminology which they consider a personal responsibility of each Muslim. One must practice *tabligh* in order to correct one’s beliefs and deeds as well as those of other Muslims.⁵³⁸ Performing the *tabligh* to others is in fact more of an act of correcting oneself than correcting the others. One should not seek others’ wrongdoings but should look to his own faults, which is fulfilled only by trying to spend a day of his life learning the *sunna* of Muhammad and

⁵³² Muhammed Yūsuf Kandehlevi, 18.

⁵³³ Hazrat Maulana Muhammad, 241.

⁵³⁴ Hazrat Maulana Muhammad, 268.

⁵³⁵ Hazrat Maulana Muhammad, 395-396.

⁵³⁶ Matthew Kuiper, *Da‘wa and Other Religions*, 158.

⁵³⁷ Hazrat Maulana Muhammad, 527.

⁵³⁸ Hazrat Maulana Muhammad, 557.

imitating his deeds and beliefs which is the very essence of doing *tabligh* tours.⁵³⁹

For any prospective member of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, learning the six principles is both necessary and sufficient with no further training or education being required to go on to *tabligh* tours.⁵⁴⁰ “For any Muslim to nurture affinity with the above mentioned six principles, all Muslims are asked to go on a *tabligh* tour of forty days, leaving behind their families and material wealth in order to invite others to these six principles and to put these principles into practice.”⁵⁴¹ Also, villages around towns are visited for a duration of three days. Every *Tablighi* is also asked to make a habit of going on a three-day *tabligh* tour every month. A Muslim is encouraged to go on a four-month *da‘wa* tour in a lifetime, forty days a year, and three days a month, in addition to performing two visits every week and joining two study groups a day.⁵⁴²

The *Tablighi Jamaat* comes with its own terminology which the members of the movement use while dealing with *tabligh* related activities. While the terminology draws many words from Arabic, which is not unexpected as most Islamic concepts can be traced to Arabic language, there are certain terms which are of Persian and Urdu origin. This is an indication of the internationalization of the Urdu language in the *Tablighi* circles. Concepts of Arabic origin may be more readily familiar to most non-Urdu speaking Muslims for whom, at least to a certain jargonistic extent, as their native languages borrowed the same terms were from Arabic as well. Most Arabic terms have gained secondary but related

⁵³⁹ Murat Demir, *Tebliğ Cemaati: Türkiye Örneği*, unpublished master’s thesis. (June 2019), 43.

⁵⁴⁰ Murat Demir, 33.

⁵⁴¹ Muhammed Yûsuf Kandehevî, 28.

⁵⁴² Muhammed Yûsuf Kandehevî, 42-43.

meanings in the *Tablighi* context. Terms of Persian and Urdu origin, on the other hand, point to the local origins of the movement. Frequently terms are as follows: *Tashkeel*: It means forming, a formation. In the *Tablighi* terminology *tashkeel* refers to a group of ten to fifteen persons who came together with an intention to carry out *tabligh*. Maulana Ilyas asked that a group of at least ten people be formed for *tabligh*.⁵⁴³ Each member of the *tashkeel* is responsible for their own expenses during the *da'wa* tour.⁵⁴⁴ Members of *tashkeel* are barred from chatter lest worldly discussions might divert their attention from their mission they set out to perform, which is doing *tabligh*.⁵⁴⁵ Anyone who cannot go on to *tabligh* tours due to valid reasons should encourage others to perform it and help them financially if these Muslims are unable to afford it.⁵⁴⁶ Barring exceptional cases, donations are not accepted. If a member of a *tashkeel* has ample means, he should help his companions who lack the means.⁵⁴⁷ When a *tashkeel* arrives in a locality, the group visits the official authorities such as mayor and neighborhood head to inform them of their mission and of its importance.⁵⁴⁸

Shalwar qameez: The traditional attire of Muslim men in South Asia. It is part of the *Tablighi* appearance along with scullcaps and long beards which members of the movement consider to be reflecting the appearance of Muhammad and his companions. *Tablighi* man often draw criticism outside South Asia, such as Kyrgyzstan, for their appearance which critics consider to be alien to their

⁵⁴³ İhtişam'ul Hasen Kandelevi, 50.

⁵⁴⁴ Muhammed Manzûr Nûmânî, 74.

⁵⁴⁵ İhtişam'ul Hasen Kandelevi, 50.

⁵⁴⁶ Muhammed Manzûr Nûmânî, 75.

⁵⁴⁷ İhtişam'ul Hasen Kandelevi, 52.

⁵⁴⁸ Mustafa İslam, *Davetçinin Yol Azığı* (İstanbul: Gülistan Neşriyat, 2015), 141.

respective cultures.⁵⁴⁹ Other critics focus on the *Tablighi Jamaat*'s reduction of religiosity to *fiqh*-based piety which draws from a strong formalism as evidenced by the groups association of *shalwar qameez* with correct religious observance.⁵⁵⁰ Despite criticism from secular and nationalist circles outside South Asia, the *Tablighi Jamaat* attaches great importance to the distinguishing attire and long beards, and encourages its members to follow Muhammad's example in clothing and appearance. According to Balcı, the distinct *Tablighi* clothing and appearance is "part of the show"⁵⁵¹ as it heightens the visibility of the movement. For the purposes of the present thesis, the *Tablighi* insistence on the *shalwar qameez* attire and long beards along with the *Tablighi* practice of *tashkeel* marks this behavior as strictness in Dean Kelley's terminology which is covered in the 3rd Chapter.

Gasht: Urdu word meaning to go around, synonymous with the Arabic word *jawlah* or *jawla*. In the *Tablighi* terminology, *gasht* means visiting Muslims in a given locality to bring them *tabligh*. Therefore, *gasht* is one of the two activities a *tashkeel* undertakes. One group, comprising about ten members, of the same *tashkeel* goes on a *gasht* around the neighborhood to inform Muslims of the arrival and *tabligh* activities of the *tashkeel*, inviting Muslim men to the mosque where *bayan* will be delivered.⁵⁵² The other group, comprising two or three members, stays at the mosque, keeping themselves busy with *dhikr*. *Tablighis* participating in *gasht* may sometimes observe that their presence goes unappreciated by the local populace and, consequently, feel overwhelmed with

⁵⁴⁹ Aksana Ismailbekova, Emil Nasritdinov, "Transnational Religious Networks in Central Asia: Structure, Travel, and Culture of Kyrgyz *Tablighi Jama'at*," *Transnational Social Review* Volume 2(2), (2012), 189.

⁵⁵⁰ Sönmez Kutlu, *Çağdaş İslami Akımlar ve Sorunları* (Ankara: Fecr, 2018), 39-40.

⁵⁵¹ Bayram Balcı, "The rise of the *Jama'a al Tabligh* in Kyrgyzstan: the revival of Islamic ties between the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia?" *Central Asian Survey*, 31(1), (2012), 68.

⁵⁵² Mani Hammad el-Cüheni, 410.

unease. This is considered an opportunity for them to appreciate the hardship Muhammad endured while preaching in the streets.⁵⁵³

Tabligh work is by no means improvisational but repetitive as well as totally structured due to the rules of doing *tabligh* laid out by Maulana Ilyas and members of his immediate family. Members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* are expected to abide by these rules which the early leadership of the *Tablighi Jamaat* claimed to be based on how the Prophet conducted *tabligh* himself. Should these rules are not followed consummately, the *Tablighis* believe that *fitnah* (trial and distress) will ensue.⁵⁵⁴ Therefore, like almost any *tabligh*-related activity, there is a prescribed way of conducting the *gasht* in the style of the Prophet. The etiquette of conducting the *gasht* involves standing on the side of the door of the house visited and not peering inside the house; knocking on the door no more than three times; asking to speak to a man should a woman answers the door, and in case no man is present at home, leaving a message about the *Tablighi* gathering at the mosque; should a man answers then the leader of the group introducing himself and the rest of his group and delivering a message long enough to emphasize the importance of obeying Allah and following the example of the Prophet; finally inviting the Muslim man to join the group at the mosque to perform the daily prayer and listen to the special speech of the *Tablighis* afterwards.⁵⁵⁵

Bayan: The speech delivered by a member of the *tashkeel* after the prayer inside a mosque. The speaker stands up after the prayer is concluded and invites Muslims to join them and listen to the six principles of the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Once the *bayan* is concluded, the audience is encouraged to join the *tashkeel* and

⁵⁵³ Fikret Efe, "Cemaat-i Tebliğ'in Davet, Tebliğ ve Eğitim Yöntemi," *İslâmî Araştırmalar Dergisi* Cilt: 17 Sayı: 3 (2004), 230.

⁵⁵⁴ Muhammed Yûsuf Kandehlevî, 55.

⁵⁵⁵ <http://tablighijamaatruth.blogspot.com/2012/03/fazail-o-adab-of-gasht-umumi-joula.html>

go on a *tabligh* journey for forty days. Those among the audience interested in undertaking such a task give their names to a member of the *tashkeel* who writes them down to organize the event.

Amir: Leader, director or manager and always a male with strong connotations of responsibility. Also called *faisal*. The *amir* is responsible for making the ultimate decision, and the rest of the group is to obey him. In the *Tablighi* context, an *amir* is the male who has been chosen as the responsible for the *tabligh* group to which belongs. It also denotes the top leader or responsible of the chapter of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in any country where the movement operates. The *amir* is always guided by consultation which is called *shura* or *mashwara*.⁵⁵⁶ It also denotes the ultimate, topmost *Tablighi amir* within the entire body of the *Tablighi Jamaat*.

Dalil: Guide. The local person who helps the *gasht* by leading them to the homes of Muslims. It is the *dalil* who thrice knocks the doors. Should a Muslim male open the door, the *dalil* introduces the members of the *gasht* to him and gives the floor to the *mutakallim*.

Mutakallim: Spokesperson. Part of the *gasht* who is responsible for delivering a short introductory speech about the importance of faith, prayers etc. *Mutakallim* asks Muslims whose homes the *gasht* visits, to join them.

Mashwara(h): *Mashwara* means consultation and is a *sunna* according to the *Tablighi Jamaat*. A decision should not be made before everyone involved's opinion is consulted. In the *Tablighi* terminology, *mashwara* has gained a new dimension where it has come to denote the division of labor among the members of a *tashkeel* with regard to each member's respective responsibility at the place where *tabligh* activity is to be carried out.

⁵⁵⁶ Barbara Metcalf, *Islam in South Asia*, 242.

Shabguzari: Weekly night's *ijtima*, i.e., meeting.

Masturat Jamaat: *Masturat* means womenfolk. *Masturat jamaat* is gatherings for women only for women do not attend usual meetings which are for men only. Women traveling for *tabligh* purposes are always accompanied by their husbands or appropriate relatives. Women, unlike men, do not stay at mosques but at homes of nearby Muslims. Other women are invited to the house for prayer and Islamic learning which is called *taleem*. Women are not allowed to give sermon after nightly prayers which is undertaken by a male *Tablighi* behind a curtain to avoid any contact between sexes for "women's voices, like their bodies, can incite male passions and therefore can be disruptive to religious practice."⁵⁵⁷ A *masturat* preaching party consists of four to five couples and takes either 3 or 15 or 40 days.⁵⁵⁸

Khurooj: Also known as *tashkeela*. The journey a *tashkeel* undertakes for *tabligh* purposes.

Muallim: The person in a *tashkeel* with superior mastery of Islamic matters.

Karguzari: An account and report of a *khurooj* and the activities of the *tashkeel*. Any member of a *tashkeel* traveling abroad must send headquarters one or two reports every month.⁵⁵⁹

Taleem: A religious study group where the usual study material is the book *Fazail-e Amal* by Maulana Muhammad Zakaria which consists of Muhammad's

⁵⁵⁷ Arsalan Khan, "Pious Masculinity, Ethical Reflexivity, and Moral Order in an Islamic Piety Movement in Pakistan," *Anthropological Quarterly* Volume 1, Number 1, (Winter 2018), 59-60.

⁵⁵⁸ Mehmet Çelenk, Ulukbek Kalandarov, "Tebliğ Cemaati ve Kırgızistan'daki Faaliyetleri," *TESAM Akademi Dergisi* 6(1), (Ocak 2019), 271.

⁵⁵⁹ Mustafa İslam, 124.

sayings.⁵⁶⁰ This is the sole book to be recited during an individual *taleem* where two people study together, whereas additionally *Fazail-e Sadaka* too is studied during collective *taleems*.⁵⁶¹

Chilla: Also known as *mihna* which denotes the very act of *tabligh*. *Chilla* means forty in Persian and is originally used in Sufism to refer to spiritual solitude without food for forty days.⁵⁶² The borrowing from Sufism of this specific term points to the Sufi connection of Maulana Ilyas, whereas the Sufi inspiration of the *Tablighi Jamaat* has but almost disappeared by now. The *amir* of the *tashkeel* is responsible for assigning each member of the traveling group a duty, including buying food, cooking and cleaning. This practice is called *khidmat*, meaning service, which is done on a rotating basis and every *Tablighi* is assigned a different duty each time they go on a *da'wa* tour which is considered by the *Tablighi Jamaat* as a means to instill and reinforce humility.⁵⁶³

Ijtima: Also spelled *ijtema*. Any gathering. In the *Tablighi* context *ijtima* denotes gathering of Muslims. The term has a wide scope in that it may refer to small, weekly gathering of the *Tablighis* at mosques, or to larger gatherings at national or international level. Each national chapter of the *Tablighi Jamaat* holds its own yearly *ijtima* that brings together *Tablighis* from that country. There are also yearly *ijtimas* held in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh which draw attendants all around the world, including Kyrgyz *Tablighis* as well as non-*Tablighi* Muslims seeking blessings. The yearly *ijtimas* are attended by representatives of national chapters of the *Tablighi Jamaat* outside South Asia where representatives from

⁵⁶⁰ Aijaz Ahmad, "Tabligh Movement in Mewat," *International Journal of Professional Development* Vol. 4 No. 2 (July-Dec. 2015), 74.

⁵⁶¹ Muhammed Yûsuf Kandehlevî, 46.

⁵⁶² The Turkish word *çile* comes from the same Persian word.

⁵⁶³ Arsalan Khan, 60.

each country submit their reports regarding challenges and success of *da'wa* activities in their homelands.⁵⁶⁴ The said international annual meetings each span three days and draw more than a million attendants. The Bangladeshi *ijtima*, called Bishwa *ijtima*, is reportedly visited by 5 million attendees.⁵⁶⁵ The Raiwind *ijtima* is held in Pakistan which draws a large crowd in the excess of a million people.⁵⁶⁶ In India, where various regional *ijtimas* are held instead of a single, national one due to security reasons, one of the largest regional *ijtimas* held in Aurangabad draws a similarly large number of devotees.⁵⁶⁷

Dawat: The word *dawat* is a version of the Arabic word *da'wa*. While this word means call in Kyrgyz, it is how the *Tablighi Jamaat* is named in Kyrgyzstan, whereas members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* are called *dawatçı* which means preacher in Kyrgyz.⁵⁶⁸

Missionary activity, *da'wa*, has always been an essential part of Muslim life throughout history; indeed Islam has been identified as a missionary religion.⁵⁶⁹ The origins of Islamic practice of missionary activity can be traced back to Qur'an itself, precisely to the Qur'anic verse “[c]all unto the way of thy Lord

⁵⁶⁴ Aksana Ismailbekova, Emil Nasritdinov, 183.

⁵⁶⁵ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/bangladesh/12088120/What-is-the-festival-of-Bishwa-Ijtima-and-where-is-it-held.html>

⁵⁶⁶ <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz-haber/dunyanin-en-buyuk-islami-cemaatinde-tehlikeli-bolunme/1336638>

⁵⁶⁷ Barbara Metcalf, *Islam in South Asia*, 240-241.

⁵⁶⁸ Aksana Ismailbekova, Emil Nasritdinov, 182.

⁵⁶⁹ Matthew J. Kuiper, *Da'wa: A Global History of Islamic Missionary Thought and Practice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 2.

with wisdom and fair exhortation, and reason with them in the better way.”⁵⁷⁰ As the entire *surah* is attributed to the Mecca period shortly before the *Hijra*, it can be argued that the injunction to spread Islam constitutes one of the earliest tenets of Islam. Nevertheless, it has been acknowledged that Islamic missionary activities gained momentum in the late 19th and particularly 20th centuries. Islamic *da‘wa* in the said period not only did go through a quantitative upsurge but also experienced a qualitative transformation. In Kuiper’s words, Islamic missionary activity in the modern era “has spawned a significant democratization and diversification of the missionary task, so that more and more ordinary Muslims around the world see it as their personal responsibility to spread Islam and to do so with great creativity and variety.”⁵⁷¹ Therefore, the *Tablighi* modus operandi must first and foremost be considered as a part of and the continuation of the Islamic tradition of missionary activity. Christian Troll argues that missionary activity in Islam went through a transformation particularly in the South Asian context in the late 19th century which can now be considered and organized mission work comparable to Christian mission movements in Europe and North America, and that transformation comes in three parts: the *da‘wa* has gained dynamism by going beyond mere proclamation, the *da‘wa* became spiritualized in that having been freed from the prior juridical and juridico-political functions the missionary work has assumed a more spiritual character, the *da‘wa* became institutionalized which resulted in its having an ecumenical engagement.⁵⁷²

Although Maulana Ilyas crafted the *tabligh* method as a response to the shortcomings of the *da‘wa* efforts of the *Deobandis*, he never slighted nor criticized the latter’s approach to *tabligh*. In fact, in *Melfûzât*, a book penned by

⁵⁷⁰ *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur’an* translated by Marmeduke Pickthall (Hyderabad-Deccan, India: Government Central Press, 1930), 16:125.

⁵⁷¹ Matthew J. Kuiper, *Da‘wa: A Global History*, 4.

⁵⁷² Christian W. Troll, 116.

Muhammed Manzûr Nûmânî, a disciple of Maulana Ilyas, before the latter's death, the author cites Maulana Ilyas who mentions two types of *da'wa* carried out by Muhammad himself which can be likened to the *Deobandi* and *Tablighi* types of *da'wa*. Maulana Ilyas reminds that Muhammad himself used to go out to streets to meet people and invite them to Islam during his prophethood in Mecca, which is referred to as the Mecca period. However, he abandoned this practice when he had to relocate to Medina where he established a headquarters and received people there to invite them to Islam. This change of modus operandi during the Medina period was made possible, he explained, only because Muhammad trained a group of competent preachers who would perform *tabligh* in the Mecca period which necessitated in the Medina period that Muhammad stay at the headquarters and busy himself with dispatching his preachers.⁵⁷³ According to Kuiper, Maulana Ilyas's distinction between Muhammad's *tabligh* in Mecca and Medina periods correspond to the top-down *tabligh* of the *ashrāf* as usual and the bottom-down model he launched, respectively.⁵⁷⁴ Incidentally, where the activities of the *Tablighi Jamaat* are banned such as post-Soviet Central Asian republics save for Kyrgyzstan, *tabligh* is conducted clandestinely where preaching is done at homes and *jawla* is avoided, whereas in countries like Kyrgyzstan where the *Tablighi Jamaat* is free to operate the usual *jawlah* method is used. The former method is referred to as Mecca style and the latter as Medina style among the *Tablighi* circles.⁵⁷⁵ Maulana Ilyas lamented the lack of learned men among the ranks of *tabligh* performers and expressed his desire that their numbers grow.⁵⁷⁶ He also asked *tabligh* groups to visit learned men during their *da'wa* tours to benefit from their

⁵⁷³ Muhammed Manzûr Nûmânî, 41-42.

⁵⁷⁴ Matthew Kuiper, *Da'wa and Other Religions*, 150.

⁵⁷⁵ Mehmet Çelenk, Ulukbek Kalandarov, 261-262.

⁵⁷⁶ Muhammed Manzûr Nûmânî, 76.

teachings.⁵⁷⁷ Indeed, the *tabligh* groups have traditionally focused on the most basic tenets and practices of Islam, refraining from engaging in religious discussions which were considered the province of the learned men. The *Tablighi* preachers also visited the *'ulama* both before and after their tours as per Maulana Ilyas' wishes to improve their religious capital and report their activities. Thus, not only were the learned men satisfied of the mentorship role they were assigned by the *Tablighi Jamaat* but also helped elevate religious capital of members of such preaching groups.⁵⁷⁸

The innovative nature of the *Tablighi* version of *da'wa* as crafted by Maulana Ilyas and systematized by Muhammad Yusuf Kandhlawi, which gives the movement its current worldwide scope of outreach, is characterized by how *tabligh* is done and who does it. Firstly, the itinerant manner in which it was carried out, while undoubtedly reminiscent of and indebted to the way *tabligh* was done during the time of Muhammad, also carried the influence of Protestant missionaries in British India whose aggressive and novel way of preaching to the public gave the *Deobandis* and Maulana Ilyas the impetus to emulate their successful modus operandi. Secondly, delivering *tabligh* by laymen instead of the *'ulama* as was the practice among Muslims was an innovation of import which, more than the itinerant mode it was done, indicates the impact the Protestant missionary activity in India left on Maulana Ilyas. Thirdly, the apolitical stance of the group since its inception as per Maulana Ilyas' intention, for whom *da'wa* was above all worldly concerns,⁵⁷⁹ has definitely contributed to its perseverance and success. It has been argued that the *Tablighi Jamaat* is the first Islamic movement which divorced politics from religion, considering the

⁵⁷⁷ Muhammed Manzûr Nûmânî, 92-94.

⁵⁷⁸ David Emmanuel Singh, *Islamization in Modern South Asia: Deoband Reform and The Gujjar Response* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2012), 28.

⁵⁷⁹ Yoginder Sikand, "The Tablighi Jama'at and Politics: A Critical Re-Appraisal," *The Muslim World* Volume 96(1), (January 2006), 176.

former as trivial and even unnecessary.⁵⁸⁰ While the success of the *Tablighi* modus operandi can be evidenced by worldwide presence of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, that it is emulated by other Islamic groups is another indication. A staunchly anti-sufi *Salafi* Yoruba group by the name *Yan Izala* very popular in Northern Nigeria, is known to have adopted the door-to-door *tabligh* method as well as the recitation of *Riyad as-salihin* by Imam Nawawi, which is the reference *hadith* book for the *Tablighi Jamaat*, without identifying themselves as *Tablighis*.⁵⁸¹ There seems to be little resemblance or common intellectual ground between the *Yan Izala* and the *Tablighi Jamaat*, suggesting that the former's adoption of certain *Tablighi* habits is due only to the latter's success in winning devotees in Nigeria through these practices. Also recently, an Islamic group from Turkey which goes by the name *İsmailağa Cemaati* seems to have adopted the *Tablighi* modus operandi. Clad in *jellabiyas* and *turbans* and sporting long beards, members of the former have been observed to take to streets in Istanbul and other towns in a very ostensive manner, warning people that their conduct, such as consuming alcohol and eating ice cream, is incompatible with Islam all the while inviting them instead to adopt 'correct' Islamic manners.⁵⁸² This case however is different to the case of the *Yan Izala* in that the *İsmailağa Cemaati* and the *Tablighi Jamaat* both trace their *silsila* back to Shah Waliyullah in the 18th century. A Kurdish Sufi named Khalid Baghdadi became a disciple of Shah Waliyullah before moving back to his homeland and establishing the *Khalidî* branch of *Naqshbandî* order which became the dominant Sufi movement in the

⁵⁸⁰ M. Manazır Ahsan, "Cemâat-i Teblîğ," *Diyanet İslam Ansiklopedisi* cilt 7, (Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 1993), 293-294. Also accessible at <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/cemaat-i-teblig>.

⁵⁸¹ Ousmane Kane, *Muslim Modernity in Postcolonial Nigeria* (Boston: Brill, 2003), 125-126.

⁵⁸² I have been informed by one of my Turkish *Tablighi* contacts in Tavşanlı in September 2021 that the *İsmailağa Cemaati* adopted this method in recent years by way of the late Abdülmetin Balkanlıoğlu, who, having previously travelled with Turkish *Tablighi* groups abroad, encouraged *İsmailağa Cemaati*, to which he belonged, to organize similar tours in Turkey. My contact has hinted that the ostensive manner it was carried out and the negative publicity it generated were met with disapproval in the Turkish *Tablighi* circles which are more circumspect and shun public attention as a general rule.

late Ottoman and Republican eras in Turkey, which forked into around ten well-known Sufi groups in contemporary Turkey, such as the *İskenderpaşa Dergahı*,⁵⁸³ *Nurculuk Hareketi* a subset of which is the *Gülen* movement mentioned in the first chapter, *Süleymancı* movement which we mentioned in the first chapter, *Erenköy Cemaati* which owns the *Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Vakfı* mentioned in the first chapter, *Menzil Grubu*, and the *İsmailağa Cemaati*.⁵⁸⁴ The *İsmailağa Cemaati* is a *madrassa* oriented renewalist movement which also retains connections with a more sober Sufi tradition, not unlike the practice of the *Deobandi* movement.⁵⁸⁵ Therefore, it might be surmised that common intellectual heritage between the two movements must have encouraged the *İsmailağa Cemaati* to adopt the *Tablighi da'wa* method.

4.1.4. The *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan

The present chapter has focused on the roots, the principles, the formation, and the development of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in South Asia so far. This sub-chapter, on the other hand, is intended to shed light on the presence and activities of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan. Focus will be on how the movement operates, with a brief historical information as to how the it was introduced to the nation. It must be remembered, however, that the organization of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan does not significantly differ from its organizations in other countries. One of the characteristics of the movement from its structure to its modus operandi is its uniformity across different settings.

While there is little official record as to how and when the *Tablighi Jamaat* entered Kyrgyzstan, there exist accounts of the first time citizens of Kyrgyzstan

⁵⁸³ The *İskenderpaşa Dergahı* constituted the backbone of Turkish conservative politics. The former counted Necmettin Erbakan and Turgut Özal among its members.

⁵⁸⁴ Mehmet Ali Büyükkara, 118-128.

⁵⁸⁵ Mehmet Ali Büyükkara, 125.

came into contact and became acquainted with the *Tablighis*. It has been argued that one of the first contact between the *Tablighi Jamaat* and Kyrgyz nationals happened in 1992 when a group of preachers from Pakistan visited the central mosque in Bishkek. Unable to communicate with the preaching group, the attendants of the mosque happened on a young Kyrgyz national who was schooled in Pakistan and was conversant in the Urdu language. That person led the *Tablighi* group to his hometown Balykchy in the northern region where the first ever *tabligh* activity took place in Kyrgyz territories. Locals joined the group soon despite hostility from the populace. Balykchy is thus considered the birthplace of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan.⁵⁸⁶

Regardless of oral accounts, the first time the *Tablighis* visited Kyrgyzstan can be safely traced back to the early 1990s without exact dates when the nascent republic opened its doors to various Islamic groups from the Middle East and South Asia. Benefiting from the liberalization of the religious market in Kyrgyzstan, the *Tablighi Jamaat* like many other Islamic trans-national movements sought to gain a foothold among the local population. However, Balcı reports that the first time Kyrgyz *Tablighis* heard of the *Tablighi Jamaat* was when the movement arrived in the neighbouring Uzbekistan, rather than their native country.⁵⁸⁷ This is not totally surprising as of all Central Asian Muslim people Uzbeks were already known in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union as the most religious ethnicity. The connection between Muslim groups outside the Soviet Union and Uzbeks date back to the 1970s when several Uzbek scholars clandestinely went to Pakistan and India to seek Islamic education. Muhammad Rustamov Hindustani (1892-1989) was a particularly noteworthy scholar who travelled in South Asia and established underground Islamic education centers (*hujra*) upon his return to Central Asia. It might be possible that the *Tablighi Jamaat* first sought to enter Central Asia

⁵⁸⁶ Mukarram Toktogulova, *Localisation*, 7-8.

⁵⁸⁷ Bayram Balcı, 64.

through Uzbekistan due to the Indian connection established by him and his disciples decades earlier which Balçı sees improbable if not impossible due to lack of any evidence pointing otherwise.⁵⁸⁸ Outlawed by Uzbekistan soon after their arrival, the *Tablighi Jamaat* was forced to focus their efforts in other Central Asian republics. No sooner had the *Tablighi Jamaat* arrived in Tajikistan, than they were outlawed by the government of Tajikistan as well. Having been similarly banned in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, the movement was left with Kyrgyzstan as the only venue in the entire region where they could operate openly.

The pioneering *Tablighi* groups that arrived in Kyrgyzstan in the early 1990s were composed of South Asian nationals exclusively and spoke no Russian or Kyrgyz, relying therefore on locals for translation and interpretation.⁵⁸⁹ However, as the movement started to recruit Kyrgyz nationals, the leadership as well as the rank and file of the local chapter of the *Tablighi Jamaat* came to be dominated by Kyrgyz nationals, mostly Kyrgyz with few Uzbeks and Dungans, for other nationals visiting Kyrgyzstan temporarily for *tabligh* purposes.⁵⁹⁰ The endogeneity of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan stands in contrast to the situation in Europe, the USA, South Africa, and East Africa where the movement still draws heavily from the South Asian diaspora.⁵⁹¹ While members of the movement are referred to as *Tablighi* in the Indian subcontinent where it emerged as well as in other parts of the world, people who identify with the

⁵⁸⁸ Bayram Balçı, 64.

⁵⁸⁹ Mehmet Çelenk, Ulukbek Kalandarov, 257.

⁵⁹⁰ Suat Cebeci, “Kırgızistan’da Dini Durum ve Sovyet Sonrası Dini Gelişmeyi Besleyen Etkenler,” *MANAS Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi* Cilt: 5, Sayı: 3, (2016), 114.

⁵⁹¹ Dietrich Reetz, “Mediating Mobile Traditions”, 133.

movement in Kyrgyzstan are called *dawatçı* in Kyrgyz.⁵⁹² Both appellations are exonyms, as it has been noted earlier in the present chapter that the participants of the *Tablighi Jamaat* refer to themselves simply as Muslims or ‘mosque attendants’ in their perspective languages. The participants of the *Tablighi Jamaat* are also disparagingly referred to as *sakalçandar* in Kyrgyzstan which means those “who wear long beards.”⁵⁹³

Although the *Tablighi Jamaat* claim that the movement is without a central and hierarchical structure, it has been reported by researchers that this is not the case. Ismailbekova and Nasritdinov, the latter of whom is a *Tablighi* himself, note that there exist in the *Tablighi Jamaat* a vertical and horizontal structure both on international and country level.⁵⁹⁴ Each year participants of the movement throughout the world gather in the gatherings in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh where representatives of each country consult with the leaders and elders from the South Asian countries. During such consultations, country representatives submit a report on their *tabligh* efforts and discuss the difficulties they encounter with yearly comparisons. Elders from the Indian subcontinent offer their recommendations and instructions to each country representatives who bring them back to their respective countries which are relayed to local *Tablighis* in national and city level councils upon return. In Kyrgyzstan, decisions regarding all the *tabligh* related activities and matters on national level are taken in the national council which are then passed down on councils on lesser levels such as regional and city. The *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan have divided the territories of the republic into sixteen *halkas*, or circles.⁵⁹⁵ On regional and city level meetings are held once a week where organizational matters are discussed. The

⁵⁹² Aksana Ismailbekova, Emil Nasritdinov, 182.

⁵⁹³ Mukarram Toktogulova, *Localisation*, 9.

⁵⁹⁴ Aksana Ismailbekova, Emil Nasritdinov, 182.

⁵⁹⁵ Bayram Balcı, 68.

very same evening, such decisions are passed down to local level in each mosque in every corner of Kyrgyzstan. This well-structured vertical organization allows the movement to keep track on activities and maintain its apolitical stance by ensuring that no deviation from the principles of the *Tablighi Jamaat* occurs.⁵⁹⁶ It has been reported also that on local level, people from every corner of Kyrgyzstan travel to the subcontinent, with number of Kyrgyz nationals visiting India surpass Indian nationals visiting Kyrgyzstan ten to twenty times.⁵⁹⁷ Far from being mere passive listeners in India, Kyrgyz travelers talk to locals and discuss with them their own activities, often contextualizing the Kyrgyz *tablighi* experience. Therefore, according to Ismailbekova and Nasritdinov, the Kyrgyz *Tablighis* and their Indian counterparts are engaged in a two-way communication which attests the horizontal structure of the movement as well.⁵⁹⁸ The horizontal structure, on the other hand, is best observed in the decision making process. Regardless of on which level the *amir* takes a decision, he consults participants in the meeting, which democratizes the entire process. All *Tablighis* are encouraged to offer their opinion, actively participate in the discussions, and respect others, but they are discouraged from insisting on their viewpoint. The decision making lies exclusively on *amirs* whose decisions are final and are not open to any further discussion.

Any Kyrgyz national wishing to travel to the subcontinent is to pass through a three-layered process. The first step is the local mosque, the second regional council, and the third the national council in Bishkek.⁵⁹⁹ This ensures that the aspirant accrues enough experience in *tabligh*-related activities and is well immersed in the tenets of the movement before they travel abroad. Such

⁵⁹⁶ Aksana Ismailbekova, Emil Nasritdinov, 182-183.

⁵⁹⁷ Aksana Ismailbekova, Emil Nasritdinov, 183.

⁵⁹⁸ Aksana Ismailbekova, Emil Nasritdinov, 183.

⁵⁹⁹ Aksana Ismailbekova, Emil Nasritdinov, 185.

aspirants are usually asked to complete first a forty-day tour in Kyrgyzstan. Traveling to the subcontinent is open to participants with less experience for such trips are considered as of a more educational nature, whereas trips to former Soviet republics and Turkey are reserved for more experienced *Tablighis*. In the early phases of the *Tablighi* expansion in Kyrgyzstan, participants seeking to travel abroad for educational purposes preferred to go to Pakistan, but in the wake of September the 11th, obtaining visa to Pakistan became very difficult. Consequently, Kyrgyz *Tablighis* were forced to travel to India instead of Pakistan, which became more difficult in later years due to India's growing reluctance to allow foreign *Tablighis* in.⁶⁰⁰ Thus, today Bangladesh has become the principal destination for Kyrgyz nationals wishing to travel for the same purpose.⁶⁰¹ In each destination mentioned the Kyrgyz *Tablighis* found a distinct motif related to the country where they traveled to which they carried back to Kyrgyzstan. Early *Tablighis* had to go through taxing sacrifices in traveling to Pakistan which inspired them to be more active among their native population to disseminate the *Tablighi* experience which was unknown to the populace; in India the motif was to be soft-spoken and to take careful steps as to not vex a non-Muslim and sometimes hostile majority, whereas in Bangladesh the stability of the country and the robustness of the *Tablighi Jamaat* inspired Kyrgyz participants to contemplate the critical mass their own movement has reached back in Kyrgyzstan.⁶⁰²

Today, the *Tablighi Jamaat* maintain a strong presence throughout Kyrgyzstan, with *madrasa* instructors nationwide having close relationship with them without

⁶⁰⁰ Aksana Ismailbekova, Emil Nasritdinov, 185-186.

⁶⁰¹ Aksana Ismailbekova, Emil Nasritdinov, 187.

⁶⁰² Aksana Ismailbekova, Emil Nasritdinov, 185-188.

any problem.⁶⁰³ It has been reported that in North Kyrgyzstan where Islamization is the weakest the rural population's sole contact with Islam occurs through the *Tablighi Jamaat*.⁶⁰⁴ The number of mosques in Kyrgyzstan is in excess of 2.500 which is an indication of the robustness of the *Tablighi* network in the nation as these mosques serve as educational centers and points of recruitment for the *Tablighi Jamaat*. There are only a few mosques where the *Tablighi* activities are met with resistance.

All religious affairs in Kyrgyzstan fall under the jurisdiction of two state organizations: the Board for Religious Affairs and the State Committee for Religious Affairs. The former is composed of clerics and is responsible for the appointment of *imams* and organizing religious events, whereas the latter, composed of bureaucrats with no religious training, is responsible for the regulation of religions as to ensure the secular nature of the state is observed.⁶⁰⁵ The State Committee for Religious Affairs is entrusted with a broad range of powers including fining religious groups which fail to meet the criteria for registration and banning them altogether.⁶⁰⁶ Apart from the aforementioned state organizations, there exists a semi-official organization, the Muslims Spiritual Administration, also known as the *Muftiate*, which is responsible for promoting the *Hanafi* school of Islam which is the form of Islam traditionally observed in Kyrgyzstan.⁶⁰⁷ The *de facto* function of the *Muftiate*, however, is to keep Islam as professed in Kyrgyzstan in line with the interests of the state. The *Muftiate* acts in this capacity as an intermediary between the state and the Muslim

⁶⁰³ Suat Cebeci, 114.

⁶⁰⁴ Suat Cebeci, 114.

⁶⁰⁵ Bayram Balci, 70-71.

⁶⁰⁶ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/kyrgyz-republic/>

⁶⁰⁷ Johan Engvall, 34.

community. The *Muftiate* is led by the Grand *Mufti* who appoints provincial religious leaders, the *kazis*.⁶⁰⁸ The *Muftiate* was led by Maksatbek Toktamushev,⁶⁰⁹ a graduate of the *Madrassa Arabia Raiwind* in Pakistan which is the center of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in that country, who was known for his sympathy towards the *Tablighi Jamaat* to which he was rumoured to adhered, who resigned on corruption charges related to the purportedly appropriated *Hajj* funds in February 2021.⁶¹⁰ The new *Mufti* Zamir Rakiev, a graduate of an Egyptian university, is not known to have any ties to the *Tablighi Jamaat*.

In order to fight Islamic radicalization, the State Committee for Religious Affairs altered the law governing religious organizations in 2009, making registration of religious organizations an arduous task which has effectively curbed the entry into the religious market of any new Islamic organization. The new law forbids Kyrgyz nationals from converting to other religions. However, the modified law did not limit the activities of the *Tablighi Jamaat* as the movement is not registered operating without a legal status all the while not being illegal at all. It has been reported that the new law in fact contributed to the widespread presence of the *Tablighi Jamaat* for the movement is considered a useful one targeting the same audience as the *Salafi* movements, which are negatively affected by the law, by promoting a ‘moderate’ version of Islam without pursuing political ends.⁶¹¹ As the state has come to acknowledge that the widespread network of the *Tablighi Jamaat* throughout the nation served the state by appealing to all generations and pacifying the youth who suffer from economic and social disadvantages, the movement was integrated into Kyrgyz social fabric by

⁶⁰⁸ Johan Engvall, 34-35.

⁶⁰⁹ Johan Engvall, 23-24.

⁶¹⁰ <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-grand-mufti-resigns-amid-corruption-scandal/31096169.html>

⁶¹¹ Bayram Balci, 71.

creating within the *Muftiate* a department dedicated to *dawa* which regulates and controls *tabligh* activities.⁶¹² In fact, the head of the *Muftiate* Toktamushev declared in 2017 that the *Tablighi Jamaat* was exempt from the law as they did not constitute a separate group as long as they benevolently preached the *Hanafi* school and that call to Islam was a duty for all Muslims.⁶¹³ The *Mufti*'s evident sectarian bias is hardly unexpected because shortly after assuming his post at the age of forty one in 2014, he had declared that “we shall only spread the *Hanafi madhab* in Kyrgyzstan which is not radical and to which the Kyrgyz have subscribed for thirteen centuries.”⁶¹⁴

The former *Mufti*'s emphasis on the privileged status of the *Hanafi* school, or the official desire to elevate it to such a position, in Kyrgyzstan involves more than meets the eye. Underlining the fact that the *Hanafi madhab* is the sect to which the Kyrgyz historically subscribed to, Toktamushev directs the audience's attention to the contested matter of the Kyrgyzness, nativity, suggesting that subscribing to another *madhab* is not compatible with being a Kyrgyz. Therefore, Toktamushev implies on the one hand that Islamic movements seeking to spread non-*Hanafi* versions of Islam in Kyrgyzstan are not native to the nation. Values, ideas, and movements thus purportedly identified as having been ‘brought from abroad’ are immediately devalued and labeled as potentially dangerous.⁶¹⁵ Evidently, Toktamushev means to stigmatize with his words the *Salafi* movements that originate in the Middle East, playing to the public discussion around the alleged *Salafi* ‘infiltration’ and Islamic radicalization in Kyrgyzstan. The *Salafi* version of Islam, according to Toktamushev, is not only radical but

⁶¹² Bayram Balci, 71.

⁶¹³ Samat Dzhumakadyrov, “V KR predlagayut zapretit’ deyatel’nost’ ‘Tablighi dzhamaat’,” *Radio Azattyk*, November 26, 2015, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/27389035.html>.

⁶¹⁴ https://www.vb.kg/doc/268326_myftiy:_v_kyrgyzstane_bydem_rasprostraniat_tolko_hanafizm.html

⁶¹⁵ Vincent M. Artman, “‘My Poor People, Where Are We Going?’: Grounded Theologies and National Identity in Kyrgyzstan” *Europe-Asia Studies* Volume 71 Issue 10, (2019), 3.

also foreign to Kyrgyzstan which is another indicator of its ‘erroneous’ and radical nature. By extension, it is implied that the traditional Kyrgyz religion, the *Hanafi* Islam, is the only one which is good, moderate, pluralistic, tolerant, and in line with the interests of the state.⁶¹⁶

On the other hand, the former *Mufti* implies that the *Tablighi Jamaat*, who are *Hanafis*, can be safely considered as native even if the movement originated abroad and has some elements, such as attire and terminology, which might suggest otherwise. Therefore, the elevation of the *Hanafi* school to the privileged station of nativity will automatically confer the same privilege to the *Tablighi Jamaat* meaning that the version of Islam the *Tablighis* preach is none but the ‘traditional’, and ‘authentic’ Kyrgyz Islam. Countered thus are the accusation and criticism that the *Tablighis* roaming the cities and countryside, clad in Pakistani style attires and sporting long beards, are practicing a non-Kyrgyz version of Islam, referred to as the agents of Pakistanization, Arabization, or *mankurtization*.⁶¹⁷ The attempts to normalize and nativize by the *Muftiate* of the *Tablighi Jamaat* is also evidenced by the former’s sartorial intervention by introducing a modified attire, in the shape of *shalwar qameez* embroidered with Kyrgyz motifs, for members of the movement more in line with local traditions and palatable to Kyrgyz nationalists.⁶¹⁸ Another attempt to the same end is that both the *Muftiate* and members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* claimed that the *Tablighi* attire is very similar to the traditional Kyrgyz attire described in the Epic of Manas and that wearing Western style clothes itself was non-Kyrgyz.⁶¹⁹ In a similar fashion, parallelism is drawn between early Islamic figures and Kyrgyz national heroes, suggesting that from their upright conduct to modest attire the

⁶¹⁶ Vincent M. Artman, 9.

⁶¹⁷ Vincent M. Artman, 16.

⁶¹⁸ Johan Engvall, 24.

⁶¹⁹ Mukarram Toktogulova, *Localisation*, 6.

early Islamic era and pre-modern Kyrgyz culture resemble one another.⁶²⁰ Thus, the *Muftiate* implies that the *Tablighi* Islam, being of the *Hanafi madhab*, represent the ‘true’, ‘traditional’, and ‘authentic’ Kyrgyz Islam, with elements, long lost among the Kyrgyz due to Russian influence, still being present and conspicuous.

The promotion by the Kyrgyz *Muftiate* of the *Tablighi Jamaat* not only as one among many but also the only vector of Kyrgyz *Hanafi* Islam is particularly telling. The *Tablighi* version of Islam, despite being apolitical and non-violent, has little in common with the traditional *Hanafi* Islam the Kyrgyz traditionally subscribed to. For one, the Kyrgyz Islam, or Islam in Central Asia in general, prior to the Soviet rule was characterized by its Sufi nature which included Shamanistic elements.⁶²¹ The traditional Kyrgyz Hanafism emphasized faith (*iman*) over practice (*amal*), meaning that adherence to religious practices took an essentialist shape rather than formal which enabled Kyrgyz Muslims to perform their prayers in vernacular language instead of Arabic, which is the norm. Lack of strict textual approach to canonical sources also marked Kyrgyz Islam as a traditional religion. The purist *Tablighi* version of Hanafism, on the other hand, emphasized a return to the original sources and ridding Islam of what they considered as innovations which arose from the incorporation of pre-Islamic and non-Islamic elements. This version leaves little room for locals variations due to the strictness of *imitatio muhammadi*. In a sense, the traditional *Hanafi* Islam practiced in Kyrgyzstan before the arrival of the *Tablighi Jamaat* had more in common with the Mewati Islam that the *Tablighi Jamaat* set out to ‘correct’ in the first place than what the *Tablighis* preach.

One particularity of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan is that members of the movement have to submit several documents should they seek to go on *tabligh*

⁶²⁰ Mukarram Toktogulova, *Localisation*, 6.

⁶²¹ Hayati Beşirli, Zeynep Serap Tekten Aksürmeli, Ali Ünal, “Bağımsızlık Sonrası Kırgızistan’da İslamiyet ve Kaynakları,” *MANAS Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi* Cilt: 9 No: 1, (2020), 10.

tours within the country. Such members have to submit documents regarding the religious education they received and their familial status which indicates that their family is taken care of in the absence of the aspirant traveler, as well as a certificate from the Ministry of Internal Affairs attesting that they are not extremists or terrorists.⁶²² The formal process before going on a *tabligh* trip is as follows. Anyone wishing to partake in a *tabligh* party must apply to the *Muftiate* for written permission. The very act of preaching is to take place under the direct control and surveillance of the *kazi* and the head imam of the locality where the party wishes to preach. The aspirant *Tablighi* should obtain from the regional *imam* a document to attest that person's religious education and from their respective families a written permit to go on *da'wa*. They are also forbidden to have foreign attire with them and should have in their possession accurate, local attire. They should also have on their person passport or another identity card.⁶²³ While officially adherents willing to go on to *tabligh* trips should obtain written permits from their families, there are reports that this is not the case in many instances where young *Tablighis* leave their families in inopportune times when they are most needed at home, such as during the plowing season. More often than not, the preaching groups include people without official permits and familial consent.⁶²⁴ Furthermore, their consistent visits sometimes put many citizens at unease and cause them to resent the very presence of the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Some Christians claim that the *Tablighis* drop a visit to call them to the mosque, as well.⁶²⁵ Nevertheless, Ravshanbek Eratov, who translated Muhammad

⁶²²

https://www.vb.kg/doc/329637_dymk:_y_vseh_daavatchikov_est_spravki_o_neprihastnosti_k_terrorizmu.html

⁶²³ Kanatbek Murzahalilov, Mirajiddin Arynov, "Dvijenie 'Tabligi Djamaat' v Kyrgyzstane: Osobennosti Deyatel'nosti i Vozmojnye Posledstvia Dl'a Razvitia Religioznoi Situatsii v Respublike" *Tsentralnaia Aziia i Kavkaz Jurnal Sotsial'no-Politicheskikh Issledovanii* 13(3) (2020), 188-189.

⁶²⁴ Kanatbek Murzahalilov, Mirajiddin Arynov, 189.

⁶²⁵ <http://formula.kg/211/>

Zakariya Kandhlawi's opus magnum *Fazail-e Amal* into Kyrgyz and formerly led the *Daawat* department at the *Muftiate*,⁶²⁶ claimed that the activities of the *Tablighi Jamaat* were beneficial to the community for there were drug addicts, former inmates, alcoholics, and homeless people who joined the *tabligh* tours and eliminated their harmful ways and bad habits, and started to get their lives back on track.⁶²⁷

The *Tablighi Jamaat* went through a schism in Kyrgyzstan as a result of which an offshoot by the name *Yakin Inkar* (*Ўакын Инкар* - Rejection of Everything Other Than God) came into existence. What factors led to the schism and the subsequent developments are not easy to figure out because its members do not acknowledge the secular state and no scholarly work has been done about it so far; consequently what little information exists about the *Yakin Inkar* can only be gleaned from the internet where information and interpretation are found intermixed. Apparently, a sub-group rose among members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* who were not satisfied with the *Tabligh*'s current approach based on finding a balance between the worldly and otherworldly concerns. The dissatisfied went so far as to denounce all worldly affairs and boons of civilization in favour of the Afterlife, with their motto being "denunciation of everything of this world excepting God."⁶²⁸ According to Kadir Malikov, a prominent theologian, *Yakin Inkar* is not planning to replace the secular government with an Islamic state, but remain apolitical and literalist Muslims who wish to cut off totally from secular society.⁶²⁹ Clad in Pakistani style garments and sporting long beards and matching long hair which they do not cut, the members of the *Yakin Inkar* are not easily distinguishable from the *Tablighi*

⁶²⁶ Mehmet Çelenk, Ulukbek Kalandarov, 272.

⁶²⁷ https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_religion_islam/24542445.html

⁶²⁸ prevention./?p=2854

⁶²⁹ <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-intensifies-crackdown-on-back-to-basics-islamic-group>

preachers.⁶³⁰ Reportedly they avoid modern means of transportation and prefer to walk to their intended destination for preaching.⁶³¹ Their women cover their faces. Unlike the *Tablighi Jamaat*, the *Yakin Inkar* have been banned in Kyrgyzstan since 2017 and remain in the government's official list of terrorist organizations to this date.⁶³² The official reason as to why the *Yakin Inkar* are included among terrorist organizations is that they do not acknowledge the *Muftiate* nor any secular power and they refuse to register and seek official permission to go on *tabligh* tours, which resulted in their being considered extremists by the Kyrgyz government. Several members of the group on tours were convicted and serve time in prisons. Government officials state that member of this group do not send their children to government schools, ignoring laws and completely avoiding secular education.⁶³³ It is also reported that they avoid vaccinating their children.⁶³⁴ This stands in stark contrast to the *Tablighi Jamaat* who acknowledge the authority of state and always seek permission from government officials before they go on tours. Nevertheless, with about a thousand followers, referred to as the *Инкарцы* (Inkartsy), i.e., denialists, in Russian, the group is still active, particularly in the south of Kyrgyzstan.⁶³⁵ It has been reported that their number is dwindling now despite the fact that their exact number remains unknown.⁶³⁶ The group is similarly categorized under the list of

⁶³⁰ prevention.kg/?p=886

⁶³¹ Mehmet Çelenk, Ulukbek Kalandarov, 264. I have been told by one of my Turkish *Tablighi* interlocutors in Ankara in August 2021, PUBLIC D, that there existed among the underground Kazakh *Tablighi* community a group who preferred to travel to Mecca to perform the *Hajj* on foot. However, I was unable to confirm whether the said group was connected to the *Yakin Inkar*.

⁶³² ng.ru/ng_religii/2018-06-20/13_444_kirgisia.html

⁶³³ https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_religiya_yakyn_inkar/29098512.html

⁶³⁴ <https://www.caa-network.org/archives/21022>

⁶³⁵ prevention.kg/?p=2854

terrorist organizations in the neighboring Kazakhstan where the *Tablighi Jamaat* too are illegal.⁶³⁷ A former Kyrgyz *Tablighi* I interviewed in Ankara in September 2021 who is referred to as PUBLIC D in the next chapter informed me that members of *Yakin Inkar* visited Turkey for *tabligh* purposes before the pandemics. A Turkish *Tablighi* I interviewed in Tavşanlı in July 2021 confirmed this, adding also that the visiting group's unwavering denunciation of anything worldly made them vocally critical of *Tablighis* and non-*Tablighis* alike, rendering the *tabligh* tours of *Yakin Inkar* offensive to the people they sought to reach out.

⁶³⁶ https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_religiya_yakyn_inkar/29098512.html

⁶³⁷ https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/yakyn-inkar-priznali-ekstremistskoy-v-kazahstane-355494/

CHAPTER V

FIELDWORK: MEETING THE *TABLIGHI JAMAAT*

The present chapter deals with the data generated through elite interviews, and interviews with ordinary people with a view to assess public opinion about the *Tablighi Jamaat* as well as data obtained through the fieldwork primarily in Kyrgyzstan but also elsewhere as noted in the first chapter, and its interpretation through thematic analysis and the religious economies approach as detailed in the previous chapters. The structure of this chapter is as follows. The five themes identified during the fieldwork by way of thematic analysis constitute the basis of the three subchapters which are, namely, the *Tablighi Jamaat* defined by the *Tablighis* from Kyrgyzstan, the *Tablighi Jamaat* perceived by the public, and the *Tablighi Jamaat* perceived by the bureaucracy and the academia. Each subchapter in turn consists of my questions, the answers produced by respective interviews, and their interpretation and is divided into further subsections according to the subthemes emerging from the answers of the interviewees.

5.1. The *Tablighi Jamaat* Defined by the *Tablighis* from Kyrgyzstan

This subchapter is devoted to the way the *Tablighis*, with a particular emphasis on the ones from Kyrgyzstan, define in their own words the *Tablighi Jamaat*, themselves, their relationship with the group, and how they conceptualize and position themselves as well as the wider *Tablighi Jamaat* as a group with which they are affiliated with regard to the non-*Tablighi* world out there in Kyrgyzstan. I have found most of my *Tablighi*-affiliated potential interviewees in and around the former Grand Mosque (*Чоң мечит/Çong Meçit*) in Bishkek which served as the central and the largest mosque in Bishkek which is considered by most Kyrgyzs to be the epicenter of *Tablighi* congregation in all of Kyrgyzstan. The Grand Mosque was relegated to the status of the second largest mosque

nationwide by the time the Central Mosque of Imam Serakhsi built by the Turkish *Diyanet Vakfi* (*Diyanet* Foundation) became operational in 2018 which, having the capacity to accommodate 30.000 worshippers at once, apparently, dwarfed the former in physical terms. However, the latter failed to attract worshippers and is visited by only a handful during the daily prayers.⁶³⁸

⁶³⁸ While an analysis of this failure is beyond the scope of the present thesis, it certainly is attributable to the activities of the *Tablighi Jamaat* which is explored in this chapter. It is noteworthy that Turkey has long made strenuous efforts to export to Central Asian republics what has been labeled as the Turkish model of Islam. This concept was originally centered around the *Diyanet*, i.e., the state, being at the helm of religious affairs with religious NGOs having an auxiliary and complementary role. However, as the *FETÖ* case has shown, the Turkish state supervision over certain NGOs and groups was lacking and inefficient at best, and such groups acted in a centrifugal manner contrary to what was officially expected from them. In the post-2014 era, it seems that the lacuna created by the disappearing influence and power of *FETÖ* was replaced by other Turkish religious groups as mentioned in the First Chapter, the *Hüdayi Vakfi* being the one with the most extensive network abroad what with its schools and personnel who, it seems, have partly been transferred to be employed at the Turkish state structures in these countries, including but not limited to the *Maarif Okulları*. In the post-2014 era, the ‘modified’ Turkish model is characterized by a much more pivotal role for the *Diyanet* abroad which seeks to build large mosques, employ *imams* and other religious personnel and secure full control over the activities of religious organizations originating in Turkey, and exert a stronger and more direct politico-religious influence on the host countries. It was in this capacity that the Serakhsi Mosque became operational, despite the fact that Bishkek was not in dire need of a new, much larger central mosque, much less an Ottoman style mosque.

I was informed by one of my expert interviewees, an expert from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bishkek on December 25th 2021 that there was no demand from the Kyrgyz party of the construction of a mosque of such grandiose size nor such a need was ever felt by the public. I was told that Turkey nevertheless acquired the terrain and realized the construction anyway. My interviewee was of the opinion that the mosque at the time of the interview had little role in the everyday religious life of Kyrgyz Muslims who preferred to attend other mosques in Bishkek, and that only the shop owners in the neighborhood attended the mosque during Friday prayers just for the sake of convenience. The mosque was referred to by the Kyrgyz as the Turkish mosque, the Serakhsi mosque, or the new central mosque as opposed to the Grand Mosque, the traditional, former central mosque in Bishkek. In that respect, the Serakhsi Mosque by virtue of its superior size, toppled down the latter as the central mosque, in a sense, robbing it of its name, reputation, and status. It goes without saying that my interviewee was not delighted in this transfer of status, and told me that this was the common opinion among the Muslims of Bishkek. That the Serakhsi Mosque is populated by Kyrgyz and Turkish *imams* and other religious personnel who trained Kyrgyz *imams* is being seen as ineffectual, as few Kyrgyz choose to worship there and a great majority of *imams* throughout Kyrgyzstan are trained by the *Tablighis* or *Tablighi* related personnel from Kyrgyzstan. It is clear that Turkey chose to impose the construction and operation of the said mosque against all odds with a view to thwart the *Tablighi* influence among local *imams* which is conspicuous in almost all mosques throughout the nation. More explanation of this phenomenon shall be offered in the present chapter.

The stylistic choice in architecture of the Serakhsi Mosque is also telling. Much like the colonial powers replicating their home church architecture styles in their colonies instead of adapting to existing local architecture, Turkey opted for constructing in Bishkek a large, classical Ottoman style mosque the likes of which are found in almost every town in contemporary Turkey in the

Therefore, the said former Grand Mosque remains the largest mosque in terms of attendance. True to what I have been told by all my non-*Tablighi* interlocutors, the former Grand Mosque attracts on any day the largest number of worshippers, a great number of whom are *Tablighis*. The interior of the mosque is packed with worshippers even during the weekdays, and Friday prayers are always very well attended as expected. The full attendance rate at the former Grand Mosque is partly attributable to its very central location in the heart of Bishkek but also to the fact that it draws a large number of *Tablighis*. Apparently, for the ordinary people who wish to attend impromptu *Tablighi* circles after each prayer this mosque is the right destination.

My first contact with the members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan, however, took place not in the former Grand Mosque, nor in any other mosque

hundreds, if not thousands, with no room for variation and local flavors. From the choice of monumental size to the lack of local stylistic contribution, to its faux-Ottoman style in a country that was never ruled by the Ottoman Empire, as well as the unilateral decision of Turkey to erect the mosque can be considered as a reflection of Turkish neo-Ottomanist foreign policy. For a critical assessment of neo-Ottomanism in architectural practices in contemporary Turkey, see Jeremy F. Walton, "Practices of Neo-Ottomanism: Making Space and Place Virtuous in Istanbul" in *Orienting Istanbul: European Capital of Culture?* Edited by Deniz Göktürk, Levent Soysal, İpek Tureli, (New York: Routledge, 2010).

That Ottoman mosques of such stature were uniquely *Selatin* mosques during the Ottoman era is also of importance for *Selatin* mosques were built in order to celebrate imperial victories where significant amount of loot was acquired and were financed by the sultans' personal purses. It is also of importance that the loot requirement was discontinued as Ottoman *Selatin* mosques beginning from Sultanahmet Mosque (also known as the Blue Mosque) were built without any imperial victory and loot. In that sense, I am of the opinion that Turkey is copying the later tradition of *Selatin* mosques, where, it seems, the construction follows not a real victory but stems from the desire to replicate a distant, more glorious past. The decontextualized nature of the Serakhsi mosque is also apparent in the fact that the namesake of the mosque Imam Serakhsi, an eleventh century jurist, was born in a town in the modern day Turkmen-Iran border, far from Bishkek both spatially and temporally, as he had no relation to Bishkek or Kyrgyzstan where conversion to Islam happened centuries after his time. Furthermore, from an architectural point of view, the *Selatin* mosques built in Turkey and abroad alike during the Republican era bear no similarity to their Ottoman predecessors which the Republican mosques are supposed to be based on, for the proportion of domes to the minarets, a *sine qua non* of the original *Selatin* mosques, was totally disregarded and contain instead various exaggerated architectural elements serving no structural function at all. This further suggests that such Republican era *Selatin* mosques, whether built in Turkey or abroad, were built not out of a demand from the worshippers or of necessity on part of lack of worshipping places, but as a means to glorify the ruling political cadres to whom the faux style provided a claim to continuum with a distant but more alluring past which sought to lend the said cadres legitimacy.

for that matter. The very same night I arrived in Bishkek airport on December 19th 2021, waiting to be picked up, I spotted Kyrgyz men clad in *Tablighi* clothes some of whom were accompanied by women in *hijab* from head to toe in the lounge. When I approached them to inquire whether they were *Tablighis* indeed, they affirmed their affiliation and asked me to come visit them at the former Grand Mosque in Bishkek the next day where the *Tablighis* were found in the greatest numbers and would be more than willing to talk to me about their experience with the *Tablighi Jamaat*. This was cue enough for me.

I visited the former Grand Mosque multiple times everyday for a period of ten days in December 2021, but mostly timed my visits so that I was there before the noon prayer, which of all the five daily prayer times drew the largest number of worshippers. Friday noons saw the largest gathering of the faithful in the mosque, as Muslim men anywhere in the world typically flock to mosques for the weekly Friday prayers even if they do not pray on a daily basis. When in the mosque, telling the *Tablighis* from the non-*Tablighi* attendants was not difficult for me as most of former sported long beards and were partly or fully clad in turbans and long *shalwar kameez*, their signature outfit. Young *Tablighis* were especially easier to spot for youngsters in Kyrgyzstan seldom have beards, whereas many elders traditionally can be seen with beards even though they may not be religious at all as beards are associated with elder men who are referred to as *aq-saqal* (*аксакал*) which means white beard in Kyrgyz and denotes a bearded elder man who is held in high esteem.⁶³⁹ There in the former Grand Mosque were also men, young and old, who wore the *ak-kalpak*, the traditional white high hat of felt worn by males.⁶⁴⁰ Also noteworthy was that even during the daily prayers

⁶³⁹ *Aq-saqal* courts were introduced in 1995 in order to emulate the traditional role of Kyrgyz elders in settling disputes without and before the intervention of judicial courts particularly in the remote rural areas.

⁶⁴⁰ It seems that the Kyrgyz *ak-kalpak* somewhat fell out of fashion for some time in the late 20th century only to make a comeback as a symbol of Kyrgyz national identity in recent years. Its national marker status has become official and its traditional manufacturing has been added to the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage of humanity in 2019.

the number of young attendants was no less than that of the elders. I found this surprising because in Turkey elders noticeably outnumber the young in mosque attendance. This phenomenon is not limited to mosque attendance; it is possible to spot in the streets of Bishkek as many bearded youth clad in religious attire as elder men of similar outlook. We shall elaborate more on the increasing religiosity among the youth in Kyrgyzstan in the next pages which is undeniably tied to the ubiquity of the *Tablighi Jamaat* nationwide.

While I came across many *Tablighi*-looking men outside the mosque, it became apparent to me very soon that interviewing them outside before the prayer was not very productive. Not only were they looking forward to getting inside the mosque as soon as possible as it was too cold outside for a chatter with a stranger asking questions about their affiliation with the *Tablighi Jamaat* but also they did not want to be spotted by others, possibly by acquaintances, interviewed by the said foreigner. Thus, my initial idea of getting them one-on-one out of their social environment did not go according to my plans. Therefore, I decided to give it another try inside the mosque after the prayer when they were all of them gathered around the *Tablighi* preachers which turned out to be a wise move. Once the prayer was over, almost half worshippers remained seated, the other half leaving the mosques to go about their business. Multiple preaching circles were promptly formed by the *Tablighis* who drew the remaining mosque attendants around themselves. Some of them drew larger crowds than the others whereas some *Tablighis* withdrew to a corner with only one person for a one-on-one study of Quran and the *Tablighi* literature. Each preaching group consisted of a preacher who usually stood up and apart from the audience who formed a semi-circle around the preacher who had his back to the wall. Some of the listeners were clad in the *Tablighi* style attires whereas others were in modern everyday clothes, even a few of them wearing suits. What struck me was the absence of an age-based hierarchy between the preachers and their audience.

<https://ich.unesco.org/fr/actualites/trente-cinq-nouveaux-lments-inscrits-sur-la-liste-representative-du-patrimoine-culturel-immatriel-de-lhumanit-13247>

That is, preachers were not exclusively bearded elder men, unlike what is normally expected in traditional Muslim societies where seniority is equated with wisdom and prized over youth, and the young are expected to listen to the old rather than give them sermons. Old and young were equally represented among both preachers and the audience, and there unfolded a particular scene where a young *Tablighi* preached and among his audience were very elder, bearded Kyrgyz men clad in turbans and *shalwar kameez* that matched the attire of the preacher. These preaching sessions lasted about fifteen minutes if it was a one way communication; but the duration was noticeably longer if the audience asked questions. Therefore, it is possible to argue that the preaching circles came in two forms where one was a monologue with the audience being passive listeners and the other where there existed between the preacher and the audience a two-way communication. The latter form of preaching in which I partook lasted more than an hour where the members of the audience asked short questions that called forth a lengthy round of answers. The questions in this particular case involved the devices of Satan and how people were led astray by him and how to avoid them. I had the impression, however, that these questions arose more from a desire to avoid a long monologue on the part of the preacher which might end up boring the listeners and to encourage others to ask questions than a genuine need for answers.

When I established a *connaissance* with a particular worshipper immediately after the prayer, they asked me to join the circles as they did before interviewing them. At the first of such an instant, my potential interlocutor led to a corner of the mosque where a couple of *Tablighis* were conversed with one another. It turned out that one of them, a middle aged man, whom I shall call TABLIGHI A in order to distinguish him from my other interlocutors *Tablighi* or otherwise, was a senior *Tablighi*. Having repeated that I was writing a thesis on the *Tablighi* activities in Kyrgyzstan and wanted to interview them, he told me that I was not to take photographs, produce voice records or make videos, but apart from that I was free to interview whomever I wanted and take notes. Nevertheless, he told me promptly that it would make more sense if I skipped asking questions

altogether and join the preaching circles right away as well as the next *Tablighi* tour in the coming days where I would learn more about what the *Tablighi Jamaat* stood for by emulating and observing them. This conduct was hardly unexpected as the *Tablighi Jamaat* abstained from leaving any written or recorded material behind, summarized in the *Tablighi* motto “*na parcha, na charcha, na kharcha*” (no publication, no publicity, no expenditure), already mentioned in the Introduction chapter.

My first question to my interviewees was whether they were affiliated with the *Tablighi Jamaat* and whether they considered themselves as the *Tablighis*. This blunt question was not always met with an affirmative answer. Some interlocutors replied that they were ordinary Muslims who needed no further epithet but they moved in the *Tablighi* circles. Others affirmed that they were indeed affiliated with the group and considered themselves *Tablighi*. In more than one instance, my interlocutors told me that they were not *Tablighis* all the while they were engaged in *tabligh* related activities such as reciting the *Tablighi* literature. It turned out that these men were not familiar with the epithet *Tablighi*, but called their engagements *dawat* and themselves *dawatçı*, oblivious to the fact that the *Tablighi Jamaat* and *dawat* referred to the same phenomenon. This experience is not singular because Mathijs Pelkmans notes in his study of short terms *tabligh* tours in Kyrgyzstan in which he participated as an observant that some of his *Tablighi* interlocutors were puzzled over learning the interchangeable nature of *dawat* and the *Tablighi Jamaat*.⁶⁴¹ There were instances when an outwardly *Tablighi* would deny their affiliation, but after becoming more relaxed would tell me that they were a part of the group. Obviously, some *Tablighis* were wary of foreigners asking questions about their relationship to the group, and consequently they did not openly acknowledge their affiliation with the group or admit to being a *Tablighi*. However, there was also something at play other than their simple and understandable desire to

⁶⁴¹ Mathijs Pelkmans, *Fragile Conviction: Changing Ideological Landscapes in Urban Kyrgyzstan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 104.

remain incognito to foreigners. Most *Tablighis* I interviewed opposed to identify and being labeled as such because they believed that the *Tablighi Jamaat*, in their opinion, did not constitute a separate identity, nor doing *tabligh* was any different than what a Muslim was supposed to do, and doing *tabligh* the *Tablighi* way to other Muslims was nothing but the very core of what any Muslim should do. A fifty-two-year-old man, whom I shall call TABLIGHI B, a *Tablighi* unmistakable in his typical outfit coupled with the beard, who accepted to be interviewed by me after the noon prayer answered my question as to why he was involved in *dawat*, which means *tabligh* in Kyrgyz, and why he was a *dawatçı*, that is, a *Tablighi* in Kyrgyz, in the following manner:

Why am I a *dawatçı*? Because Allah himself is a *dawatçı* [Аллах сам *даватчы*]. *Dawat* is an obligation [*farz*]. *Dawat* is the practice of Quran. Through *dawat* Quran makes one rise; through *dawat* Allah makes one rise. The true faith belongs to Allah only. Should one follow the path leading to Allah, he shall receive help from Allah. *Dawat* is the path leading to Allah. That is why I am doing *dawat*.⁶⁴²

Another interviewee, a male of fifty years of age, TABLIGHI C, responded to the same question that *dawat* was the greatest of all the *sunnas*, the greatest of all paths, also adding that he was involved in *dawat* because he wanted to please Allah, as should all Muslims.⁶⁴³

A fifty-year-old man, TABLIGHI D, with whom I had a conversation at a teahouse was very reluctant to answer my questions at first and his aversion to being asked questions about the *Tablighi Jamaat* went so far as to his accusing me of being a spy, an account of which I have mentioned earlier in the Second Chapter. Once he relaxed a bit, however, he became more conversant. On the topic of why he chose the way of *tabligh*, he replied:

⁶⁴² Interview conducted at the former Grand Mosque in Bishkek on December 20th 2021.

⁶⁴³ Interview conducted at the former Grand Mosque in Bishkek on December 20th 2021.

Dawat is the path of the Prophet Muhammad and his Rightful Companions. *Dawatçıs* live the same way the Rightful Companions and the four Rightful Caliphs did. We emulate their ways because they lived the rightful lives. The three out of four caliphs were murdered because they were deeply involved in *tabligh*.⁶⁴⁴

Yet another *Tablighi*, a twenty-year-old young male, TABLIGHI E, has told me that:

A *dawatçı* before everything else is nothing but an ordinary Muslim, a man in the street. *Dawatçıs* follow the way of the Prophet, the surest path, which involves '*al 'amru bi-l-ma'rūf wa-n-nahy 'ani-l-munkar*, that is, encouraging others about doing good deeds and forbidding them from committing evil ones.⁶⁴⁵ Any Muslim following the ways of the Prophet and doing such good deeds is a *dawatçı* and any Muslim deserves to be called that even if they do not join the *Tablighi Jamaat* or they do *tabligh* tours independent of Muslim groups.⁶⁴⁶

This particular mindset of the Kyrgyz *Tablighis* is not unique to the country, and is, in fact, in line with that of other *Tablighis* worldwide which is well documented in the academic literature dealing with the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Thomas Gugler has noted in his study of trans-national Islamic missionary organizations originating in the South Asia, which includes not only the *Tablighi Jamaat* but also the *Da'wat-e Islami* as well as the *Sunni Da'wat-e Islami ka maqbul-e 'ilm-e Tablighi Nisab*, that these movements, which elsewhere he identified their activities as "God selling" as an allusion to Laurence Moore's treatment of the

⁶⁴⁴ Interview, 26 December 2021, Bishkek.

⁶⁴⁵ There are multiple instances in Quran where this particular expression is used to encourage Muslims to spread the good deeds and forbid the harmful ones: Quran 3:104, Quran 3:110, Quran 9:71, Quran 9: 112, and Quran 31:17. The same particular conduct is encouraged in the *Hadith* literature as well. For a discussion of this Islamic injunction, see Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁶⁴⁶ Interview conducted at the former Grand Mosque in Bishkek on December 26th 2021.

American religion,⁶⁴⁷ have given rise to a process which he calls *Sunnaization*.

Gugler states that these movements:

... stress piety of action as well as the strict and literal imitation of the life of the Prophet (*sunnat an-nabī*) in all aspects of the daily routine. As missionary, the *dā'i*, the lay preacher has to act like a perfect, ideal Muslim, a Super-Muslim, so to speak. Selling Sunnas as salvation goods, the lay preachers are at the same time promoters and consumers of the commodities they promote. The commodity they are prompted to put on the market, promote and sell are themselves. As the three missionary movements compete for impact, politics of visibility is of the essence for them. The test they need to pass in order to be admitted to the social prizes they covet demands them to recast themselves as commodities, as products capable of catching the attention and attracting demand and customers [...]. With the interpretation of Sunnah as a normative system of life-styles (Weber/Troeltsch) the Missionary Movements transform the consumer into a commodity. They mark their lay preachers with easy [sic] recognizable symbols and marks of belonging, which exemplify modern processes of transformation in systems of religious practice [...] with the means of Identity Formation [...]. This process I want to call *Sunnaization*.⁶⁴⁸

The *sunnaization* and the subsequent *imitatio Muhammadi*, the strict imitation of Muhammad in every possible detail in life, according to Gugler, are of particular importance to the youth and women who are among the primary focus groups of the *Tablighi Jamaat* and other similar missionary Muslims groups. The *imitatio Muhammadi* serves not only as a means to generate otherworldly rewards which correspond in the terminology of religious economies approach to supernatural compensators, but also as a means through generating social capital to improve one's worldly lot in the highly structured and hierarchized Muslim societies where seniority and being male are prized whereas women and youngsters occupy lower rungs:

Youths and adult women particularly benefit from these ways of generating social capital relatively autonomously - especially denomination-specific trust

⁶⁴⁷ Thomas K. Gugler, "Sunna, Sunnaisierung und Imitatio Muhammadi", 225. The term "God selling" originates in Robert Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁶⁴⁸ Thomas K. Gugler, Parrots of Paradise – Symbols of the Super-Muslim: Sunnah, Sunnaization, and Self-Fashioning in the Islamic Missionary Movements *Tablīghī Jamā'at, Da'wat-e Islāmī, and Sunnī Da'wat-e Islāmī*, Panel Paper, 5, emphasis in original.

and authenticity capital – by imitating the Prophet. “Imitatio Muhammadi” is a means of generating *thawāb* (a reward) for the hereafter and a means of empowerment and increased ego strength in the here and now, as this symbolic capital enables adult women and young adults in particular to impact on Islamic practice in their immediate environment and hence experience the attention paid to Islamic authorities.⁶⁴⁹

The empowerment the *Tablighi* practice of *sunnaization* and the *imitatio Muhammadi* generates for adherents lacking in social capital was readily observable to me at the former Grand Mosque of Bishkek. As already mentioned in the present chapter, one of my *Tablighi* interlocutors was a young male, twenty years of age, who first impressed me as he delivered a typical *Tablighi* sermon to the mosque attendants after the noon prayer was concluded whom we shall refer to as TABLIGHI F. Clad in the quintessential *Tablighi* attire from the signature *shalwar kameez* to the head turban and sporting a beard which is a part of the *sunna*, as well as his soft-spoken manner of speech, the young preacher radiated an air of unwavering adherence to the *Tablighi* *modus vivendi* which conveyed his audience the message that this person, despite his young age, embodied the *only* correct way of being a Muslim through strict devotion to the *sunna* of the Prophet. Hence he commanded respect from the audience which included not only Western style clad middle-aged men but also much older, white bearded men clad in similar *Tablighi* attire. That in a society which privileges seniority and equates young age with lack of wisdom, a young man commanding such respect and gathering a large audience of much elder men was an unmistakable sign that the *imitatio Muhammadi* empowered the much younger preacher by conferring social and symbolic capital on him to the point that for his audience he was a leader to follow and imitate.

In another instant, I observed a similar case of empowerment enjoyed by a middle-aged Kyrgyz woman, PUBLIC E, who worked in a shop in the vicinity of the former Grand Mosque. While the woman told me that she did not apply the epithet of *Tablighi* to herself, she was indeed involved in *Tabligh* tours back in

⁶⁴⁹ Thomas K. Gugler, “Muslim Youths on Tablīghī Journeys”, 79.

her youth while she was a student in Moscow.⁶⁵⁰ As the *Tablighi Jamaat* has been declared illegal in the Russian Federation for quite some time, the timestamp for her movements with the *Tablighi Jamaat* around Moscow can be traced back to no later than 2009 when the *Tablighi Jamaat* was outlawed. PUBLIC E, clad in *hijabi* style with a headscarf and long dress that reached almost to her feet, told me that even before she joined the *Tablighi* tours in Moscow she was coming from a religious, practicing family but received a secular education. Her experience with the *Tablighi Jamaat* during her youth had improved her manners and she became even more devoted to the *hijabi* dress-code. She remarked that despite what she was taught at school and what was implied by secular Muslim women around her, she never experienced repression or subjugation on the part of *Tablighi* men who, in fact, respected safety and the privacy of women, and left them alone which allowed women on *Tablighi* tours like herself a greater level of freedom which they would hardly enjoy outside *Tablighi* tours. While my interlocutor no longer joins *Tablighi* tours, she still commands a higher level of respect from both her boss and the clientele of the shop where she works due to her past experience with the *Tablighi Jamaat*, *hijabi* outlook, Islamic knowledge, and manners in conformity with religious circles. The shop owner, a Turk by origin, whom I interviewed as well and who shall go by the sobriquet PUBLIC D, is a man of limited religious information and whenever a religious subject arises he consults her despite her being his employee and subordinate from a professional point of view. Similarly, clients, men and women, in search of a particular religious publication such as catechisms or a particular religious item such as prayer beads were asked by the shop owner to consult my interviewee. In both cases, TABLIGHI F and PUBLIC E, the social capital my interviewees generated thanks to their physically discernible adherence to the *sunna* per their involvement with the *Tablighi Jamaat* allowed them to transcend the usual subordinate social roles they were expected to fulfil, and instead exert more power among the people they interacted with on a daily basis, the young preacher at the mosque as a leader

⁶⁵⁰ Interview, 27 December 2021, Bishkek.

whom people of all ages looked up to, and the female shop clerk at her workplace in the vicinity of the same mosque, than they would otherwise do should they wore Western style attires and did not practice the *imitatio Muhammadi*.

The empowerment through affiliation with the *Tablighi Jamaat* and exercise of *imitatio Muhammadi* of individuals who normally lack necessary social and capital to assert for themselves a respected place in their society is a theme that comes up in the literature on the movement. Conducting a research on the re-Islamization of the youth in Pakistan and India, Amélie Blom and Aminah Mohammad-Arif noted that the youth who by affiliating with the *Tablighi Jamaat* and adopting the group's sartorial norms stood against those of their families and society and acquired as a consequence an autonomy of thought and action as well as equal standing with elders in social spaces which normally they were denied by elders in their gerontocratic societies.⁶⁵¹ These youth not only contested the authority of their families and their societies but also that of the traditional *'ulama* whose monopoly over textual interpretation became an object of contestation because the re-Islamized youth demanded an interpretation of Quran and *hadith* independent of the conventional loci of power and authority. In Pakistan, where since the late 1970s re-Islamization has become a source of status, the study has found out, young Muslims from underprivileged background overcame their inferiority complex thanks to their new-found Islamic identity.⁶⁵²

The *Tablighi* emphasis on the inviolability of the scripturalist exegesis of Quran and the *sunna* for the Muslim identity can hardly be attributed to the *Tablighi*

⁶⁵¹ Amélie Blom, Aminah Mohammad-Arif, *Réislamisation et (A)politisation des Jeunes en Inde et au Pakistan. Etude comparée de Bangalore et Lahore* In : *Politique et Religions en Asie du Sud: Le sécularisme dans tous ses états*, (Paris: Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2012), 50.

⁶⁵² Amélie Blom, *Réislamisation*, 51.

Jamaat alone, as other similar trans-national Muslim missionary groups, or any Muslim renewalist movement for that matter, underline the importance of the *sunna* and *Sharia* in defining how a model Muslim should be. However, the *Tablighi Jamaat* and other similar renewalist movements from the Indian subcontinent had a unique reason to emphasize *Sharia* in their renewalist endeavors. Yoginder Sikand argues that the ethnic, social, and sectarian heterogeneity of the Indian Muslim community forced the *Tablighi Jamaat* and other renewalists to emphasize the *Sharia* as the building block and corner-stone for Muslim identity marker:

It is important to note the concern of Muslim elites with the shari'a as a symbolic marker of identity, uniting Muslims while at the same time distinguishing them clearly from Hindus. This concern had much to do with fact -which the reformers lamented- that the Muslims of India (like the Hindus) did not actually constitute a single community. Sharp divisions of language, locality, ethnicity, sectarian affiliation and even caste divided the Muslims of the country, and in no sense of the term could they be considered a single homogenous, monolithic group. The attack on local customary practices, and their replacement by commitment to the universal, normative standard of shari'a-centred scripturalist Islam, thus served as a powerful symbolic resource in the process of constructing a pan-Indian Muslim community transcending internal divisions.⁶⁵³

It has been argued that historical and modern renewalist (*muslih*) movements in Islam differ in their respective points of reference, the former privileging the *sunna* whereas the latter emphasizing the Quran in their attempts to return the 'stray' Muslims to the 'original' state of affairs during Muhammad's time which was idealized by both historical and modern renewalists alike.⁶⁵⁴ This argument is noteworthy in the case of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, because unlike the other modern renewalists, according to my observations, the *Tablighi Jamaat* as a modern renewalist movement places more emphasis on the *sunna* than Quran, as evidenced by their strict adherence to what they consider the prophetic methods

⁶⁵³ Yoginder Sikand, "The Reformist Sufism of the Tablighi Jamaat", in *Sufism and the 'Modern' in Islam* Martin Van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell (eds) (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 132.

⁶⁵⁴ <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/islah>

including the signature *Tablighi* modus operandi, i.e., the door-to-door preaching style, as well as to their distinctive attires which they believe are modeled directly after the Prophet and his followers. According to Barbara Metcalf, the focal point in the *Tablighi Jamaat* is becoming what she calls ‘living hadīth’ by which two interrelated ends are aimed. “Followers attempt to *live by* hadīth but in such a way that they aspire to internalize the written/heard texts to the point that they ideally *become*, in a sense, living hadīth.”⁶⁵⁵ The *Tablighi* emphasis on *hadith* is unmistakable in that *Hikāyāt-i Sahāba*, the Stories of the Companions, the most read *Tablighi* book, which sets the standard of behavior Muslims *par excellence* exhibited in the time of the Prophet and his Companions and describes the deviation from this standard of Muslims of the present, is based on *hadith*.⁶⁵⁶ *Hikāyāt-i Sahāba* is a text meant to remind Muslims of how they are to behave after the model of the Prophet and his companions, and to warn them that they have failed in every aspect of behavior and conduct mentioned in the book which led them to the terrible situation they have ended up in. Nevertheless, the text does not focus on the failures of the present, but on the fact that the high standards set in the *hadith* are not incompatible with the present, and urges the audience to follow the steps of the Prophet and his Companions. The text based on *hadith* in that sense is of immense importance not only for telling Muslims how to act but to make them act so:

The books were always expected to be communicated in public settings, and, indeed, to be acted out. Not surprisingly, when cassettes and videos appeared, Tablighīs eschewed them out of their deep commitment to avoid anything that would distract from their emphasis on the human embodiment of their cherished texts-as well, no doubt, from a sense that such media not only communicated material that was potentially distracting from Islamic teachings, but that they also created forms of consciousness less amenable to those teachings.⁶⁵⁷

⁶⁵⁵ Barbara Metcalf, “Living Hadīth in the Tablighī Jama‘āt”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (Aug., 1993), 585, emphasis in original.

⁶⁵⁶ Barbara Metcalf, “Living Hadīth”, 586-687.

⁶⁵⁷ Barbara Metcalf, “Living Hadīth”, 591.

It has been noted in the literature on the *Tablighi Jamaat* that despite the movement's emphasis on *hadith* in learning Islam, the absence of teaching of the *usul* (method) of *hadith* and the superficial recitation of the *Kutub al-Sittah*, that is, the six most revered *hadith* collections, point to a lack of profound learning of Islam and *hadith*, precluding a systematic scholarly approach among the members of the *Tablighi Jamaat*.⁶⁵⁸

As to why the *Tablighi Jamaat* relies more on the *sunna* and *hadith* than Quran, it could be surmised that as Quran offers insight into a limited array of topics bound by the textual limit it comes with, the *sunna* is a much wealthier deposit of information and direction for Muslims almost to the point of being limitless.⁶⁵⁹ While the number of *'āyāts* (verses) relevant to Islamic law falls between two hundred and five hundred, the number of such *hadith* is considered to be in the thousands, up to seven thousand by some accounts.⁶⁶⁰ It is also plausible to consider that should Quran be singled out as a source of religious knowledge or even privileged over the *sunna* in extrapolating religious opinion, Quranic exegesis will inevitably include local, rational or more contemporary interpretations which might pose a serious threat to the consensus among the *Tablighi* circles on how Quran is to be interpreted. Additionally, reliance on Quran at the expense of the *sunna* and *hadith* is a characteristic of modern interpretations of Islam which tend to see the latter as contaminated with later additions, fabrications or local religious perceptions passing as the core of Islam, as opposed to what they consider as the unequivocal authenticity of Quran. Therefore, emphasizing Quran over the *sunna* would, to the *Tablighi Jamaat*, appear as an abomination that would lead to a situation where the Prophet might disappear altogether as a source of Islamic knowledge at the expense of the text

⁶⁵⁸ Fikret Efe, 227.

⁶⁵⁹ Thomas K. Gugler, "Muslim Youths on Tablighī Journeys", 78.

⁶⁶⁰ Thomas Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 94-95.

of Quran which is open to interpretations depending on time, culture, and place. Thus, for the *Tablighi Jamaat*, reliance on the *sunna* rather than Quran as the major source of influence and inspiration is consistent with the tenets of the group as heavy emphasis on the *sunna* discourages deviancy and bolsters group cohesion. The central position to the *Tablighi Jamaat* of the *sunna* is also discernible in the language employed by the group. The *Tablighi Jamaat* describes its acts as the revival and reinforcement of the *sunna* and ‘killing of innovations’ (*imātat al-bidat*) where the term *bidat* which is translated into English as innovation is positioned as the opposite of the *sunna*.⁶⁶¹

Moreover, it can be argued that Quran’s approach to communal matters is different than the idea of community that has been extrapolated from the body of the *sunna*. The Quranic approach is more inter-faith centered in the sense that a special emphasis is placed on the category called ‘*ahl al-kitāb* (People of the Book) where not only Christians and Jews but also Zoroastrians and Mandaeans are considered along with Muslims as members of a monotheistic community whose rights are protected and regulated through a *dhimma* contract.⁶⁶² Moreover, Quran is somewhat encompassing and embracing towards the People of the Book which suggests that all monotheistic people are to be treated by Muslims as respectable non-Muslims believers if not as equals. Quran reminds on several occasions Muslims and Muslims-to-be that there lived previous prophets who established their own monotheistic traditions and that the righteous among their followers shall be rewarded by God. For instance, Quran conveys to Muslims that:

Those who believe (in the Qur'an), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians,- any who believe in Allah and the Last Day,

⁶⁶¹ Thomas K. Gugler, “Muslim Youths on Tablīghī Journeys”, 78-79.

⁶⁶² Sharon M., People of the Book. In *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*. ed. J.D. McAuliffe, 2004, 36.

and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.⁶⁶³

This verse is of importance for it holds Muslims, who are referred to as the believers, and other members of monotheistic religions on an equal footing in that they are all promised rewards and exemption from divine injunction on the condition that they be true believers in Allah and do good deeds. Therefore, non-Muslim monotheists are also counted among the possible recipients of divine retribution of rewards. It is possible to argue that Quran emphasizes common points, convergences, and shared goals rather than differences and divergences between Muslims on the one hand and the People of the Book on the other.⁶⁶⁴ The body of the *sunna*, however, is more occupied with defining the Muslim identity and delineating the Muslim community to distinguish Muslims from non-Muslims, be them the People of the Book or all those that belonged to non-monotheistic traditions. In a similar vein, the focus of Quran is Allah where Muhammad has a faint presence in comparison to the Divine. Allah sets the scene and hands in the script to Muhammad in Quran with His omnipresence as if a director where Muhammad, a prophet among prophets, features as a little more than a bit-player as he is seldom directly mentioned in the text but always present in his capacity as a supporting actor who delivers the divine message where the originator of the message cannot attend Himself. After all, the Quranic verses, the book reminds often, are very words of Allah; not those of Muhammad and the latter is sent as a messenger like many others were sent before him.⁶⁶⁵ To

⁶⁶³ Quran 2:62 translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali.

⁶⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Quran also tells in 5:51 -translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali- to Muslims to not befriend Christians and Jews: "O ye who believe! take not the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors: They are but friends and protectors to each other. And he amongst you that turns to them (for friendship) is of them. Verily Allah guideth not a people unjust." For a treatment of the subject of the relationship between Muslims and the People of the Book within the context of Quran and specifically this verse see Hakan Çoruh, "Friendship between Muslims and the People of the Book in the Qur'an with special reference to Q 5.51," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* Vol. 23, No. 4, October 2012.

⁶⁶⁵ In fact it is a contentious matter among scholars of Quran whether the verses are words of

employ Erving Goffman's terms,⁶⁶⁶ as far as Quran is concerned, Muhammad is the animator and not the author which is Allah. In the *sunna* tradition, on the other hand, Allah's presence is only felt far away in the distance and only indirectly, whereas Muhammad is elevated to a much more pivotal role; that of a lead actor where he not only plays the script *mot-à-mot* but also improvises if need be, such as when the script is silent in a certain matter, and dominates the scene with his unmistakably strong persona evident in the way his companions hung on to his every word and movement, or so as suggested by the *sunna* and *hadith* corpus. Muhammad is the *auteur*, elevated to the status of the author in Goffman's terms, of what has been compiled in the later periods as the *sunna*; his movements and words, in accordance with and inspired by the divine revelation of which there is no doubt for Muslims, are nevertheless those of a mortal. This fact, however, did not suggest to most Muslims that they should be taken with a grain of salt as Muhammad has been considered by most Sunnis and all the Shi'a as infallible.⁶⁶⁷ For the purposes of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, which since its early days has aimed to preach only to Muslims to bring them back to the fold, the distinctiveness of the Muslim community from other spiritual communities is of the utmost import.⁶⁶⁸ *Fazail-e Amal*, one of the formative books for the

Allah or Muhammad. While a great majority of scholars support the idea that they are words of Allah, there are some who argue that Quran itself pronounces that they are Muhammad's as they are his pronouncement even if they were inspired by God. For a detailed discussion of skepticism in Classical Islam which includes debates regarding the question of divine speech, see Paul L. Heck, *Skepticism in Classical Islam: Moments of confusion*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014).

⁶⁶⁶ Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 144.

⁶⁶⁷ Muhammad's infallibility, and that of all prophets for that matter, has long been another contentious subject among Muslim scholars. While a majority of them considered prophets infallible *in toto*, some, including Ibn Taymiyyah, the 14th century precursor to modern Salafism, argued against the concept of absolute infallibility and suggested instead that prophets were infallible so long as their prophetic mission was concerned, but were not exempt from errors and mistakes in other aspects of life just like any mortal human being. For a treatment of Ibn Taymiyyah's argument against absolute infallibility of prophets see Saram Mafrouz, "Sural Al-'Abas and the Problem of the Infallibility of Prophet Muhammad", *Journal of Religious Thought* No. 23, Summer 2007.

⁶⁶⁸ This *Tablighi* principle is reminiscent of Jesus who told a Gentile woman asking for his help

Tablighis, for instance, draws the readers' attention to the imminent existential threat for the Muslim population in the British India or anywhere in the world where Muslims live. The author, Maulana Muhammad Zakariyya who was the nephew of Maulana Ilyas, places emphasis on the inter-religious surrounding where Muslims live which he believes fosters degenerating influences over the *ajlāf* and threatens the very existence of Islam.⁶⁶⁹ Moreover, Maulana Ilyas likened the *tabligh* tours he conducted in the Mewat region to the raiding parties of Muhammad during the Medina period. According to Kuiper, "it is not simply that the TJ' [Tablighi Jamaat] *da'wa* is a recovery of the Meccan pattern; it is also a transposition of the Medinan pattern in a Meccan key."⁶⁷⁰ Therefore, it would be consistent for the *Tablighi Jamaat* to place more emphasis on the *sunna* than Quran to conceptualize how it envisages the ideal Muslim community and how a Muslim should act in accordance with Islam especially when Muslims and non-Muslims are in contact on a daily basis. Also of utmost import for the *Tablighi Jamaat* is the central position of Muhammad in Islam for his *sunna* offers them a blueprint in great detail as to how to become a good Muslims, whereas relying solely on Quran for daily conduct would leave them with an enormous *terra incognita* that would definitely lead to discord among Muslims and possibly render the concept of an Islamic community impossible. Ali and Orofino note that:

For Tabligh Jama'at, Prophet Mohamamde is the Muslim leader, and now that he is deceased the institution of *imamate* (leadership) is enshrined not in human personality or human institutions but in Quran and Hadith.⁶⁷¹

to heal her daughter that "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Matthew 15:24)

⁶⁶⁹ Maulana Muhammad Zakariyya, *Fazail-e Amal*, 220.

⁶⁷⁰ Matthew Kuiper, *Da'wa and Other Religions*, 172.

⁶⁷¹ Jan A. Ali, Elisa Orofino, ..., 45.

It is therefore possible to make an argument that the very basic tenets of and the historical social conditions that begot the *Tablighi Jamaat* leave no room for the movement to privilege Quran over the *sunna* as most modern renewalist Islamic movements do.

The *Tablighi* stance to what is appropriate attire for Muslims and the sartorial practices of the group were a subject which inevitably came up during my interviews with the members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan. This is not unexpected, though as the *Tablighi* attire is very distinctive outside the Indian sub-continent, and wherever the *Tablighi Jamaat* is present they are persistently seen in their signature attires which inevitably draws attention and criticism on the part of the public. Nevertheless, members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* demonstrate unwavering perseverance in the face of such criticism, and continue to parade streets clad in the Pakistani style *shalwar kameez*, and in some instances, turbans. Coupled with this style is the long beards most *Tablighis* sport which only adds to the frustration of the critics of the group. The *Tablighi* insistence on their distinctive appearance at the face of criticism is similar to their characteristic *modus operandi*, door to door *Tabligh* visits which remains a *sine qua non* for the group but draws criticism from the public, as well.

The *Tablighi* attire as well as the long beards most of them seem to sport are a part of the *imitatio Muhammadi* which explains the perseverance of the appearance that has become a symbol of the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Long beards as well as their turbans and long garments are closely linked with the group's adherence to the *sunna*. Together, their preference for garments and beards put them at odds with the public not only in Kyrgyzstan but also almost anywhere where they operate because it is markedly different from what the public is accustomed to, except, of course, for the sub-continent where such an outlook is not out of place for Muslims.⁶⁷² My *Tablighi* interlocutors in Kyrgyzstan too

⁶⁷² My conversations with Cameroonian members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* suggest me that the Sub-Saharan Africa is another part of the world where the *Tablighi* attire does not cause much

were subject to constant criticism from both the public, to which they sought to address through preaching, as well as bureaucrats and intellectuals, which the *Tablighi Jamaat* went to great lengths to not antagonize, on the account of the way they were dressed. The *Tablighis* in Kyrgyzstan, therefore, were willing to take the risk of alienating many a Kyrgyz citizen by sticking to their ways. It appears, however, that my *Tablighi* interlocutors were unfazed and unapologetic about the public outcry. In fact, they were, if anything, rather adamant and even self-satisfied about it without exception.

One of my interlocutors from the former Grand Mosque of Bishkek, TABLIGHI A, replied upon my question whether he was bothered by the negative public reaction to the *Tablighi* attire that he was not dismayed in the least because his was the attire all Muslims should adopt regardless of ethnicity:

All Muslims, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Pakistani etc. are of the same nation. It is the nation of Islam, the *'umma*. It is of no import that we are from different ethnicities or that we speak different languages. We are all of us Muslims. Muslims should wear what the Prophet did. Our attire is the Islamic attire. What the *Tablighi Jamaat* are doing is not wrong. We are rather following the path of the Prophet which is the only correct path. All Muslims should abandon adopting Western customs and wearing Western attire. They should stop criticizing us for following the injunctions of Allah and the *sunna* and follow our example. Kyrgyz people are coming back to the path of Allah and the Prophet, God willing.⁶⁷³

TABLIGHI A did not elaborate on how he coped with public reaction to his attire and appearance, but my other interviewees mentioned this point. Clad entirely in the *Tablighi* style, TABLIGHI F, for one, as a young man would probably receive more negative reaction from the public than TABLIGHI A who

friction with the general population as not only African Muslims but also non-Muslims usually wear similar long attires and one's clothing rarely comes up as a point of controversy. I am of the opinion that this points to the overall lenient attitude of Africans with regard to clothing and to African tolerance for different ways of life. As a side note, firmly entrenched in a sub-tropical setting, the *Tablighi* attire seems to irk populations where climate is colder, demography more urban, and dressing habits, consequently, allow less variation. Not only Kyrgyzstan but also Turkey, Western Europe, and the Balkans tend to disfavour *Tablighi* style attire.

⁶⁷³ Interview, 23 December 2021, Bishkek.

is a middle aged man for whom such a foreign-looking attire would seem a bit less strange. TABLIGHI A said that:

My entire family being *Tablighi*, and being surrounded mainly by *Tablighis*, I did not receive any scolding from my acquaintances for wearing this attire. When we go on to *dawat* tours, however, I as well as my companions sometimes receive negative criticism from people who are not enlightened. People who are in the know, they respect us, though...How do we respond? A *dawatçı* is not someone who fights with people when he is faced with adversity. We follow the *sunna*. The Prophet himself was not welcomed by the infidels but he always responded with gentleness. That is why when ignorant people criticize our attires and beards we do not respond with acrimony but tell them that this is what the Prophet and his companions wore. We tell them this is the attire of Muslims and invite them to follow the example of the Prophet. There is difficulty of course, but if the Prophet bore with it, so should we.⁶⁷⁴

Obviously, coming from a family deeply involved in the *Tablighi Jamaat*, TABLIGHI A enjoyed the privilege of not having to cope with family members who disagreed with him. Nevertheless, negative public reactions became an almost daily occurrence for some *Tablighi* members. Constant harassment for *Tablighi* attire on the part of family members and acquaintances is a matter for distress for some *Tablighis*. For Tablighi D whose family does not belong to the *Tablighi Jamaat* but is still more religious than the average Kyrgyz, sartorial criticism is much often felt close to home:

My family is somewhat divided about the *Tablighi* attire. My parents who belong to the Communist mindset were critical at first, but got used to it in time. For my wife and children it is a non-issue even if they do not follow my steps. Some neighbours, however, took an issue with it and I have to explain them time and again that I am not wearing this to copy a foreign ideology or to impose a political stance. It has nothing to do with politics. We are not political, and this *shalwar kameez* I wear for it is the injunction of Allah and the *sunna* of the Prophet. My neighbours see that there is no harm coming to them from me, and they become more accepting...Sometimes during the *dawat* tours we encounter people of ignorance who hurl at us accusations about extremism. Which *Tablighi* did they see who was an extremist? This attire, making *du'ā*, doing *tabligh* tours, these are not extremism. In fact, anyone involved with the *dawatçıs* is free from radicalism and extremism. Following the true path of Allah and the Prophet keeps *dawatçıs* away from such evils.⁶⁷⁵

⁶⁷⁴ Interview, 23 December 2021, Bishkek.

⁶⁷⁵ Interview, 23 December 2021, Bishkek.

Some members of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, however, face even more negative reactions. TABLIGHI C, a middle-aged man, has recounted how he faced such reactions in the past and compared his experience to the younger *Tablighis*’:

I became involved in *dawat* tours when *dawat* was new in Kyrgyzstan. In those years people were not accustomed to our attire and *dawatçis* faced with criticism in towns. I did not immediately abandon my former, Western attire. I used to go on to *tabligh* tours clad in Western garments. However, as time passed, my faith became stronger as I became more attached to the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Then I decided to go *Tablighi* style and adopted the *shalwar kameez* and the turban. If people criticize my attire, it is because they are not happy with this country becoming more Muslim. As this is the *sunna* of the Prophet, *dawatçis* wear them no matter what. We have beards too for this is the *sunna* of the Prophet. Such criticism coming from close friends and relatives is saddening, but that did not turn me from the path of the Prophet. This is the price the Prophet paid for doing *tabligh* to infidels and it is all the more reason *dawatçis* will bear with it. Patience in the face of adversity is the *sunna*, and when *dawatçis* face with such problems, they follow the path of the Prophet. It tests and shows the strength of one’s faith...Our young brothers do not sometimes wear *shalwar kameez* because they do not want to irk others. They join the *dawat* tours in Western clothes. The stronger their faith becomes, the more they will want to wear Muslim clothes. Because they are young they cannot resist their families and friends for the moment. They fear friends will abandon them. Even the Prophet was abandoned by some of his family members, but he did not stop obeying Allah. The true path is before them. We do not force them to wear *Tablighi* clothes nor to sport beards at once, but encourage them to do so. Most elderly people went through similar testing times and came through with the right decision to follow the Prophet. Allah will reward those who do not stray from the right path as He promises in Quran.⁶⁷⁶

The *Tablighi* insistence on strict adherence to the example of the Prophet including even the smallest of matters in life is well noted in the literature. Eva Amrullah notes in her study of the participation of upper class women in *Tablighi* activities in Indonesia that not only women from the lower classes but also, and particularly, those from the upper class segments of Indonesian Muslim society have increasingly displayed since the mid-1970s a propensity to follow the rules set by the *Tablighi Jamaat* in almost any matter in life which she observed to be a continuation of Maulana Ilyas’s original teachings who:

⁶⁷⁶ Interview, 23 December 2021, Bishkek.

set the main rule of the movement that all the followers of the Tablighi must follow the examples set by the Prophet and his male and female companions in every area of their lives, from small things like the way to dress, eat, and sleep to how they see the world. For women in the Tablighi, in particular, the lifestyle of the Prophet's wives and his female companions has become their role model.⁶⁷⁷

Amrullah's observation is in harmony with Gugler's who uses in his study of short-term youth missionary activity in South Asia the terms 'sunna systems' and 'sunnaization' to describe how the *Tablighi* practice of *imitatio Muhammadi* transformed everyday practices such as clothing and beards as observed in my interviews in Bishkek are into religious rituals:

The term "sunna systems" is used to refer to Islamic images, symbols, and behavioral systems that enable religious practice to expand in everyday life and thus integrate everyday worlds. These sunna systems are associated with the transsubstantive power to transform everyday routine into a quasi-religious ritual, making Islam a lifestyle by "sunnaizing" aspects of everyday life, in particular people's clothing, speech, and behavior.⁶⁷⁸

The *Tablighi* perseverance in the face of public criticism for their Pakistani-style attire is in line of the postulations of the religious economies approach. In Dean Kelley's strictness thesis in his highly debated book titled *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* dated 1972, which was explained in the Chapter 2, the author has studied in detail the phenomenon, long observed in the United States of America since the late 1960s, as to why conservative churches were still growing while mainline churches stagnated and even receded in terms of church attendance and member commitment.⁶⁷⁹ Kelley noticed this contrasting denominational tendency between conservative and liberal churches in his capacity as an executive of the National Council of Churches, the largest

⁶⁷⁷ Eva F. Amrullah, 140.

⁶⁷⁸ Thomas K. Gugler, "Muslim Youths on Tablighī Journeys", 69.

⁶⁷⁹ Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977).

ecumenical body in the USA.⁶⁸⁰ Kelley formed a recipe for failure of religious organizations, that is, mainline churches which already lost membership. The recipe was as follows:

It is generally assumed that religious enterprises, if they want to succeed, will be reasonable, rational, courteous, responsible, restrained, and receptive to outside criticism; that is, they will want to preserve a good image in the world....It is expected, moreover, that they will be democratic and gentle in their internal affairs...They will also be responsive to the need of the people, and will want to work cooperatively with other groups to meet those needs...They will not let dogmatism, judgmental moralism, or obsessions with cultic purity to stand in the way of such cooperation and service.⁶⁸¹

Kelley suggested that all these points were realized by mainline churches which he called dying churches which saw steady decline in membership followed by a decrease in financial contributions.⁶⁸² In Kelley's study, strict churches are such churches that encourage their members to adhere to not so easy rules, stretching from frequent church attendance to expecting monetary and temporal commitment to the church activities to behavioral patterns unusual and to a great extent unpalatable, even unacceptable to the wider public:

⁶⁸⁰ There was a very lively debate in the United States academia in the second half of the 1970s as to not only the dynamics of this denominational contrast but also about the very accuracy of Kelley's claim that such a contrast ever existed. Even the in the preface to the second edition of the book dated 1977, the author admits that doubts are raised among clergy as well as scholars of religion whether the phenomenal growth of the conservative churches was an ongoing tendency, citing several sources which claimed that they too started to show signs of stagnation like liberal churches had already done in the preceding decade. Nevertheless, independent from Kelley's thesis, the conservative churches remain as robust as ever in the American context in the 21st century which is evidenced by the mushrooming Evangelical churches throughout the nation and the extent to which they remained resilient in the face of growing discontent among liberal segments of American society towards the Evangelical churches as well as their remarkable ability to adapt to what has been considered as televangelism and the marketization of religion. Also evidenced is that the same phenomenon takes place also outside the United States at least since the last decade of the 20th century due to the breakneck growth of Evangelical churches in the Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and East Asia, particularly in South Korea and the Philippines. It is part of my thesis that such a tendency can also be discerned in the Islamic world due to the rapid expansion in number and visibility of trans-national Islamic movements such as the *Tablighi Jamaat*, which in certain aspects shows striking similarities to Evangelical churches, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormonism.

⁶⁸¹ Dean Kelley, xv-xvi.

⁶⁸² Dean Kelley, xvii-xviii.

[w]e could expect such firm adherence of members to the group's beliefs that they would be willing to suffer persecution, to sacrifice status, possessions, safety, and life itself for the organization, its convictions, its goals. We would see wholehearted *commitment* on the part of members, each individual's goals being highly or wholly identified with -or derived from- those of the group [...]⁶⁸³

Kelley observes that growing churches are what would be called 'wrong churches' in the sense that:

They refuse to recognize the validity of other churches' teachings, ordinations, sacraments. They observe unusual rituals and peculiar dietary customs. [...] They disregard the "decent opinions of mankind" by persisting in irrational behaviour, such as Jehovah's Witnesses' refusal of blood transfusions. They try to impose uniformity of belief and practice among members by censorship, heresy trials, and the like.⁶⁸⁴

Kelley goes on to formulate his own explanation for the growth and resilience of conservative churches where he postulates that the growing churches, be them Evangelical, Mormon, or black Muslim, grow due to two shared dynamics: first, their ability to provide adherents with answers to big, essential, and sometimes ontological questions such as what the point of life is, or why bad things happen to people, and thus to offer a meaning to existence and life, and secondly, their emphasis on seriousness in the form of commitment to the cause.⁶⁸⁵ As for the first dynamic, that is, successful religious movements creating meaning to life, Kelley postulates that growing churches display a set of traits which are harsh and not necessarily compatible with modern values found in what he calls lenient churches which are in decay. These traits are absolutism, conformity, and fanaticism. Absolutism is the claims that the religious group in question has an absolute claim to the Truth so that other beliefs are considered plain wrong which is also followed by the claim that the group has answers to every question,

⁶⁸³ Dean Kelley, 26.

⁶⁸⁴ Dean Kelley, 57.

⁶⁸⁵ Reginald W. Bibby, "Why Conservative Churches *Really* are Growing: Kelley Revisited", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* Vol. 2 (June 1978), 129.

thus creating a closed-system of meaning and value as well by a total refusal of criticism of the values of the group.⁶⁸⁶

Kelley also espouses that meaning is much more than words, concepts, or ideas; in fact meaning not backed by commitment would not amount to more than a heap of words. “We want something more than a smooth, articulate verbal interpretation of what life is all about. Words are cheap; we want explanations that are validated by the commitment of other persons.”⁶⁸⁷ He explains that:

[...] the quality that enables religious meanings to take hold is not their rationality, their logic, their surface credibility, but rather the *demand* they make upon their adherents and the degree to which that demand is met by *commitment*...The concepts of the *Book of Mormon*, the *Doctrine and Covenants*, and the other sacred writings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are no more logical, reasonable, or credible than those of other religious movements-possibly less so. But these are evidently not the qualities that determine the effectiveness of religious meanings and the movements that bear them. The latter can apparently grow and flourish upon what would seem to many the most singular concepts. But more significant than the content of the faith for its success are the demands made upon would-be members and the commitment with which they respond.⁶⁸⁸

So, growing, strict churches come also with rules regarding behavior and conduct which transform values and meanings into a closed-system of conduct which in Kelley’s systematization translates into discipline and conformity where the commands of charismatic leadership is not open for questioning, hence the term church strictness. These strict rules keep members of such strict groups apart from non-members, creating a spirit of community and solidarity among members all the while forcing them to abide by the rules of the group at great expense to the extent that members may face inconvenience and social exclusion due to their unconventional behavioral patterns and habits set by their

⁶⁸⁶ Dean Kelley, 84.

⁶⁸⁷ Dean Kelley, 54.

⁶⁸⁸ Dean Kelley, 55.

church. Kelley's postulation was that even though such strict rules posed remarkable inconvenience for members, it allowed them to enjoy the benefits of membership to a religious group, including peace of mind, finding a meaning to life, and facilitation of following rules thanks to group solidarity. People ready and willing to devote their energy to such strict demands on the part of religious organizations are referred to as 'virtuosi of religion' by Kelley who borrowed the term from Weber.⁶⁸⁹ Kelley offers the two-year full time missionary activity requirements by Mormon Church as an example:

Growth of membership to the Mormon Church occurs not *in spite of* its high demands upon its members but *because* of them. That is, no one would spend two years of his life propagating the meanings of Mormon religion if he did not consider them highly important. That is the real test of their depth and validity—not whether some gold plates were delivered to Joseph Smith by the Angel Moroni...The gold plates of the Angel Moroni derive their convincingness from their place in a powerful stream of social experience in which thousands of individuals and families over more than a century have invested their time, money, effort, devotion, and their very lives. This stream of shared experience brings to members a system of explanations, a sacred cosmos (in Berger's terms) which makes life understandable to them, not by virtue of the system's inherent sense, but because it is validated by a tremendous and transforming movement which has lifted its followers out of their old homes and humdrum lives and told them who they are and what the world is all about and what they are about to do about it.⁶⁹⁰

What reinforced such group solidarity is the peculiarity of the group with regard to dress and speech conduct:

Some eccentric traits that single them out from the rest of the population, often for ridicule, obloquy, discrimination, persecution [...] These peculiarities are the uniform of the group, which demonstrates to all that they are different from other people. These are their shared stigmata of solidarity, their badge of belonging. The ridicule and persecution it draws down, even upon children, is an important element in reinforcing the mutual support within the group and in increasing their separation from the hostiler outside world. They often display their strange uniform with pride and in full expectation of persecution. In fact, the latter is often welcomed, if not courted, as an opportunity for demonstrating

⁶⁸⁹ Dean Kelley, 100, emphasis in original.

⁶⁹⁰ Dean Kelley, 54.

their fidelity to the faith, their willingness to suffer for it [...] Even persecution may redound to the reinforcement of social strength by increasing the cost of belonging, heightening the demand upon members, raising the validation of the meanings carried by the group.⁶⁹¹

Also contributing to solidarity is that potential free riders who did not wish to contribute financially and temporally to group activities or abide by strict rules but still wanted to reap the benefits in the form of goods deeds and divine approval would fail to keep up with the group and drop out soon. Absence of free riders, in turn, enhanced the benefits rule-abiding church members enjoyed. While Kelley contends that the harsher demands a religious movement makes on its adherents the fewer people will respond positively and become followers, he also believes that “the greater the individual and aggregate impact of those who do respond.”⁶⁹² Thus, benefits arising from membership to strict churches are club goods.

The *Tablighi Jamaat*, by asking, but not forcing, its followers to follow strict rules creates club goods in the shape of religious satisfaction, sense of community, and rewards such as *thawāb* (God’s approval through goods deeds and piety). By this way, those potential members who desire to benefit such rewards but unwilling to make contribution to the cause in the form of time, effort and, money or face undesired consequences, such as familial or peer disapproval, that come with being a *Tablighi* are discouraged to become attached to the group until they decide to follow suit. In the case of the original study by Kelley, church membership, that is, membership to strict churches, necessitate that potential members financially contribute to the church or church activities. The case of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, however, is different in that the *Tablighi Jamaat* does not require its members to make financial contribution to the organization. Indeed, the *Tablighi Jamaat* does not ask its members or potential members make financial contribution in any form other than covering their own

⁶⁹¹ Dean Kelley, 80.

⁶⁹² Dean Kelley, 101.

costs during preaching tours, but they are asked to commit their time for the cause. PUBLIC D, whose involvement with the group is, in his own words, more of a mercenary nature than arising from a desire to adopt *Tablighi* conduct, informed me that:

I am critical of the *Tablighi Jamaat* for many reasons including their tendency to leave behind their families and to go on *tabligh* tours. However, they have their own merits such as their policy of not asking for money, unlike any other Muslim group both here in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere for whom it is all about money and nothing else. I have been involved with many Islamic groups both out of piety and in order to keep up with the rest of my milieu, to avoid seeming an outlier. The *Tablighis* ask you to spend not your money but your time for the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Nor do they collect *himmeh* [money collected from members for the cause]. Never was I asked to donate money whenever I joined their tours. Money is a non-issue for them. Your time is what they ask from you.⁶⁹³

A former *Tablighi* interviewee, an ethnic Uzbek from Osh who lives in Turkey for about the past seven years whom I shall call PUBLIC C due to his leaving the group a couple of years after having been involved with the *Tablighi* circles for a while in Kyrgyzstan before moving to Turkey, has informed me that once on a *tabligh* tour, one is expected to cover their own financial expenses and relying on others' charity was very much frowned upon, except for when benefactors declared that they were willing to cover the costs of those who wished to join a preaching tour but lacked the means to do so.⁶⁹⁴ In such charitable cases, covering the costs of the needy is considered by the *Tablighis* as a meritorious act in line with the *sunna*. Therefore, principally financial commitment in the *Tablighi* case occurs not in the form of putting one's money for the cause, but takes the shape of not becoming a financial burden to others and of taking one's own responsibility. Other than this point, however, the *Tablighi Jamaat*, like strict churches Kelley has studied, demands that anyone interested in joining the group commit time and effort to get actively involved in daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly preaching tours, take the trouble to read the *Tablighi* catechism on a

⁶⁹³ Interview, 23 December 2021, Bishkek.

⁶⁹⁴ Telephonic interview, 10 December 2021, Ankara.

regular basis, and bring their lives in line with the *sunna*. Their belief is that anyone doing these will improve their religious standing and, as a consequence, their worldly lives too will improve due to God's approval. Anyone who is not ready to make such sacrifices will not be accorded by God the rewards they covet for which they do not commit themselves.

Efforts demanded of members by the *Tablighi Jamaat* do often lead to social repercussions that members might need to face with and will, hopefully, come to terms with. Social exclusion by family, relatives, friends, peers, and the public due to membership to the *Tablighi Jamaat* and the *Tablighi* code of conduct including wearing *shalwar kameez* and sporting beards is one such daunting repercussion as TABLIGHI E's account has revealed. Long periods of absence due to *tabligh* tours is another source of social friction that *Tablighis* are faced with on a regular basis. Especially members whose families do not belong to the *Tablighi Jamaat*, or novice and potential members may go through difficult times with family, employers, colleagues, and other social acquaintances; whereas those whose families are also involved in the *Tablighi Jamaat* tend to have much smoother experiences. The nature of the expected conduct from adherents to the *Tablighi Jamaat* both during and outside *tabligh* tours is very structured and taxing on members as well. One Kyrgyz interviewee, TABLIGHI D has given me a detailed account of what transpired during preaching tours. Extolling the virtues of becoming a *Tablighi*, my interlocutor told me that it required hard work just as being a pious Muslim was a demanding task for Satan strove to lead Muslims astray all the time. Therefore, he continued, *tabligh* service was simple but requires one to check oneself constantly:

Satan tells you that you are above others and that sleeping in mosques during *tabligh* is lowering yourself. He tells you that there are easier and more pleasant ways to please Allah, that such efforts are in vain. No, *tabligh* is the only way to follow the path of the Prophet because the Prophet did nothing but *tabligh*. *Tabligh* is not just going to villages and telling people to become Muslims. *Tabligh* is, above all, telling yourself that you should become a Muslim by way of practicing what the Prophet practiced and told his Exalted Companions to do. The Prophet and his Companions walked from town to town from door to door to tell infidels that Islam is the only way for salvation from the Eternal Fire. It

was no easy task. When they did this they improved their conduct and strengthen their faith while they convinced infidels to follow suit.⁶⁹⁵

TABLIGHI D went on to explain me how doing *dawat* worked, including staying at local mosques during winter and summer. As *dawatçıs* do not seek the luxury of their homes, harsh weather does not stop them, and they sleep on the ground. Nor did they accept money or food from locals, my interlocutor also added. Subsequently, my interlocutor explained that *dawat* work entailed forming two groups where the first group stayed at the mosque and the other went from door to door to inform Muslims of their arrival offering locals a brief sermon as to the virtues of enjoining what was right and forbidding what was evil. The second group, he continued, asked people to come to the mosque for prayer and stay there afterwards to listen to the sermon to be delivered by *dawatçıs*. The first group, on the other hand, prepared the mosque for Muslims. If the toilets were not clean, they cleaned them the first thing. If the grounds were not clean, they swept and cleaned the grounds. This, TABLIGHI D stated, was a test for the ones who joined the *tabligh* tour because:

...Satan tells you that you are not there for cleaning toilets. Satan tells you that cleaning toilets has nothing to do with becoming a Muslim. He whispers in your ear that even if there are those who believe that such deeds are part of becoming a good Muslim, you do not need to do it because you are above such condescending acts. He tells you that this is too hard and dirty work. He wants you out...Now, if there are novices or newcomers among the group, which we make sure there are because such work is essential for *tabligh*, we keep them in the first group and do not let them go around knocking on doors to deliver sermons to Muslims. The novices are not told to do the cleaning. However, even the most experienced, the most seasoned *dawatçıs* start cleaning the toilets as soon as the groups are formed. Therefore, the novices observe that there is work to be done and that it is to be done by the entire group, old and young, rich and poor. If they are serious about improving their faith, they join the cleaning efforts. Nevertheless, there are newcomers who are repulsed by such work and they do not help others to do the cleaning. They simply observe. We never tell them to go away. However, they realize how a *dawatçı* is expected to behave and what *dawat* work entails, and if they realize that they should first practice what they preach, they join others. If they believe that they cannot clean toilets, then they also come to the belief that *tabligh* work is too much for them. Then they stop coming altogether. Maybe when they realize that Satan led them astray,

⁶⁹⁵ Interview, 20 December 2021, Bishkek.

they will *inshallah* change their minds and join *tabligh* no matter what. That is why we keep doing *tabligh* to others with patience. Maybe they are not mentally ready yet, but they may *inshallah* be so in the future.

Explained to me many times by my interlocutors, doing *tabligh* cannot be reduced to telling others about the merits of and how to become a good Muslim. It is, to the Tablighis, best understood as inculcating piety by preaching others is already well established as a central tenet of the *Tablighi Jamaat*.⁶⁹⁶ Arsalan Khan notes that:

Each day on a *dawat* tour, a set of Tablighis are assigned the task of buying and cooking food and serving others, and generally ensuring that everyone's needs are taken care of so that they can focus on *dawat*. *Khidmat* [work or service] is distributed on a rotating basis and everyone must do it. It is considered essential work not only because it allows others to devote themselves to *dawat*, but, crucially, also because the Tablighi doing the *khidmat* cultivates the virtues of humility and patience.⁶⁹⁷

I have asked my *Tablighi* interlocutors which religious options laid before them before they finally settled with the *Tablighi Jamaat* and what influenced their decision to get attached to it rather than other religious organizations available to them. By the first question I intended to investigate whether the religious marketplace was free, semi-free, or totally monopolistic in Kyrgyzstan. While there are multiple academic and non-academic sources that inform researchers as to the nature of the religious marketplace in Kyrgyzstan, it is of great importance to inquire the *Tablighi* point of view, or that of any Kyrgyz for that matter. This question turned out to produce a wealth of subjective but very informative viewpoints coming from people of various backgrounds. Particularly older *Tablighis* tended to compare the socialist era with the independent Kyrgyzstan to give a better perspective as to how the *Tablighi Jamaat* contributed to the religious atmosphere in the nation. TABLIGHI C, for one, told me that during the Soviet times when Islam was not banned outright but was not taught at

⁶⁹⁶ Arsalan Khan, 57.

⁶⁹⁷ Arsalan Khan, 60.

schools and practicing it was very difficult, people had very little information about their religion. Therefore, he said, people did not live according to Islamic principles; wasting their money away on gambling and alcohol. In contrast, my interlocutor noted that the independence era saw an influx of Muslims coming abroad which facilitated learning about Islam; but soon it turned out that most of these Muslims brought with them *Wahhabi* ideology and extremism. TABLIGHI C compared and contrasted other Islamic movements with the *Tablighi Jamaat*:

The *dawatçis* did not propagate Wahhabi ideology. They taught us pure Islam, the *sunna* of the Prophet. That is why we have no problems in Kyrgyzstan. That is why we have no war, no terrorism, no fighting and extremism in this country. Because we have *dawatçis*. That is why they have civil war in Syria, Yemen and Turkey because there *dawatçis* are not allowed. Where you have the *Tablighi Jamaat*, there is peace and goodness... We had the Wahhabis, the Evangelicals and other Christian missionaries wandering around, calling people to come to their ranks. There were initially people who were impressed by the Wahhabis because we had no idea as to what Islam was about. There were few Kyrgyz who became infidels and became Christians. But those who learnt Islam from the *dawatçis* are safe from such troubles.⁶⁹⁸

A very soft spoken elder, TABLIGHI B was always very forthcoming about my questions and answered my question in detail as well:

There are so many Islamic groups operating in Kyrgyzstan but only *dawatçis* remain outside of politics. The others are all political. The genuine Islamic life is only possible by doing *tabligh*... I did not join other Islamic organizations. When *dawatçis* came to this mosque, I came across them doing prayer and talking about Islam. They told us about Allah, the Prophet, the *sunna*. No politics was involved. They did not call us to do jihad. They did not ask us to resort to violence. Islam is not about taking up arms. It is about doing the *tabligh* and doing good deeds. No one asks you to give them money or to send your sons to fight abroad. We have no fighters in Syria because our government is good to Islam and *dawatçis* are to be found everywhere. Otherwise we would have many problems... People are free to practice Islam in Kyrgyzstan. There are other groups as well and one can join them, as well if that is what they want to do, so long as they do not go into politics and resort to extremism.⁶⁹⁹

⁶⁹⁸ Interview, 21 December 2021, Bishkek.

⁶⁹⁹ Interview, 20 December 2021, Bishkek.

Most of my interlocutors had no prior exposure to Islamic life before they joined the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Therefore, the *Tablighi* way of Islam was the first they became acquainted with. PUBLIC D, on the other hand, had priorly experimented with many Islamic groups, all from Turkey, both in Turkey, Russia, and Kyrgyzstan before he joined *tabligh* tours. Therefore, he is very different to other interlocutors in that he was already exposed to various Islamic approaches before he went on to *dawat* tours in Kyrgyzstan. He was a disillusioned man with regard to Islamic groups, had a very low opinion of them, and was forthcoming with his criticism of the ones he was involved with before he met with the *Tablighis*. PUBLIC D was much more satisfied with the *Tablighi Jamaat* once he became acquainted with them in Kyrgyzstan. While critical of the *Tablighis* on the account that they are an ignorant lot as well, he sees them a sincere group with regard to Islamic practice and their tenets appealed to him for the group stayed away from Sufism:

The *Tablighis* are genuine Muslims. They never ask for money. They do not force you into a cage. They are sincere for they practice what they preach, and they believe what they preach. They are not deceitful or avaricious like Turks. Unlike us [Turks] who operate their own mosques and never go to mosques of other groups, the *Tablighi Jamaat* does not own or operate mosques but visit every mosque out there in Kyrgyzstan. The *Tablighis* do not have *sheikhs* or leaders whom they follow blindly. They have the *şura* where they discuss what to do and how to do it. You can express yourself freely during the *şura*. These *Tablighis*, they are ignorant people. There is pandemics right now. I am vaccinated in Turkey because there is no vaccination here in Kyrgyzstan. I am yet to see a Kyrgyz who is vaccinated. The *Tablighis* do not get vaccinated and when you talk about the pandemics they say Allah protects them and one has to submit to Allah's will. What a nonsense! Once I was on a tour with them in a village. One *Tablighi* became very sick. He developed a kidney problem in the village and he could hardly walk let alone do *tabligh*. Then they formed a *şura* group to discuss what to do about it. I told them this man had to see a doctor. He needed to go back to Bishkek; staying with the group would do him no good. They discussed it and listened to my words, too. I give it to the *Tablighis* that they listen to everyone's opinion. They do not silence you. However, in the end they decided at the *şura* that he should not go back to town but stay with the group as planned.⁷⁰⁰

⁷⁰⁰ Interview, 20 December 2021, Bishkek.

When I asked PUBLIC D why he went on to tours with them if he found them ignorant and conditions unbearable, he confessed that his clients were mostly *Tablighis* and he became involved with them due mostly to keep his social circle satisfied. As the group did not ask for monetary contribution, which was obviously a very sensitive topic for him, he saw no reason to abandon the *Tablighis*. He further told me that no matter how long we conversed about the *Tablighi Jamaat*, I had to go on a tour with them on the weekend to see for myself what they were. His invaluable advice was multifarious, ranging from what to wear during the harsh winter conditions to how to behave, and the etiquette of *dawat*:

You should keep silent, observe them, and do as they do. Of course you might have a language barrier there because in the villages people speak Kyrgyz rather than Russian. They arrange minibuses for each group to transport them to the villages or neighborhoods to be visited. For a three day tour they choose villages that are not very far from Bishkek. There is a man inside the mosque [TABLIGHI A] who has the telephone number of every *imam* around Bishkek. They are constantly in contact to figure out which mosques are available. There are usually multiple mosques where the *imam* is ready to host the *Tablighis*. If you go with them do not burden yourself with food and water because if you bring your own food it would look very selfish. The group buys the food communally.⁷⁰¹

What my interlocutor has told me about the hardships one has to endure during the long winters while on *tabligh* tours is also reflected in Emil Nasritdinov's study where a would-be *Tablighi* had to bear with similar harsh conditions with nothing but a tiny blanket.⁷⁰² The hardships did not stop Nasritdinov's interlocutor from going on to other *dawat* tours; in fact he became a *Tablighi* himself after joining a few tours. When I asked PUBLIC D whether I could ask to be included in a group that would, instead of a village, visit a mosque inside Bishkek in case I needed to discontinue the tour and go back home, he told me

⁷⁰¹ Interview, 20 December 2021, Bishkek.

⁷⁰² Emil Nasritdinov, "Translocality and the Folding of Post-Soviet Urban Space in Bishkek: Hijrah from 'Botanika' to 'Botanicheskii Jamaat'," *Mobilities, Boundaries, and Travelling Ideas: Rethinking Translocality Beyond Central Asia and the Caucasus*. Edited by Manja Stephan-Emmrich and Philipp Schröder (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2018), 332.

that it would be a very wrong and unwise thing to suggest. It would, he elaborated, irk them extremely and I would make a terrible impression on the *Tablighis* for they would take me for an haughty person who placed himself apart from and above others which went against the tenets of the *Tablighi Jamaat*. It turned out it was the leader of the group, TABLIGHI A, who got to decide who would go to which mosque and the *Tablighi Jamaat* would brook no interference.

TABLIGHI E, who was conversing with TABLIGHI A in the former grand mosque of Bishkek when I approached him, has some experience with Islamic groups other than the *Tablighi Jamaat*. He was involved briefly with Arab groups in Kyrgyzstan on which he elected not to elaborate despite my further questions. Currently working in Antalya in Turkey, his experience with them compares to his involvement with the *Tablighi Jamaat* as follows:

I used to go to a mosque operated by Arab Muslims. At first I was glad I got to learn more about Islam from them. But I realized Arabs were more interested in politics and less in Islamic learning. They were espousing extremist views which I did not like. Therefore I stopped going to their mosque. Then I met *dawatçıs* in my hometown who were not political which was better for me. When I came back to Bishkek I came to this mosque to listen to *dawatçıs* here. *Dawatçıs* are better than other Islamic groups because they do not ask you to get involved in politics. They teach you about Islam and the Prophet. People in my hometown who became involved with the *dawatçıs* quit drinking alcohol. Alcohol is a big problem where I came from.⁷⁰³

PUBLIC C, in his turn, has been exposed to a variety of Islamic groups, including the *Tablighi Jamaat*, and the *Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi* Foundation through the latter's local branch *Şefkat Yolu Derneği* (Association of Path for Mercy) which has a presence at the Theology Faculty at Osh State University where my interlocutor was a student. Therefore, he was able to offer me a deeper insight from a much more learned point of view with regard to the religious atmosphere in Kyrgyzstan and where does the *Tablighi Jamaat* stand among many Islamic movements operational in the nation. PUBLIC C has told me that he was

⁷⁰³ Interview, 20 December 2021, Bishkek.

engaged in *Tablighi* activity before attending the university in Osh which is predominantly Uzbek and is more religious than Bishkek where *tabligh* tours or the *Tablighi* attire were not much frowned upon by locals. Uzbeks, however, PUBLIC C explained, were not disposed to joining the *Tablighi Jamaat* as Uzbek culture revolved around the *mahalla* (neighborhood) culture which dictated, among others, rules for conduct, leaving little vacuum for *Tablighi Jamaat* to fill. Being an ethnic Uzbek, my interlocutor had some opinion and knowledge about which Islamic way to follow, and after attending *tabligh* tours he came to realize that their insistence made him uncomfortable. Should one decide against joining the group and elect to walk a different path, he said, the *Tablighis* pestered such people where the former insisted that theirs was the only true path. PUBLIC C stated that there was a correlation with one's level of knowledge of Islam and their receptiveness of different opinions; as such he told me that the *dawatçıs* had little information and what little they knew made them all the more intolerant of other opinions and views. Comparing and contrasting the *Tablighi Jamaat* with Arab and Turkish groups, PUBLIC C shared his observation that Arabs did not respect local customs and had little patience with Kyrgyz way of life which ended up alienating locals and the government alike. Turkish groups, on the other hand, he added, were better than Arabs, but had little contact with ordinary people; not venturing outside of their schools and *madrasas* in towns. What makes the *Tablighi Jamaat* stand out was that the *Tablighis* did not bother with such institutionalism and had an extensive outreach. His review of the *Tablighi Jamaat* is as follows:

They do not seek to train learned men. They are ignorant and ignorant people is what they seek. There is very little reading required, and as people in villages are not used to reading long religious passages, the *Tablighi* Islam suits them. All you have to do is listen, repeat, and practice...The *Tablighis* stopped many people from delving more into drinking habits. Gambling also is another problem on popular level where the *Tablighi* intervention seems to have worked. These would not happen if the *Tablighi Jamaat* did not reach ordinary men where they are found. You cannot expect poor people to go to *madrasas* for long training periods...My time as a student at Osh Theology Faculty offered me a learned and profound understanding of Islam. I am a bookish person and the *Tablighi* approach did not suit me. That is why I stopped going on their

dawat tours. I am pursuing higher education in Islam which is incompatible with the simplistic ways of the *Tablighi Jamaat*.⁷⁰⁴

What my interviews with current and former *Tablighis* have revealed about the Islamic atmosphere in Kyrgyzstan and the niche position the *Tablighi Jamaat* fills in aligns well with the scholarship on the group's activities in Kyrgyzstan. Matthew Kuiper notes that:

New contexts demand adaptations, and younger participants bring new emphases into the movement. Nevertheless, both TJ [Tablighi Jamaat] leaders and scholars who study the TJ agree that the patterns and ideology set in place in the crucial founding period of the movement have continued to guide and shape the TJ right up to the present.[...] As most reformist *'ulamā* had learned from the debacle of Sayyid Ahmad Shahīd's *jihād* in the early nineteenth century and from the failure of the 1857 uprising, unfavorable political and social conditions called for new ways of "struggling in the path of God." Building on the "*madrassa* and *fatwa*" model of his predecessors, Ilyās came to believe that this was to be done through vigorous preaching and through the mobilization of ordinary Muslims as preachers [...].⁷⁰⁵

In his study of how a Russian-speaking Kyrgyz community has transformed from almost complete ignorance of Islam into a close-knit Islamic community thanks to the efforts of *dawatçis* during the independence era, Emil Nasritdinov notes that the Soviet era youngsters of the Botanika *rayon* (district) of Bishkek used to engage in improper behavior such as fighting with their peers from other *rayons*, alcohol, and smoking weed.⁷⁰⁶ In the early years of the 2000s the youngsters, who have turned into adults by that time, were introduced to the *Tablighi Jamaat* as the turbulent decade was wreaking havoc on the economy of Kyrgyzstan, causing a massive emigration of the neighborhood families and changing the social fabric for the worse. The youth of the *rayon* were involved in small-time crime gangs and social problems such as heavy drinking and drug

⁷⁰⁴ Interview, 20 December 2021, Bishkek.

⁷⁰⁵ Matthew Kuiper, *Da'wa and Other Religions*, 171.

⁷⁰⁶ Emil Nasritdinov, "Translocality", 324.

abuse became rampant as a consequence in those years. Only through the introduction of the *Tablighi* activity were the residents of the district able to straighten up their lives, quit alcohol, drug abuse, and criminal activity which improved their health and family relations.⁷⁰⁷ Nasritdinov relates the story of a man who was into heavy drinking who was sent by his close circle to a *dawat* tour became an entirely different man in the end:

After he returned, this man, who had drunk almost every day for twenty years, quit drinking. Not long after he went for a forty-day trip and during this journey he asked Allah for a good Muslim wife. He explains that a week after his return he married a very pious Muslim woman. Nowadays he drives a taxi; they live happily and have two children.⁷⁰⁸

It is noteworthy that such stories of ‘conversion’ and improving one’s life thanks involvement with the *Tablighi Jamaat* abounds in literature and I have come across the same theme during my interviews, though not in Kyrgyzstan. One of my acquaintances in Yaoundé, a Cameroonian *Tablighi*, related me that during the *tablighi* tours he joined they visited prisons where Muslim inmates were drawn to their message and improved their conduct to the point that when they were released they quit smoking, which is considered a major sin in most sub-Saharan Muslim communities, drinking and drugs, leading completely reformed lives, becoming devout Muslims and joining *tabligh* tours themselves once they served their time.⁷⁰⁹ Such personal stories of fresh starts are reminiscent of how people initiated into the Evangelical churches, especially Pentecostal churches, left behind their troublesome lives, drug addiction, criminal activities, and familial problems and started anew with a strong devotion to their newly found faiths which they felt made them into better people. Bulbul Siddiqi in his study

⁷⁰⁷ Emil Nasritdinov, “Translocality”, 331-334.

⁷⁰⁸ Emil Nasritdinov, “Translocality”, 334.

⁷⁰⁹ Interview conducted in Yaoundé (Cameroon) on June 18th 2019.

of the growing influence of the *Tablighi Jamaat* on the Bangladeshi immigrants in the UK notes that:

the Tablighi Jamaat deliberately targets Muslim men who are suffering from personal crises and are facing problems in living with contemporary Western cultural influences. Some contemporary crises, which tend to be the direct effect of modernity and westernized life such as the rise of individualism, insecurity, the disillusioned life of the young generation, drugs, etc. may have acted as a force to go back to their religious life.⁷¹⁰

Similarly, David Smilde observes in his study of the rapid growth of Evangelical churches in Venezuela that in the male dominated culture of Caracas men who abused alcohol and drugs but wanted to change their lives for the better usually chose to join Evangelical churches instead of the established Catholic church nationwide where such vices are “explicitly defined as contrary to the Evangelical lifestyle. Abstinence from them is seen as both cause and an effect of being an Evangelical and tantamount to maintaining communion with God.”⁷¹¹ Smilde’s interviewees upon conversion to Evangelicalism improved their lives by quitting and abstaining from substance abuse.

The last question I asked my *Tablighi* interlocutors was the reason they chose to become *dawatçis* as opposed to adhering to other Muslim movements in Kyrgyzstan. In other words, I inquired what made the *Tablighi Jamaat* stand out in their eyes considering that their options are abundant as various other Islamic movements are operational in Kyrgyzstan. Most of my *Tablighi* interlocutors replied in a similar manner. TABLIGHI A, for instance, said that the *Tablighi Jamaat* was the only Islamic group in entire Kyrgyzstan which conducted *tabligh*. “Other Islamic groups you see in Kyrgyzstan” he elaborated:

⁷¹⁰ Bulbul Siddiqi, *Becoming ‘Good Muslim’: The Tablighi Jamaat in the UK and Bangladesh* (Singapore: Springer), 2018, 143-144.

⁷¹¹ David Smilde, *Reason to Believe: Cultural Agency in Latin American Evangelicalism* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 62.

are not interested in doing *dawat*. All they do is politics and talk. There is no action. Muslims are to be found in the streets, villages, shops. Sitting all day in the mosque and the *madrasa* waiting them to demand Islamic learning is not enough. You have to look for Muslims. You have to visit them. That is what the *Tablighi Jamaat* does. We never sit idly. When we do not learn about Islam we go out and reach. That is the way the Prophet converted infidels, and that is how you treat an ailing society. Other Islamic groups won't offer medicine. Talking all the time without taking action does Muslims no good.⁷¹²

TABLIGHI B's words resonated those of TABLIGHI A but he added that:

Other Muslim groups deal with money. They know there is money to be made. The *Tablighi Jamaat*, however, has nothing to do with money. When you are busy with money you forget Islam and your duties as a Muslim. Other Muslim groups have relegated Islam to a secondary place. For the *dawatçis* money is no issue as it was not during the time of the Prophet. We do not do *tabligh* tours to make money. We do it to please Allah.⁷¹³

TABLIGHI C, in turn, added that the *Tablighi* way transformed lives which did not happen with other Islamic groups:

When you become a *dawatçi* you make a great effort to leave your wrongdoings behind. You try to be a better Muslim. To do it you have to go on *dawat* tours. You tell Muslims that they have to pray five times a day, but you practice it yourself. How can you preach something and not put into practice what you preach? You tell Muslims they have to follow the example of the Prophet but what good comes of it if you do not follow the Prophet's way yourself? You wear the *shalwar kameez*, you grow a beard, you pray five times a day, you stay away from vices and then only can you preach others and tell them about Islam. The more you practice the more pleasure you receive of your prayers. Other Muslim groups do not practice *tabligh* which is the very basics of Islam. You cannot rectify others if you abstain from *tabligh*. The *Dawatçis* are the only group which aim and strive to rectify themselves and other Muslims. The other Muslim groups already believe that they are upright and do not put effort to improve themselves. They keep preaching but they need to be taught Islam themselves.⁷¹⁴

⁷¹² Interview, 21 December 2021, Bishkek.

⁷¹³ Interview, 20 December 2021, Bishkek.

⁷¹⁴ Interview, 21 December 2021, Bishkek.

TABLIGHI D has compared other Islamic groups and the *Tablighi Jamaat* with regard to the extent to which they were ready to make sacrifices, saying that other Islamic groups were found in large towns only where they established *madrasas* to train students and teach them political ideas. TABLIGHI D claimed that other Islamic groups never took the trouble to visit villages and remote areas because sitting in Bishkek was comfortable; whereas Islam was not about comfort but about making an effort in the shape of putting one's life, time, and personal money to travel to remote areas to preach ill-informed Muslims about Islam and to warn them against ills like alcohol and gambling:

Bishkek is full of mosques where a Muslim can go and learn from an *imam*. The remote villages have very little in the way of *imams* and mosques. That is why the *dawatçıs* make an effort to go visit those poor villages where people do not have money to send their sons to *madrasas*. We leave our families behind, we travel during winter and summer because that is how the Prophet and his companions did it in the desert. If they sat in their homes in Mecca Islam would not have spread.⁷¹⁵

Also mentioning the *dawat* method as the only path to orthopraxy, TABLIGHI E, on the other hand, said that the *Tablighi Jamaat* made him go through not-so-easy tasks which turned out to be fruitful for his faith which is what made the group stand out among Muslim groups in Kyrgyzstan:

Doing *dawat* tours is what is distinct about the *Tablighi Jamaat*. You make an effort to visit neighborhoods and villages which gives you an opportunity to practice what you know. Of course it is no easy task; leaving your family behind, sleeping in mosques, always reciting Quran and reading Islamic texts. Because the world calls you all the time: forget about *dawat*, forget about religion; come eat the fruits of the earth. Devil tells you that you are already a Muslim and you do not have to go to such great lengths to become a good Muslim. Therefore you have to do *dawat* no matter what Devil says to stray you from the right path. In hardship is a test for Muslims. *Dawat* is the only way to keep yourself on the Prophet's way. Therefore I have become a *dawatçı* myself. No other Islamic group makes you go on to *dawat* tours.⁷¹⁶

⁷¹⁵ Interview, 21 December 2021, Bishkek.

⁷¹⁶ Interview, 22 December 2021, Bishkek.

The common theme that emerge from these interviews is that my interlocutors chose to join the ranks of the *Tablighi Jamaat* because the *dawat* method distinctive to the movement makes them go out of their comfort zones which they see as an endurance test of their faith by emulating the Prophet and an opportunity to follow his steps by putting into practice what they know or learn at the *Tablighi Jamaat*. The observances of my *Tablighi* interlocutors resonate with what the literature on the *Tablighi Jamaat* reveals. Arsalan Khan's study of the construction of pious masculinity among the itinerant *Tablighi* members in Pakistan is a testimony of how people going on *tabligh* tours make sacrifices and forego their comfort at home to become pious Muslims per the instructions laid by Maulana Ilyas:

[...] *dawat* requires physical presence in a congregation of men who travel far away from their homes and live together in mosques in order to preach the merits of Islam. It is the physical trials and tribulations involved in this work and the companionship (*sohbat*) with pious others that is understood to cultivate the virtues that enable the *Tablighi* to live as a pious Muslim.⁷¹⁷

It is another of Arsalan Khan's study of *Tablighi* activities in Pakistan where he concludes that *Tablighis* are extremely attached to their distinctive *tabligh* method which they consider as divinely inspired and reject all other forms of Islamic activism which they believe are tainted with political occupations and worldly concerns that preclude any Islamic activity from converting Muslims back to Islam.⁷¹⁸ Indeed, Arsalan Khan notes that for the members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* “*dawat* is the mother of practices [...] which means that it creates the condition for all other Islamic practices.”⁷¹⁹

⁷¹⁷ Arsalan Khan, “Pious Masculinity,” 57.

⁷¹⁸ Arsalan Khan, “Islam, Ritual and the Ethical Life: *Dawat* in the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Pakistan”, unpublished doctoral thesis, 2014, 6-7.

⁷¹⁹ Arsalan Khan, “Islam, Ritual and the Ethical Life”, 77.

Another common theme that appears in the interviews with the *Tablighis* is their appreciation of the apolitical stance and devotion to *tabligh* activities of the *Tablighi Jamaat*. It becomes apparent that several interviewees found political messages and activism to be of little value and even inimical to an Islamic life they wished to live. That is the reason why some of my interlocutors distanced themselves from other Islamic organizations they were involved with priorly which they considered to be on the wrong path because they were involved in politics. The apolitical quality of the *Tablighi Jamaat* is one of the principal aspects of the movement, especially from the viewpoint of its origins. The explicit wish of Maulana Ilyas's and his relatives that took up the spiritual leadership after his death to keep his activities and the movement he founded out of political debates, which he considered to be in error, and to focus instead on personal reform of Muslims through *imitatio Muhammadi*, which to him was the only path to reforming Muslims, is well documented in the literature. Maulana Zakariyya, a nephew of Maulana Ilyas and an ideologue of the *Tablighi Jamaat* wanted Muslims of India to have no part in the political debates of his time which focused on the protection of Muslim interests through Congress and Moslem League where he:

offers an alternative to those “leaders” [...] whose very *raison d'être* was to reverse what was perceived as Muslim decline, under-representation in councils and universities, and so forth. His teachings encouraged quietism even while implicitly acknowledging the sufferings and trials felt by many at the time. For him the only history that mattered was the mythological or “typological” history, always potentially present, of recreating the past. His, and *Tabligh's*, narrative simply opted out of the linear story being constituted in his day that traced Muslim glory in the recent past, subsequent decline in the face of external conquest, and the current struggle for social and political reassertion. The *Tabligh* not only ignored the emerging historical narrative of the nationalist movement but has continued to ignore the versions of that narrative told in the new nation states. Not the state, but the home and the individual together were to be the target of Islamic action and Islamic teaching.⁷²⁰

Indeed, literature reveals that the apolitical quality of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, apart from being in theory, is indeed put into practice, and it is a strong point in favor

⁷²⁰ Barbara Metcalf, “Living Hadīth”, 593-594.

of the movement which helps it operate in various countries where their respective governments do not regard the *Tablighis* as a threat to peace, and distinguish them from political Islam and other *Salafi* movements which are deemed radical. Gilles Kepel has noted as early as in 1991 that the apoliticism of the *Tablighi Jamaat* was beneficial both for the movement itself and the governments of the states where they were operational:

Generally speaking, members of the Tabligh are citizens of authoritarian Muslims states or foreign immigrants into Western countries. They are not electors, or marginally so, but because of their apolitical pietism governments regard them as an alternative to the revolutionary movements working for re-Islamization from above and aiming to achieve power... Both the Tablighis and Lubavitch at first adopted a 'minimalist' attitude of non-confrontation with the authorities, giving priority to their social work with young people in their community – who, once within the fold, would no longer pose problems (particularly of delinquency) because they would be, as it were, withdrawn from the body of society.⁷²¹

A Cameroonian *Tablighi* I interviewed in Yaoundé also pointed out that the government regarded the *Tablighi Jamaat* as a safe alternative to radical Islamic movements originating in the Gulf states or to Islamic terrorist groups like Boko Haram which wreaked havoc in the Lake Chad Basin which includes the Muslim-majority Far North Region of Cameroon.⁷²² In the said region which borders Nigeria and Chad, Boko Haram has been conducting raids and suicide attacks in villages and even in big towns for years. My personal contacts from the region who are not affiliated with the *Tablighi Jamaat* informed me that the

⁷²¹ Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God: the resurgence of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in the modern world*, (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania University Press, 1994), 188. The original French text was published in 1991 which reads as follows:

Les tablighis sont d'ordinaire citoyens des États autoritaires du monde musulman ou résidents étrangers immigrés dans le monde occidental. Ils ne sont pas -ou si peu- électeurs, mais leur piétisme apolitique en fait pour les gouvernements une alternative aux mouvements révolutionnaires qui prônent la réislamisation par le haut et la prise du pouvoir... Tablighis comme loubavitch ont adopté d'abord une attitude « minimale » de non-confrontation avec les autorités, mettant en avant leur rôle de socialisation communautaire de la jeunesse qui, une fois encadrée par eux, ne poserait plus de problèmes, de délinquance notamment, puisqu'elle serait comme soustraite au corps social.

⁷²² Interview conducted in Yaoundé on June 21st 2019.

unemployed and undereducated young males of the region were lured by Boko Haram which offered them motorcycles, firearms, 100 US Dollars per month, and a free hand in abducting girls who end up either as wives and concubines of their abductors, or as slaves sold in the slave markets in various Nigerian towns. Having no other prospect in life through their labour, hundreds of young men were attracted to Boko Haram and the ensuing violence has left the region, which is the poorest among the ten regions of Cameroon, in shambles with schools being closed for years. In response to this bout of violence and terrorism, the government hopes that re-Islamization of the youth will help fight against the destructive ideology of Boko Haram which my interlocutors regarded as totally ignorant of even the most basic tenets of Islam. To this end, the government of Cameroon not only allows the *Tablighi Jamaat* to roam freely in streets of Cameroon to preach Muslims but also ensures the safety of members of the group during their yearly gatherings in the region by deploying the army around the venue of the gatherings. The government is also weary of the Gulf states which have offered scholarship to scores of Muslims students who, having adopted the *Wahhabi* and *Salafi* ideologies while studying abroad, radicalized the Far North Region upon returning to Cameroon. The Gulf states have strong diplomatic presence in the capital city, Yaoundé, where the cleanest mosque in the entire city, which draws a large attendance in daily prayers, was built by the Saudi Arabia which pays the salary of the *imam* responsible for religious services. Therefore, the growing ideological influence of the Gulf Arab states has been a source of alarm for the government of Cameroon for quite some time. Thus, the government has resorted to the quietist *Tablighi Jamaat* to counter the threat of Boko Haram and the influence of Gulf Arab states.

The apoliticism of the *Tablighi Jamaat* is a major reason why the group operates rather freely in Kyrgyzstan, as it does elsewhere, to which some of my interviewees pointed out as well. However, the apoliticism of the *Tablighi Jamaat* has also come into question in literature as well as in Kyrgyzstan. Debates on the veracity of the apolitical quality of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in the context of Kyrgyzstan will be dealt with in the next two sub-chapters in detail where several interviewees

from the public, bureaucracy, and the academia have portrayed the *Tablighi Jamaat* in a different light.

These interviews with Kyrgyz *Tablighis* also reveal information and personal insights into life as a *dawatçı* which are suitable for an interpretation through the prism of the religious economies approach. Priorly in the present chapter, I have observed that my *Tablighi* interviewees noted with indifference and acceptance the occasional public criticism directed towards the traditional Pakistani-style *Tablighi* garments, long beards and the distinct *Tablighi* modus operandi of preaching door-to-door. The *Tablighi* indifference to public criticism and the social isolation that sometimes came with it the *Tablighis* patiently if unhappily bore with is explained by religious economies approach where members of a particular religious group endure hardship arising from their behavioral and visual habits that distinguish them from the larger society because such distinct habits reinforce in-group cohesion and thus contribute to the satisfaction each member derives from adhesion to such a group. Members endure such social friction and hardships of membership also with the hopes that they will be accorded divine rewards in the form of compensators where the otherworldly benefits that cannot be acquired immediately are postponed to the afterlife. In the case of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, my interlocutors in following what they consider the path of the Prophet *-imitatio muhammadi-* which, according to them, is the only 'correct' path, are accepting to run the risk of going against the norms of the larger society in Kyrgyzstan and generate costly stigmas for them, which includes incurring the wrath of family members, relatives, and friends, because they believe that, theirs being the path ordained by God, are going to receive divine rewards such as blessings and entry to Heaven some of which are not necessarily to be attained in life but definitely in the afterlife. Moreover, the difficulties of going on *tabligh* tours which the *dawatçıs* are expected to accept with pleasure serve as a way to test the perseverance of *dawatçıs* and would-be *dawatçıs*. Such difficulties also help the movement to weed out free riders and reinforce group cohesion which in turn help *dawatçıs* receive more satisfaction and pleasure from wearing *Tablighi* clothes, sporting long beards, prayers,

recitations, *tabligh* tours, and other rituals that come with being a part of the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Therefore, those closely affiliated with the *Tablighi Jamaat* enjoy the benefits of their membership to a religious club per club theory as laid out in the religious economies approach. Accordingly, the more they are satisfied with their affiliation with the exclusive religious club that is the *Tablighi Jamaat* the more they are willing to commit themselves to *dawat* and the more devoted they become to the club which only becomes possible thanks to the mechanism that weeds out myriad free riders. In Jean-Paul Carvalho's words:

A successful social movement requires the production of both spiritual/ideological and material goods. Free riders undermine both forms of production. First, they consume the material goods collectively produced by the group, without contributing, depleting the group's existing resources and undermining reciprocal altruism. Second, they erode the spiritual/ideological life of the community with an infectious lack of faith in the movement's mission. Without a way to screen out these free riders, such communities are self-undermining. Their success begets failure.⁷²³

Carvalho goes on to explain that according to club model of religion, a crucial component of religious economies approach, successful religious groups set a two pronged high entry barrier for new participants to eliminate the free riders problem where screening "by raising the cost of membership, stigmatizing forms of religious identity ensure that only cooperators and true believers join the group," and substitution "by lowering the payoff from outside activity, they induce members to divert time and money from non-group activities to group activities."⁷²⁴

Therefore, the demanding nature of *dawat* serves a two-fold benefit for the *Tablighis*. First, the hardships endured and shared by *dawatçis* both on a collective and personal level, which are by no means random and arbitrary but

⁷²³ Jean-Paul Carvalho, "Religious Clubs: The Strategic Role of Religious Identity" in edited by Jean-Paul Carvalho, Sriya Iyer, Jared Rubin, *Advances in the Economics of Religion*, IEA Conference Volume No. 158 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 26.

⁷²⁴ Jean-Paul Carvalho, 27.

modeled after what the group considers the Prophet's own experiences, stabilizes and enhances in-group cohesion and cooperation, adding to the benefits of and satisfaction with membership to the group. Secondly, people who attend *Tablighi* sermons and even join *dawat* tours without putting any personal effort and do not behave in accordance with the group's conduct, are eliminated naturally through such free riders' own will, setting the group boundary and doubly increasing the benefits the committed *Tablighis* enjoy.

It is noteworthy, however, that the sense of belonging and group cohesion reinforced by the behavioral and sartorial distinctness of the *Tablighi Jamaat* that set them apart from the larger Kryrgyz society is not interpreted nor desired by *dawatçis* as an insurmountable barrier to entry. In fact, while it helps reduce the number of potential adherents that might want to become *dawatçis* through a naturally developing process of eliminating the free rider problem, it is never intended to isolate the group from the society *in toto* which is the case for several conservative branches of Anabaptist groups, mostly residing in the United States, such as the Amish and the Hutterites, who rarely if ever let outsiders into their ranks and whose rules are extremely strict and set serious limits to contact with outsiders.⁷²⁵ The *Tablighi Jamaat* has never been an isolationist movement; actually from the very beginning the movement assumed an extremely proselytizing orientation, seeking to reach out to masses and increase the number of adherents. The *Tablighi Jamaat*, despite its detestation of the material world, does not reject technological advances so long as it does not interfere with the conduct of spiritual life nor does it shun social contact with non-*Tablighi* Muslims which it does not consider an abomination but co-religionists in grave error who could and should be brought back into the fold. In that sense, the entry barrier the *Tablighi Jamaat* raises for novices is not forbiddingly high. The disadvantages of raising too severe a barrier of entry and merits of finding a finer balance in setting entry barrier is also noted in the literature of religious

⁷²⁵ Conservative branches of Mennonites shun contact with non-Anabaptist groups to the point that they call churches outside Anabaptism, including the Roman Catholic Church, abomination.

economies approach. Michael McBride argues that despite Iannacone's postulation that for a church to remain afloat it needs to screen out all free riders, which was the original view in the religious economies approach that has remained the prevailing theory so far, churches have to and do allow free riders to a certain level. According to McBride's study, "a church's optimal strategy in a dynamic setting is to manage but not eliminate all free riding."⁷²⁶ Expounding on the concept of religious capital, that is, an individual's set of skills and knowledge that he employs in affiliation with the tenets and structure of a given religious organization, he elaborates that:

[a]s religious capital grows, so does an individual's marginal value of participation and their willingness and ability to contribute to the group. By allowing some individuals, who are not yet willing to contribute, to consume the religious goods today, the church makes an investment in their religious capital with the hope that they contribute in the future. Indeed, because contributors are not born but must be produced, a church *must* allow a degree of free-riding to survive over time; otherwise its stock of high capital contributors will eventually be depleted.⁷²⁷

McBride also makes a distinction between strict churches and what he calls ultra-strict churches based on their willingness to suffer free riding potential members for a period or lack thereof. Accordingly, strict churches are such religious movements and organizations that temporarily and intentionally allow free riding with the hope that such individuals will commit in the future, whereas ultra-strict churches eliminate all free riding problem through too high entry barriers which induce social stigma and isolationism. The former form is found among such Christian groups as the Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses, whereas the latter can be observed among the Amish and Hasidic Jews which, in absence of proselytism and converts, turn to in-group fertility to bolster numerical and financial growth. This distinction is explanatory for the case of the *Tablighi Jamaat* as well, which does not seek to set too high and

⁷²⁶ Michael McBride, "Why churches need free-riders: Religious capital formation and religious group survival", *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics*, vol. 58, 2015, 78.

⁷²⁷ Michael McBride, 78.

taxing a barrier for potential members that would discourage and turn away all potential *dawatçıs*. The *Tablighi Jamaat* as such does not aim to maintain an isolated congregation as it would totally go against the founding tenets of the group, and in McBride's terms it is not an ultra-strict church. The *Tablighi Jamaat* is the quintessential strict church that relies heavily on gaining new members which explains why the group puts so much emphasis on *dawat*. The *Tablighi Jamaat*, therefore, does not want to discourage potential members by erecting insurmountably difficult barriers to entry, as it would clash with the group's desire to gain new members. Instead, the *Tablighi Jamaat* keeps the difficulty of joining the group at an optimal level where the door is not closed on the unready. The group nurtures the hopes that by erecting high barriers to entry, free riders are screened out automatically, but they might yet have a change of heart in the future. Consequently, no potential member is considered a lost cause, and the *Tablighi Jamaat* does not refrain from visiting their homes.

5.2. The *Tablighi Jamaat* Perceived by the Kyrgyz Public

Here the expression Kyrgyz public refers to people who have not been involved with the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan or whose involvement remained on a very sporadic basis without any long-lasting attachment. It also excludes government officials and academicians even if they meet the requirements for they fall under the rubric of bureaucrats and academicians which will be inspected in the next subchapter of the present chapter. My definition of Kyrgyz public includes a very large number of people from various walks of life who are not in any way linked to one another, and who are not necessarily associated with any common political, intellectual, professional, or ethnic identity. My interviewees from this vague clump, eleven in total, make an interesting assembly: an ethnic Kyrgyz businessman, PUBLIC A, who studied in Turkey and still maintains close ties with Turkish business associates both in Kyrgyzstan and Turkey; an ethnic Kyrgyz female housepainter PUBLIC B; an ethnic Uzbek from Osh who was formerly affiliated with the *Tablighi Jamaat* but has since left the movement altogether and now lives in Turkey PUBLIC C; a small-time

Turkish shop owner in Bishkek who was involved on a sporadic basis with the *Tablighis* but never became too involved as to call himself one PUBLIC D; an ethnic Kyrgyz female shop clerk who went on to *Tabligh* tours, of all places, in the Russian Federation but has since reduced the frequency of her socialization with the group PUBLIC E; a Turkish businessman who is married to a local woman and who has been living in Kyrgyzstan for over two decades, PUBLIC F; the Turkish cook, also a long time resident in Bishkek who works at the restaurant of the said Turkish businessman PUBLIC G; an ethnic Russian waiter PUBLIC H; and an ethnic Kyrgyz waitress who work at a posh café in a classy neighborhood of Bishkek PUBLIC I; and two ethnic female Kyrgyz university students from the University of Central Asia, PUBLIC J and PUBLIC K. I conducted these interviews in various places; most interviews took place at the workplaces of the interlocutors, whereas at least one interview I did at my apartment and two while walking in the street. However, my interlocutors were to a great extent averse to my taking notes while being interviewed, not unlike the *Tablighi* interviewees mentioned in the previous subchapter. Interviewing this lot posed fewer problems for they were more enthusiastic to speak up about the *Tablighi Jamaat* and their views have displayed far more diversity than what my *Tablighi* interviewees divulged about their personal experience. While some of the interviewees had taken little to no notice of the *Tablighi Jamaat's* activities or even its presence in Kyrgyzstan so far, others were far more informed about them. All in all, most of the interviews in this subchapter were conducted in a more relaxed manner without the interlocutors risking being eavesdropped and harassed by unwelcome passersby, and the varied responses I received from them reflect the diverse public opinion about and reveal the true wealth of the range of reactions to the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan.

Also included in the present subchapter are the interviews with the members of Turkish Islamic groups operating in Kyrgyzstan which have been enumerated in the First Chapter. In this regard, I interviewed two such representatives; one from the *Süleymançıs*, PUBLIC L and the other, PUBLIC M from the *Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Vakfı* both back in 2016. At the time when I conducted these

two interviews I had not yet arrived at my final decision as to which Islamic movement to study in my thesis. Therefore, my questions centered around the activities of the respective movements they belonged to and which Islamic movement, of all such groups in Kyrgyzstan, made the largest impact on Kyrgyz society, and, in a sense, was more worth to be examined in a doctoral thesis. In other words, my questions to PUBLIC L and PUBLIC M were of more general nature and aimed at figuring out the general state of affairs in the Kyrgyz religious marketplace from the perspective of Turkish movements in Kyrgyzstan. Nevertheless, the name *Tablighi Jamaat* came up a few times during both interviews without me directly asking about the group. My interview with the former took place at the headquarters of the *Süleymançıs* in Bishkek which ensued in a formal manner. Though not unwelcoming, PUBLIC L was not enthusiastic about being interviewed about the activities of the *Süleymançıs* in Kyrgyzstan, either. This I did not consider a surprise because the relationship between the *Süleymançı* movement in Turkey and the Turkish government had already taken a somewhat sour turn, which did not improve in my second field study in 2021, and my being a public employee certainly exacerbated the situation. Therefore, I surmised that PUBLIC L might have mistaken my request for interview for an attempt to glean information about the *Süleymançı* activities in Kyrgyzstan which have always been under the radar of the Turkish Embassy despite the latter's desire for more 'cooperation'.⁷²⁸ Nonetheless, PUBLIC L granted me an interview and answered my questions regarding both *Süleymançı* and non-*Süleymançı* related topics. PUBLIC M, on the other hand, accepted to be interviewed in a café which offered a more relaxed and informal ambiance where the interview itself flowed without any tension or anxiety for both parties. This too did not come as a surprise because the *Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Vakfı* had warm relations with the Turkish government and I had already made some personal acquaintances within the movement while I was stationed in various African countries in my professional capacity which came up both before and

⁷²⁸ More will come up about the contentious nature of relations between the *Süleymançıs* and the Turkish government in the next subchapter which also contains a testimony which draws a parallelism between the *Süleymançı* movement and the *Tablighi Jamaat*.

during the interview with PUBLIC M. My previous experience with the movement made it easier to establish a more informal atmosphere for the interview which I made a point to make feel more like a chatter than an interview. No matter how much one might feel oneself at ease while having an amicable chatter on the Islamic movements in Kyrgyzstan, the moment the interviewees realized that they were being interviewed and their opinions might appear in a thesis even under the condition of anonymity, they became less enthusiastic and shut off. This is the reason why I found informal interviews under the guise of friendly chatter in an informal setting more conducive. All in all, PUBLIC M was more welcoming and willing to answer my questions than PUBLIC L.

My first question to PUBLIC L and PUBLIC M was about the general religious outlook in Kyrgyzstan where I asked them to describe the recent tendencies in this department. Both of them remarked that an Islamic revival was underway for quite some time, and that there was a popular demand for Islamic learning which their respective movements were trying to supply.⁷²⁹ The *Süleymancı* movement, as explained in the First Chapter, runs Quranic schools, which do not teach non-Islamic subjects, and PUBLIC L noted that their students came mostly from lower socioeconomic echelons of Kyrgyz society. He also added that their overall impact on the religious landscape in Kyrgyzstan was limited to their students and their immediate families for the *Süleymancıs* interacted only with them who are found in towns, and that the *Süleymancı* movement had little contact with rural communities which constitute a large swathe of population in Kyrgyzstan. PUBLIC M too remarked that there was a noticeable surge of interest in Islam among people. His organization, as opposed to the *Süleymancıs*, ran *imam-hatip* schools, which are proper schools that teach non-Islamic subjects as well, and a theology faculty outside Bishkek, and was occupied with students of higher socioeconomic status. Nevertheless, PUBLIC M has admitted that the *Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Vakfi* had a limited impact on the overall Islamic landscape throughout Kyrgyzstan because their outreach went no further than big

⁷²⁹ Both interviews are conducted on November 20th 2016 in Bishkek.

towns. However, it is plausible to argue that among the two Turkish Islamic movements the *Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Vakfi* has wider outreach and wields a larger impact among Kyrgyz people because their clientele, unlike that of the *Süleymançıs*, is not limited to the less well-to-do sections of the society and that they maintain warmer relations with the Turkish government which offers them support that come in various forms. My next question was aimed at figuring out which Islamic group had made the largest impact and had the most profound day-to-day outreach in Kyrgyzstan to which both answered that it was the *Tablighi Jamaat*. This proclamation confirmed what I had already been told by my other interviewees. When I asked why they considered the *Tablighi Jamaat* the most influential Islamic movement, PUBLIC L remarked that the group was numerically superior to any other group and that they visited even the remotest villages which others shunned for various reasons. PUBLIC M's answer was more elaborated where he explained that unlike other Islamic groups the *Tablighi Jamaat* did not run schools or courses which tied other Islamic groups to cities and towns where their institutions were established. This, he continued, enabled the group to roam freely through towns and rural areas alike without being preoccupied with settling at a fixed place. He also mentioned that the *Tablighi Jamaat* was not selective in their target audience, anyone from any age group or socioeconomic background would do it as long as they were willing to listen to what the *Tablighi Jamaat* preached. Turkish Islamic groups including his, he noted, were on the other hand more inclined towards potential pupils from young age groups who would be ready to sacrifice their time to learn Islamic sciences. These remarks served as a further corroboration of what I was told by other interviewees as well as what the literature on the *Tablighi Jamaat*'s activities in Kyrgyzstan has put forth.

As for my interviewees from my second fieldwork back in 2021, my questions were centered around the *Tablighi Jamaat* because by the time I conducted my interviews I have long settled on my thesis topic as the group's activities in Kyrgyzstan. PUBLIC F and PUBLIC G were my first interviewees among this motley group. I have met both at the former's restaurant where the latter works

as the cook. The restaurant served me both as a lunch venue and a convenient place for it was within a short walking distance from the Serakhsi Mosque built by Turkey which hosted *Tablighis* from time to time. While neither of my interviewees were much informed about the *Tablighi Jamaat* which they knew by the name *Dawat* like the Kyrgyz do, they occasionally came into contact with *dawatçıs* who visited the restaurant for a quick bite which was enough for them to form an opinion of the group just like any uninterested Kyrgyz did. PUBLIC F told me that he saw *shalwar* wearing and beard sporting men both around and at his restaurant and never had a problem with them. Because his wife is a local, he was able to learn more about them from her. His mostly uninformed but local perspective with a mixture of Turkish is mostly indifferent as long as the group left him be. Nevertheless, he found them a backwards lot seeing as they wore garments that reminded him of the sartorial preferences of the Turkish people of the Ottoman times. He mentioned that in the span of twenty years he spent in Kyrgyzstan the nation became noticeably more religious with many *hijabi* women and *dawatçıs* populating the streets and mosque attendance becoming far greater which was an impossible sight two decades back. His review of the *Tablighi* preaching is as follows:

Going from door-to-door to teach people how to become Muslim sounds like an outdated method to me. We have schools and mosques for this. What good does it do to travel large distances especially considering that towns and villages are few and far between? And the roads are in terrible condition. I think this is mostly a futile enterprise, but seeing as they have more and more followers each year, it must have paid off.⁷³⁰

PUBLIC G, on the other hand, seemed to be even less informed about them for he was not married to a local woman and therefore lacked the Kyrgyz perspective. He told me that he saw *dawatçıs* at the restaurant who dropped by in small numbers from time to time after the Friday prayer for a quick bite but were by no means regular patrons. He found their appearance bizarre in the context of Kyrgyzstan because people wearing such clothes were not an everyday sight for

⁷³⁰ Interview, 20 December 202, Bishkek.

him and long beards were very distinctive in a bad way. He saw *Tablighis* in far greater numbers whenever he went to the *Çong Meçit*. As far as he was concerned, the *Tablighis* came to his restaurant because it was convenient for them but also because his establishment served *halal* food only which was important as the neighborhood had many restaurants that served pork and alcohol. He never felt uneasy around the *Tablighis* because they never tried to talk him into joining them or even listening to their preaching. While he had some Turkish acquaintances who were subject to unsolicited preaching from the *dawatçıs*, he was ready to let them be so long as they did not try to preach him. However, he did not hide his disdain for their foreign-looking garments, saying that “Who walks around in these foreign garments and asks passersby to become Muslims? This is ridiculous.”⁷³¹

PUBLIC A with whom I met through common friends in Turkey was far more informed about the *Tablighi Jamaat* than PUBLIC F and PUBLIC G were. In fact, PUBLIC A was one of my most informed interviewees apart from the *Tablighis* themselves. His source of information about the group is variegated as he personally knows some *Tablighis* among which are influential ones as well.⁷³² As he also has a finger in every pie thanks to his business contacts, he is acquainted with political figures and Kyrgyz alumni from various Turkish universities which helped him to have a more realistic understanding of the group and its political dealings which escape a majority of my Kyrgyz interviewees. PUBLIC A not only immediately accepted to be interviewed by me but also invited me to his office where we had a more informal and very informative talk.⁷³³

⁷³¹ Interview, 20 December 2021, Bishkek.

⁷³² Unfortunately but hardly surprisingly, these influential *Tablighis* refused to talk to me despite PUBLIC A’s mediacy on behalf of me.

⁷³³ When I entered his office I was wearing a medical face mask because I was trying to be very careful about the COVID 19 situation. Unmasked himself and amused by my wearing a mask

I initiated my interview-cum-chatter with PUBLIC A by asking him to describe the Islamic marketplace in Kyrgyzstan. He told me that since 1991 Kyrgyzstan had been a liberal oasis amidst a region marked by oppressive regimes with regard to civil liberties and religion. He even called Kyrgyzstan too much liberal for its own good, because “everything is free here which creates many a problem.”⁷³⁴ He was not happy with the unchecked extent to which liberties were exercised in Kyrgyzstan, because he observed that too much freedom without state supervision had led to a situation where some sections of the population enjoyed their freedom at the expense of others, seeing as the governments were unwilling or unable to provide a more balanced atmosphere for the entire nation. Complaining that there was simply very little in the way of legislation for a truly liberal system which he meant American style liberalism.⁷³⁵ PUBLIC A noted that liberties always came with some fine print, that religious freedom remained on paper. Accordingly, one had to seek state’s permission to establish a religious organization in Kyrgyzstan, but there was no guarantee that a particular organization would be able to secure state approval. He elaborated that if a particular organization was deemed risky or harmful which were metrics applied arbitrarily, it would not receive permission and could not operate in Kyrgyzstan, which was what happened to most non-Muslim movements. This, however, PUBLIC A warned, did not necessarily mean that Islam was privileged over other religions because it depended totally on the kind of Muslim organization. If

indoors, PUBLIC A asked me to remove it, adding that it was ridiculous for he was not sick and that nobody in Kyrgyzstan had COVID 19 anymore in 2021 which he claimed was a thing of the previous year. This moment, far from being tensional, created an immediate atmosphere of friendship. Shelving my concern about getting COVID 19 in Kyrgyzstan and removing the face mask facilitated the interview and the flow of opinion and information emanating from my interviewee.

⁷³⁴ Interview, 23 December 2021, Bishkek.

⁷³⁵ My interviewee was probably unaware of the connotations of the term liberal in the American context, believing that this epithet referred to the same ideology worldwide. Therefore, what he really meant by liberal corresponds in the American context to a lack of government intervention, a strict commitment to secularism in state structure, and the presence of a system of checks and balances.

the state officials did not like a particular ideology or a school of thought, one was labeled extremist and outlawed. Nevertheless, he added bitterly that there were some Muslim movements which were truly privileged, and of all the Muslim movements in Kyrgyzstan the *Tablighi Jamaat* was the most privileged one, by-passing state supervision thanks to their good relations with the politicians.

The topic of the *Tablighi Jamaat* has thus come up naturally. A pious Muslim himself and affiliated with a Sufi order in Turkey which he visits every year for a retreat, PUBLIC A described how the *Tablighi Jamaat* took advantage of the religious vacuum, the lack of a sound state supervisory system, and socioeconomic hardships that marked Kyrgyzstan to further its cause, claiming that the chaotic situation created by the socio-economic and political turmoils as well as lack of any direction and supervision enabled the *Tablighi Jamaat* to grow in number, amass immense power in bureaucracy, and exert influence among population. That the *Tablighi Jamaat* traveled to the rural areas when nobody else did accounted for their immense success at rural areas and among the poor. He also held that those who were attracted to the message of the *dawatçıs* were either people who had a criminal past or who abused drugs and alcohol. That, according to him, was why they had a positive image among population.

The *Tablighis*, PUBLIC A continued, “incite fear among people, by telling their friends and relatives that should they fail to perform prayers five times a day they will burn in the hellfire. They resort to such psychological cruelty to convince people to come to their side.” The *Tablighis*, according to PUBLIC A, however had made some commendable contributions to the society on the positive side, which came in the shape of informing ignorant masses about the most basic tenets of Islam such as, sin, hell, and heaven. Attributing the state’s thinly disguised approval of the group to these contributions, he claimed that the state wanted to inoculate people with very similar values due to three different but inter-related reasons. Firstly, PUBLIC A admitted that such moral values

were of great importance to the state because they encouraged citizens to become better people who did not get involved in troublesome affairs. Secondly, *Hanafi* version of Islam espoused by the *Tablighi Jamat* also encouraged Muslims to acknowledge and obey authority, and the apolitical stance of the group multiplied this effect. Thirdly, Islam, my interlocutor said, was what distinguished the Kyrgyz people from Russians and other non-Muslims groups found in Kyrgyzstan; therefore it was also a matter of forging post-Soviet national identity of the ethnic Kyrgyz people which was historically tied to their being Muslims. He also admitted that the *Tablighi Jamaat* came in handy to counter the effects of Islamic radicalism for radical movements like the *Yakin Inkar* were not able to get much traction because the *Tablighi Jamaat* had already filled that vacuum. Yet another point in favor of the *Tablighi Jamaat* as far as my interlocutor was concerned was that:

the *Tablighi Jamaat* is a truly *umma*-based movement because they do not make a distinction between ethnic identities. A fault line runs along the Kyrgyz society where the people from the South generally face discrimination by the people from the North which has the political power. It has ethnic connotations for the North is populated by Kyrgyz and Russians, whereas ethnic Uzbeks form the majority in the South. The lack of political balance has created a lot of ethnic tensions between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbek. However, the *dawatçis* embrace anyone who is a Muslim regardless of their ethnicity. This has contributed to reducing the ethnic tensions.

When I pressed whether the alleged apolitical stance of the *Tablighi Jamaat* has endeared it to the society and the state, thus contributing to its success, PUBLIC A commented that:

In the initial period when they began to disseminate their word, the *Tablighi Jamaat* was indeed apolitical. That is why the *intelligentsia* were indifferent to the *dawatçis*. However, this is not the case anymore. The *dawatçis* became political. As the movement grew both in number and influence they became institutionalized and bureaucratized which was inevitable in my opinion. I hear that they want to gain a foothold in ministries like the Ministry of Economy, and tell their male followers to shave their beards and female followers to remove their headscarves if need be so that they should not get objection and run into problems. They are becoming an institution themselves. In the past, they used to busy themselves only with *dawat*. Now that they have become more powerful and gained more followers, they began to keeping books where they register the

activities of every *dawatçı* as to where they visited and how many people they preached. If a certain *daawatçı* is not found out to have visited enough people, he is chastised. They are gaining a foothold in the state. They are becoming hierarchized.

As to why Kyrgyzstan is different to the other Central Asian republics with regard to the *Tablighi Jamaat*'s activities, PUBLIC A believes that historical dynamics played a role in the path Kyrgyzstan has taken:

Kyrgyzstan is a very liberal state and so is the Kyrgyz society. This has always have been the case because we are a nomadic society. In a sedentary society, reducing risks is a priority. In a nomadic society, however, risk are not avoided. Nomads take risks. This is our main difference to Kazakhstan. They were sedentarized at a very early age than we did. They have a powerful state for this reason. On the other hand, nobody has any expectations from the state in Kyrgyzstan.

PUBLIC A has also provided me with more information with regard to the politicization of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan. According to my interviewee, the Noor Party which means the Party of Light and which is considered by some as the first Islamic party in Kyrgyzstan,⁷³⁶ is backed by the *Tablighi Jamaat*. He also claimed that the *Tablighi Jamaat* collected money from businessmen to help further the cause of the said party. The money-collection theme is reminiscent of the *FETÖ* in Turkey, and abroad as well, where the money collected is called *himmət* which means help, support, and donation in Arabic and Turkish. Therefore, I asked my interlocutor whether he saw any parallelism and possible cooperation between the *Tablighi Jamaat* and *FETÖ*. He replied that these two movements had warm relations and that *FETÖ* had followers among the *Muftime* which is mostly populated by the *Tablighi Jamaat*.

Last but not the least, PUBLIC A also filled me in on one of my interlocutors, BUREAUCRAT J, whom I interviewed the day before and whose testimony will appear in the next subchapter. According to PUBLIC A, BUREAUCRAT J was

⁷³⁶ <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan--first-islamic-party-arstanbek-controversy/31081978.html>

victim to a knife attack a couple of years ago. The perpetrator was never caught, but it was rumored that he was a member of the radicalized *Yakin Inkar* which started out as a subgroup among the *Tablighi Jamaat* but both movements parted their ways very soon on the account that the former criticized the latter for being too worldly and subservient to the state, and also that the *Tablighi Jamaat* found their ways too radical and incompatible with *Tablighi* values. According to PUBLIC A, this failed attack on BUREAUCRAT J's life stirred an uproar among the *intelligentsia*, and drew attention to the rising problem of unchecked radical Islam in Kyrgyzstan.

PUBLIC B, a mid-thirties aged paintress by trade, was in the middle of painting the apartment next to where I stayed when I decided to strike a conversation with her. It turned out that she visited Turkey the previous summer which helped me steer the conversation towards my field trip. Not very religious herself, she had little doctrinal information with regard to the *Tablighi Jamaat* and had no desire to be contacted by the group, but her younger brother became friends with them and went on a few tours himself. Nevertheless, she did not consider her brother a *Tablighi*, but only a young Muslim man who wished to straighten up his life. She did not object to him hanging out with the *Tablighis* because she considered youth delinquency rampant in Kyrgyzstan and as an unemployed male, her brother made a few bad friends in the past. However, PUBLIC B and her family were fortunate that the young man's hanging around with this bad crowd did not lead to a prison term. That is why she was glad that he was friends with the *Tablighis* for they did not smoke, did not do drugs, and they avoided other bad habits. Her brother was not a *dawatçı* himself but looked up to them and made an effort to avoid drinking, gambling, and other vices. PUBLIC B went on to rant about the problems people like herself were faced with, such as poverty and unemployment. She added that youngsters were unable to land a job without the mediacy of someone of influence which made them turn to vagrancy and substance abuse. The *dawatçıs*, she said, told young people that there was a way out of these vices. My interlocutor confessed that in that respect she appreciated what the *Tablighi Jamaat* have been doing in Kyrgyzstan. Nevertheless, not

everything about the *Tablighis* was rosy for PUBLIC B whose mixed feelings about the group was also influenced by what she considered as the downsides of the *Tablighi Jamaat*. She said that she found the *dawatçis* to be a meddlesome crowd who had such a high opinion of themselves which they believed made them entitled to keeping pestering people about things they had no business doing so. Moreover, even her brother has assumed a holier-than-thou attitude upon befriending the *dawatçis*, who started to pester her about the way she dressed, and her having a few drinks with friends. Happy with the way she lives her life, PUBLIC B did not want or need the unsolicited and pesky advices the *Tablighis* directed at her. She said that had she been unhappy with her life, she would have sought their advice and would have welcomed the *dawatçis* then. She also added that:

I do not need advice from a younger brother when he is in need of advice himself and cannot straighten up his life without him being told what to do. I also don't like these guys wearing those foreign garments. We have our own habits, we do not need to adopt others' to become Muslims. I believe in Allah, and that is enough for being a Muslim.⁷³⁷

When I pressed her whether her brother was involved or interested in politics, or whether he developed such an interest after his befriending the *Tablighis*, she replied that:

My brother is not interested in politics. He never has been and still is not. His socializing with the *dawatçis* did not change him in that department. They do not talk about politics. As long as the *dawatçis* stay away from politics and do not attempt to force their lifestyle upon other people, I am not objecting them to preaching people to become better Muslims. But, if one does not seek advice, they should leave that person alone.

PUBLIC H and PUBLIC I waited tables at the same café not far from where I stayed in Bishkek which I frequented. The night before my flight back to Turkey

⁷³⁷ Interview, 22 December 2021, Bishkek.

on the eve of the New Year, I was able to strike up a conversation⁷³⁸ with the café clientele where I ended up interviewing PUBLIC H and PUBLIC I about the *Tablighi Jamaat*. A Russian Orthodox by birth, PUBLIC H was of very little information about the group. Coupled with his absence of information was his desire to steer clear of religious topics which was a very reasonable course of action, taking into consideration his ethnic minority status in a Muslim majority country. PUBLIC H, as a non-Muslim, obviously did not want to voice his opinion about an Islamic topic, but once other customers left he became more relaxed about it. He saw *dawatçis* on streets himself but was never contacted by them because, he guessed that his appearance gave him away as a Russian, and as a corollary, an Orthodox Christian, leaving him alone. Therefore, he has not formed an opinion about them himself, but what he heard from his Kyrgyz friends made such an impression on him that he believed that there were many Kyrgyz people who were not comfortable with the way *dawatçis* carried themselves and interacted with Muslims. His Kyrgyz friends were mostly secular Muslims who had no qualms about befriending a Russian. His friends of Muslim faith found the *dawatçis* to be very irritating because they did not take no for an answer and kept preaching people even if they wished not to be contacted. PUBLIC H commented that if he were pestered that way he would not like it, too. His low opinion of the *Tablighi Jamaat* is also based on some concerns that are possibly unique to Russian citizens of Kyrgyzstan, divulging some hidden but not deeply buried fears regarding their uneasiness about the receding status of being a Russian in the post-Soviet space. His testimony recounts not only his lack of information but also his concerns which are as follows:

Their appearance is a bit weird. Normally Kyrgyz people do not wear such long shirts. They have their own national headgear for men. But, *dawatçis* do not wear those either. They have adopted some foreign habits which I find to be

⁷³⁸ One of the Kyrgyz customers asked me whether Turks still lived in caves, a hilarious and unexpected question which turned out to be based on some misunderstanding with regard to the historical cave dwellings in the Cappadocia region which he picked up while watching a documentary about them. I told him that I knew at least one Turk, a famous singer by the name İbrahim Tatlıses, who was indeed born in a cave but took in his youth years a liking to modern housing just like the rest of the population.

strange. They look like Arabs. If this country becomes an Islamic republic like Iran, what will befall on non-Muslims like me? I am Russian but I am not a citizen of the Russian Federation. I do not want to move there because Kyrgyzstan is my homeland. If the *dawatçıs* are to keep transforming Kyrgyzstan towards an Islamic republic, I might run into trouble.⁷³⁹

PUBLIC I, a nominal Kyrgyz female Muslim, was much interested about the Turkish series aired in Kyrgyzstan, the series about Suleiman the Lawgiver and his enslaved, Slavic born wife Hurrem in particular, which I used as a stepping stone to steer our conversation towards Islam in Kyrgyzstan and the *dawatçıs*. Not very informed about Islam or much interested about it though she was, PUBLIC I had a vested interest in the preservation of the secular state in Kyrgyzstan for she led a secular lifestyle and did not want to see it endangered. She explained that she had no contact with the *Tablighi Jamaat*, but added that:

One does not have to meet them in person to know about the *dawatçıs* for they are unmistakable in their garments and long beards, walking in the streets in the middle of Bishkek. They are found everywhere, even where I live. These long shirts and long beards are not what we Kyrgyz people are accustomed to. It makes me uncomfortable, and I cannot help but think where we are headed to. Because in the past you did not see many men of such appearance and women in headscarves was even a rarer sight. If we keep this way I am afraid we might end up like an Arab state or Iran.⁷⁴⁰

When I asked her what would be her reaction should the *Tablighis* attempt to preach her she replied that:

I would not be comfortable and I most certainly do not wish to be contacted by them. I like the way I live and do not want to be told to change who I am. They should keep to themselves and stop harassing people. If somebody wants to learn more about Islam or change their lifestyle mosques are there to help them. Why roam the streets and knock on people's doors if people do not desire to be contacted this way?

⁷³⁹ Interview, 29 December 2021, Bishkek.

⁷⁴⁰ Interview, 29 December 2021, Bishkek.

I have met PUBLIC J and PUBLIC K after my unsuccessful visit to the University of Central Asia where I hoped to meet Emil Nasritdinov who is published scholar and an expert on the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan whose works have been an invaluable secondary source for my study. Because he did not return my emails and was not accessible by telephone, I took my chances by dropping by unannounced at the university he taught, which was in a walking distance from the *Maarif Vakfi* which I had just visited, but to no avail. On my way back to the bus station, I came across two young girls, PUBLIC J and PUBLIC K, who turned out to be first year students at the same university. Striking up a conversation with them, I took advantage of my new-formed acquaintance with these freshmen girls to inquire about their insight and opinion about the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Coming from secular and upper middle class background, my interviewees had little information about my query but nevertheless took notice of the itinerant *Tablighis* which, by that time, became apparent to me that was an unmistakable occurrence for Bishkek dwellers regardless of their socioeconomic background or level of religiosity. A business major, PUBLIC J responded to my inquiry about her opinion about the *Tablighi Jamaat* in the following manner:

I have seen them in the streets, but was not aware that they were called the *Tablighis* because they are known as the *dawatçis* in Kyrgyzstan. This is the first time I hear about the name *Tablighi Jamaat*. I do not know what they are all about or what they tell people because I have no contact with them. The way they wear those foreign-looking garments is weird for we normally have no such habit. I have no relatives who wear those shirts or sport beards.⁷⁴¹

Upon my question whether she felt that Kyrgyzstan was becoming more religious, and if yes, did it disturb her, she said that she was not normally interested in politics, but added that:

We are a former Soviet republic. We did not have religion as an important factor in our daily lives back then. Now religion has become more important and we have religious freedom. That is good. But, I am free to choose my lifestyle as

⁷⁴¹ Interview, 26 December 2021, Bishkek.

they are. These *dawatçıs*, these Arab-like guys, do they really respect my freedoms? I do not think so. They are too many, and I see this as a potential risk for modern people like me.

PUBLIC K's words echoed PUBLIC J's sentiments in that she too was not familiar with the *Tablighi Jamaat* on a personal level and she shared her friend's concerns about what future might hold in store with regard to freedoms:

I don't have any problems with *dawatçıs*; they have their own beliefs and I have my own. So long as everyone respects others' rights there should be no problems. However, I hear that they knock people's doors randomly and tell them to come to the mosque. This is not right. If I want to come to the mosque I do not need to be invited. Pestering people creates friction and then people become irritated with the *sakalçandar* (means bearded men in Kyrgyz). They should respect people's decisions. This is not the USSR. They are free to practice whatever they believe. And they should understand that other people are free to do whatever they want.⁷⁴²

To recapitulate, my interviews with the public have revealed that those I interviewed who came from a secular background did not have contact with the *Tablighi Jamaat* and they have no desire to be involved with them. They express their wish that they be left alone by the *dawatçıs* whose lifestyle clashed with my interviewees who see the *Tablighis* to be diametrically opposed to their modern and secular choices in life. Nevertheless, my public interviewees took notice of the growing influence and presence of the *Tablighi Jamaat* with a mixture of indifference and alarm. On the one hand, they are willing to respect the way the *Tablighis* live their lives. This is an indication that different segments of Kyrgyz society has come to acknowledge that the members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* are entitled to their views and choices much like anyone else. This is an indication that, middle-aged and young people who are not affiliated with the *Tablighi Jamaat* in any way, which constitute my interviewees from the public, have internalized the liberal tenets of the Kyrgyz social milieu, and have no problem with the fact that there is a large group of religious people which is present almost everywhere in Kyrgyzstan. On the other hand, this group comes with some caveats.

⁷⁴² Interview, 26 December 2021, Bishkek.

Firstly, they demand that the *Tablighi Jamaat* return the respect which they believe is a two-way quality. The *Tablighis*, they believe, should respect others' choices in life much the way the *dawatçis* receive respect from them. This according to my public interviewees has not materialized so far. Much annoyance has been expressed on their part that the *Tablighi Jamaat* is invasive in other people's lives. The distinctive *Tablighi* modus operandi of roaming the streets and preaching door-to-door is a major source of irritation for my public interviewees for whom this is not only incursive and unwanted but also ineffective. My interviewees claimed that anyone who wishes to receive information about Islam would seek the *Tablighis* anyway, and that reaching out to people indiscriminately achieves little beyond annoying people. On a side note, the *Tablighi Jamaat's* insistence on indiscriminate preaching is based on Maulana Ilyas's sermons. Maulana Ilyas asked his followers to contact, apart from Muslims who were in search of Islamic learning, those Muslims who harbored no desire to become more involved in Islam. His reasoning was that the Prophet himself visited non-Muslims and preached them about virtues of Islam without being asked to do so. Maulana Ilyas contended that the same weakness in faith obtained among the Muslims of his time which necessitated that the *Tablighis* follow the example of the Prophet and contact any Muslim to do *tabligh* regardless of whether their addressees demanded it or not.⁷⁴³

Secondly, my interviewees from the public expressed their displeasure with the Pakistani-style clothing of the *Tablighis* which they see as an undesirable foreign influence. This view can be interpreted from two perspectives. On the one hand, it might be attributed to a lack of respect on the part of my interviewees. Obviously, one is entitled to their sartorial choices, and as long as they respect other people's choices, they should be free from any intervention on the part of citizens and the state alike. On the other hand, the complaint of my interviewees might be considered a simple criticism and may thus fall within the purview of

⁷⁴³ Muhammed Manzûr Nûmânî, 82.

freedom of expression. Much as anyone is entitled to wear any item of clothing they prefer, people are also entitled to express their displeasure at other people's choices so long as such criticism does not form the basis of intervention. It is also possible to consider such criticism from a nationalist point of view. The criticisms, it is plausible to hold, are directed more towards the source of influence, that is Pakistan, than the simple fact that the *Tablighis* are clad in clothing different to the rest of the nation. There seems to be an element of truth here, as the *Tablighis* go to great lengths to claim that their distinctive style of clothing and beards are in fact not much different to what Kyrgyz men used to wear before the Soviet Union. Thus, the *Tablighi Jamaat* attempts to turn the tables on this front, laying a claim on nativity when it is criticized for being non-native and external. Furthermore, as I observed myself, some of my Tablighi interviewees do indeed wear authentic Kyrgyz headgears. That the Kyrgyz state has issued orders that the *Tablighis* should embroider national figures to their items of clothing, which has not gained much currency, is a further indication that sartorial criticisms directed towards the *Tablighi Jamaat* are attributable to the foreign influence and out-of-place nature of the *Tablighi* clothing rather than a desire to ensure uniformity.

Thirdly, my public interviewees demand that liberties should be assured not only for those who preach indiscriminately but also for those who wish to have no part in that. The address of this demand is the Kyrgyz state which has done little in the way to supervise everyone's liberties so far. More legislation and supervision is demanded from the state to address the concerns of this segment of the Kyrgyz society. Given the strength the *Tablighi Jamaat* has accumulated in various governmental and para-governmental bodies over the years, it appears that such demands have fallen on deaf ears as far as the *Tablighi Jamaat* is concerned which considers its cause a divine-inspired and infallible enterprise. Therefore, it is the government of Kyrgyzstan, according to my interviewees, which has to take action and ensure the safety and inviolability of the rights of all of its citizens.

The interviews with the Kyrgyz public have garnered a wealth of information and opinion which is in line with the findings of the literature on the *Tablighi Jamaat* with regard to the public opinion about the movement. For instance, my interviews have revealed that according to their observations personal crises caused by criminal activity, alcohol abuse etc. is one of the reasons why people choose to affiliate themselves with the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Therefore, they mostly associated conversion to the *Tablighi Jamaat* with one's desire to leave behind a troublesome life and start anew. This is a theme that comes up in the literature, as well, not only in Kyrgyzstan but also anywhere the *Tablighi* activity results in conversions. In Scott Flower's study of the growing number of converts to Islam from Christianity in Papua New Guinea which he attributes mostly to the activities of missionaries from Australia, Bangladesh, and India of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, for one, personal crises play a great role in conversions:

According to Ali, age 28: "I was involved with alcohol and gambling and womanizing, and this creates a lot of problems that I don't want. This is one reason why I become Muslim." Likewise for Hussein, age 25: "I was into alcohol and drugs, mostly marijuana. I would stop cars and pull the drivers out. I used to get guns and do bad things." And 35 year-old Ruqaiya explained:

"In PNG we are known for domestic violence, and my husband and I used to have domestic violence before. After embracing Islam we changed totally because everyday we are praying five times a day and so we don't do those things. Now my husband never drinks. He used to get angry quickly but now he does not."⁷⁴⁴

Similar accounts abound in the context of Kyrgyzstan as well. Apart from Emil Nasritdinov's work on the social transformation brought to a Bishkek neighborhood through the activities of the *Tablighi Jamaat* which was already referred to earlier in the present chapter, in a study by Dietrich Reetz on the relations between the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Central Asia and the International Islamic University in Pakistan, the author comments using data he gleaned through interviewing Kyrgyz *Tablighis* that young, unemployed men in rural

⁷⁴⁴ Scott Flower, "Conversion to Islam in Papua New Guinea", *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Vol. 18, No. 4, May 2015, 65.

areas took to excessive drinking and, as a result, neglected religious and social duties after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and these men:

... started modifying their behaviour and attending religious services at local mosques after they had joined TJ activities. Metaphorically, TJ activism could be seen as re-appearance of a social bond amongst young people that had previously been fostered by organisations like the Komsomol, whose rituals and practices were destroyed by the social upheaval following the end of the Soviet era and the introduction of the market economy.⁷⁴⁵

It appears that this tendency among the converts to the *Tablighi Jamaat*, far from being a phenomenon observed exclusively in Kyrgyzstan, is unbound by culture and geography and ubiquitous. This phenomenon cannot also be attributed to the post-Soviet turbulence or seen as a recent development, as already back in 1991 Gilles Kepel noted that those who were attracted to the call of the *Tablighi Jamaat* were not the lettered political and militant Islamists of the campuses, but people with low level of education who had trouble in their lives in a modern world such as the jobless workers, unemployed youth, fathers who lost their traditional authority over their children, and those who sought comfort in alcoholism and drug abuse.⁷⁴⁶

5.3. The *Tablighi Jamaat* Perceived by the Bureaucracy, Intellectuals, and the Academia in Kyrgyzstan

This subchapter covers the information and opinions revealed by my interviews of the bureaucrats, intellectuals, and academicians, the three informed segments of the Kyrgyz society which are, more or less, in contact with the *Tablighi Jamaat* for a better understanding of the structure and evolution of the group as well as to assess the cultural, political, and international risks that might be posed by the *Tablighi Jamaat*'s presence and activities throughout the nation and

⁷⁴⁵ Dietrich Reetz, "Mediating Mobile Traditions", 137.

⁷⁴⁶ Gilles Kepel, *La Revanche de Dieu: Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du monde*, (Paris : Seuil, 1991), 59.

abroad. There is a great overlap between two segments, intellectuals and academicians, but since some intellectuals do not work in or have since left the academia, it became necessary for me to make a distinction between them.

Interviewing this group was probably the most difficult of all the categories, because bureaucrats were very unwilling to talk to foreigners about the *Tablighi Jamaat* which remains a sensitive topic in Kyrgyzstan. Giving interviews about such contested issues is understandably seen risky by government officials no matter how assured they are of anonymity by the researcher. Deep suspicions about foreign researchers run among independent intellectuals and academicians as well. Only through common friends and acquaintances that I was able to convince most of them to be my interviewees. While independent intellectuals were less inclined to reject my request of interviews, academicians from Kyrgyz universities were most averse to being interviewed. Almost any professor I contacted, save one, refused to see me. This flat-out refusal on the part of academicians I find very much telling, as an indication of the extent to which the academia wants to stay away from expressing their views with regard to the *Tablighi Jamaat* even under the condition of anonymity. All in all, I interviewed nine bureaucrats both Turkish and Kyrgyz, one academician and two intellectuals outside of the academic world the breakdown of which is as follows: two Turkish officials in Bishkek one of whom I interviewed in 2016, BUREAUCRAT A; and the other in 2021, BUREAUCRAT B; another Turkish official, BUREAUCRAT C; one Kyrgyz employee working for the Turkish government, BUREAUCRAT D; another Turkish official, BUREAUCRAT E; one Kyrgyz imam working at the Serakhsi Mosque, BUREAUCRAT F; one member of the Kyrgyz Ministry of Foreign Affairs, BUREAUCRAT G; one member of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, BUREAUCRAT H; one member of the *Muftiate*, BUREAUCRAT I; one Kyrgyz academician who is a member of the Diplomatic Academy within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs BUREAUCRAT J; and two independent Kyrgyz intellectuals who have already left the academia before the interviews took place, BUREAUCRATS K and L.

When I asked my first ever interviewee BUREAUCRAT A in Kyrgyzstan, a Turkish member of the Turkish diplomatic mission in Bishkek in 2016, what he thought about the *Tablighi Jamaat*, he replied that as the Islamic movement with the largest following in Kyrgyzstan, the group was unmistakable in its presence and salience.⁷⁴⁷ This was a common theme I would very soon become accustomed to hearing. My interlocutor also added that neither the Turkish officials nor him had any contact with them, though. Given the ubiquitousness of the *Tablighi Jamaat* nationwide, this sounded a bit evasive. However, I was also told by the same authority that Turkey and the *Tablighi Jamaat* catered to different segments of the Kyrgyz society. Therefore, the lack of contact between the two parties apart from being normal, seemed deliberate, at least on the part of my interlocutor for the personnel at any diplomatic mission would naturally act neutral vis-à-vis any legal religious group in that country as long as the two parties did not have any reason to clash with one another. My interlocutor further told me about the activities of the group without expressing any negative opinion about them. It was also hardly unexpected that the *Tablighi Jamaat* would not seek to establish contact with the Turkish mission which would totally go against the grain. Nevertheless, the official position of Turkish authorities reminded me of the proverbial situation regarding the elephant in the room.

I was therefore surprised when I was told by another interlocutor BUREAUCRAT B, fulfilling the very same position as BUREAUCRAT A as his successor, that the Turkish official position regarding the *Tablighi Jamaat* took a turn very different from the previous one. Upon my question as to what he thought about the group's presence and activities in Kyrgyzstan, BUREAUCRAT B has told me that the *Tablighi Jamaat* as the movement with the most robust presence exerted the most profound influence. However, my interlocutor spoke of the group with such disdain he did not hide because the *Tablighis* were accustomed to sleeping in the mosques and masjids which he did not approve. He also said that the for *Tablighis* mosques served as a base, except

⁷⁴⁷ Interview, 20 November 2016, Bishkek.

for the Serakhsi Mosque, which he referred to as ‘our mosque, where *Tablighis* were not allowed to sleep or preach. He added that members of the group did not attempt to sleep there anyway because Turkey had its religious program of its own which did not suit the *Tablighis*. Despite the recent removal due to allegedly irregular financial dealings of the former *mufti* in Kyrgyzstan who was a *Tablighi* himself, my interlocutor found out that the positive image of the group persisted among the public. When I asked him what his review of the *Tablighi* method was, he replied that he found it to be ineffective and repetitive which the group preached to everyone all the time. He further claimed that the *Tablighi Jamaat* was financed by the United Kingdom, and, as such, the group had their roots outside Kyrgyzstan and the entire Central Asian region. Their version of Islam, he continued, was not native to the region but imported, and was some force that needed to be dealt with accordingly. Here, my interlocutor seemed to reach a point he wanted to make; that is, he added that the learned Kyrgyz held a suspicion that the *Tablighi Jamaat* had become too powerful in Kyrgyzstan and that this situation was a source of concern. Moreover, the new *mufti* was affiliated with the *FETÖ* which, according to BUREAUCRAT B, was not necessarily against the *Tablighi Jamaat*, the two organizations he said was what Turkey stood against. Turkey, he said was against the *Tablighi Jamaat*’s activities and the extent to which it has accumulated power in Kyrgyzstan. Here my interlocutor drew a direct parallelism between the *FETÖ* and the *Tablighi Jamaat*, saying that:

...this is not my personal opinion but the official position of the Republic of Turkey. They are much like what *FETÖ* used to be before the July the 15th [the failed coup d’état in Turkey perpetrated by *FETÖ*]. The *Tablighis* are ignorant of Islam, and their ways and methods are plain wrong. That is why we do not let them sleep at our mosque. They spread their message at any mosque in Kyrgyzstan save for ours where we train local *imams* and improve their religious knowledge without the interference of ignorance. We let them join the prayers at our mosque, but do not let them linger after the prayer to preach people.^{748,749}

⁷⁴⁸ Interview, 20 December 2021, Bishkek.

This change of course in the Turkish policy towards the *Tablighi Jamaat* came rather as a surprise to me for the group does not encounter any such accusation in Turkey, and in fact enjoys quasi-official support.⁷⁵⁰ When I raised this issue,

⁷⁴⁹ Nonetheless, my experience with the members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* with regard to the Serakhsi Mosque is very different to what this interlocutor told me. When I visited the Serakhsi Mosque only a day after my interview with Turkish officials, I noticed that a man, clean-shaven and clad in Western attire, stood up after the prayer and assuming a preaching position, he read some book in the Kyrgyz language aloud, but barely noticeable from afar, to the other mosque attendants. This public recital lasted about fifteen minutes after which he and a couple of other men, all seated during their companion's preaching and in similar appearance, left the mosque without any further ado. They were neither interrupted during the preaching nor harassed while leaving the premises of the Serakhsi Mosque. Later when I interviewed at the mosque a Kyrgyz official employed by the Kyrgyz *Muftiate*, BUREAUCRAT F, about the activities of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, my interlocutor told me that I just missed a preaching *Tablighi* group whom I could have interviewed had I been aware of their presence. This group my Kyrgyz interlocutor alluded to turned out to be the men I noticed.

Nevertheless, I must admit, in defense of my interlocutor at the Turkish Embassy, that the post-prayer *Tablighi* preaching at the Serakhsi Mosque was nothing like what I observed at other mosques in Bishkek. Unlike how *tabligh* is conducted at the former Grand Mosque of Bishkek, the *Tablighi* group at the Serakhsi Mosque was distinctly few in number and drew no audience from the mosque attendants. The entire affair took little time and as it lacked any contribution or notice on the part of mosque attendants, it went almost unnoticed. It seemed to me that the group did not expect any different, and that they preached there only for the sake of being able to claim publicly that they preached there, just to have a physical presence and to deliver their message without any remarkable or noticeable reaction from the other people present at the mosque. From their unusual attire, that is, unusual for the *Tablighis*, I surmised that their intention was not to provoke a negative reaction from Turkish and Kyrgyz authorities by their uninvited presence, but to make an uneventful appearance to show, perhaps, that they were not entirely unwilling to compromise where necessary to prevent their activities from being completely obstructed.

⁷⁵⁰ The President of the Turkish Republic Recep Tayyip Erdoğan attended in person and acted as a pall-bearer at the funeral of Ahmet Vanlıoğlu, the founder of *İsmailağa* Quranic School and the father to Ömer Vanlıoğlu, an influential, respected, and pioneering name among Turkish *Tablighis*, in January 2020. Ömer Vanlıoğlu has been claimed to be the current leader of the *şura*, that is, consultation, of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Turkey. For a very recent review of the Turkish chapter of the *Tablighi Jamaat* see <https://www.indyturk.com/node/494871/haber/medyadan-uzak-durmay%C4%B1-tercih-eden-tebli%C4%9F-cemaatinin-merkezi-mescid-i-selamda-bir>.

I have contacted via telephone Ömer Vanlıoğlu in 2021 to inform him that I was curious about the *Tablighi Jamaat* and wished to visit and, if possible, stay at their headquarters in *Mescid-i Selam* neighborhood in Istanbul. Vanlıoğlu expressed his displeasure at my wish, and told me that due to the on-going COVID 19 situation they were not accepting visitors from outside much less those who wished to spend the night there.

Incidentally, the deceased was the brother-in-law of Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu, the current leader of the aforementioned *İsmailağa Cemaati*, to whom the president paid homage in a very public manner, as well. This further confirms the argument that the Turkish chapter of the *Tablighi Jamaat* is closely linked with the *İsmailağa Cemaati* both on a personal level and from an ideological standpoint. It is noteworthy that the *İsmailağa Cemaati* is not apolitic in any way, nor does it claim to be that in the first place, and that it maintains a highly noticeable public presence,

BUREAUCRAT B told me that the official attitude he revealed concerned Kyrgyzstan only, and that it did not apply to Turkey. That Turkey's approach to the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Turkey differs from that in Kyrgyzstan is also curious because it indicates, in my opinion, that Turkish foreign policy can take shape in various countries independently, albeit in a limited manner, regardless of domestic events at home. The lowdown for this differentiation became clear in BUREAUCRAT B's next words about the *Süleymançıs* where he told me that:

We do not have any contact with the *Süleymançıs*, as well. We do not approve of them either, because like the *Tablighi Jamaat* they do not heed our words. They receive funding from other countries and act independently of us. They have roots outside and they are self-ordained.

It has thus become apparent that the new Turkish official stance against the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan was a function of Turkey's desire to have a say in the actors operating in that country and how they operate. Those that fall outside Turkish political, ideological, and financial control, both the *Süleymançıs* and the *Tablighi Jamaat*, are considered as unruly and risky, and the *Tablighi Jamaat*, which is salient throughout the nation, poses a particular threat to what Turkey deems the 'true' and 'native' form of Islam which it promotes in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere. I believe that this proactive stance stems largely from Turkey's experience with the *FETÖ* which was very salient abroad, remained outside state control, and exerted great influence not only in Turkey but also abroad to the point of becoming what has been labeled as a parallel state by

drawing negative criticism from secular circles in Turkey due to, among others, their *Tabligh*-like door-to-door visits to spread what they consider the correct Islamic behaviour during which they ask pub attendants to stop drinking alcohol, which stands in contrast to the *Tablighi Jamaat*'s claim that it shuns politics completely and does not seek publicity. However, my *Tablighi* interlocutor from Tavşanlı, who had a stint at the *İsmailağa Cemaati* as well before joining the *Tablighi Jamaat*, told me that he also visited pubs, night clubs and taverns in his capacity as an itinerant *Tablighi* preacher where his group preached patrons who, he claimed, did not object to be preached but were instead struck by the power of the message delivered. Consequently, he purported that several people from such pub gatherings asked them to preach even more and even became *Tablighis* themselves. When I asked one of his neighbors who was a *mufti* in that town a decade ago and did not approve of the *Tablighi* ways, whether such 'conversions' to the *Tablighi Jamaat* in unusual settings occurred often, he expressed his doubt, adding that he believed that no such preaching method would work miracles and that it proved his conviction that the *Tablighis* were delusional.

Turkish officials. In that respect, Turkey seems to take the reins with regard to Islamic movements not only in the domestic religious market, and the political scene, but also abroad where she feels that a particular group promoting a ‘harmful’ version of Islam has become too powerful. That is why, it appears, Turkey has gone to great lengths in Kyrgyzstan to build an alternative grande mosque and train local *imams* to counter the influence of the *Tablighi Jamaat*.

My other interlocutors affiliated with the Turkish Embassy, BUREAUCRATs D and E, also confirmed that the *Tablighi Jamaat* was definitely the largest Islamic group in Kyrgyzstan and that they were found everywhere, both in urban and rural areas.⁷⁵¹ BUREAUCRAT E has also voiced the other Turkish interlocutor’s, BUREAUCRAT B’s concerns about the extent to which the group became powerful nationwide. BUREAUCRAT D, on the other hand, was more cautious in that respect for he believed that the *Tablighi Jamaat*’s benefits to Kyrgyzstan outweighed the potential risks it posed and that it was not harmful as long as the group did not gain political power. When I pressed whether the group was becoming politically powerful, he said that rather than becoming directly involved in politics, the *Tablighi Jamaat* gained followers among the bureaucracy and some political figures, but not to the extent that he would see justification enough for an immediate cause for alarm. Nevertheless, he added that for the group to continue to operate in Kyrgyzstan, the state should exert stricter control over them. He concluded that:

the *Yakin Inkar* is a particular concern for us, because they are adamantly refusing to abide by the rules of the state. As state control is more concentrated in urban areas, the *Yakin Inkar* poses a threat in rural areas where state presence is more lightly felt. As long as the *Tablighi Jamaat* sticks to the rules and adapts its ways to what the state dictates, they are going to do good for the people as they have done so far.⁷⁵²

⁷⁵¹ Interviews conducted in Bishkek on December 22nd 2021.

⁷⁵² Interview, 22 December 2021, Bishkek.

BUREAUCRAT C, who works outside but in tandem with the Turkish officials, told me that he sometimes joins *dawat* groups because he found the experience spiritually invigorating during which he shut himself off the outer world and his own daily interactions which allowed him to reflect, but he does not consider himself a *dawatçı*. In fact, his first point was that there were many men like him whose involvement with the *Tablighi Jamaat* was limited to short-term *dawat* tours without any need to belong. He was glad that the *Tablighis* too were content with this arrangement and did not press him for further involvement which would prove difficult for him due to familial and professional duties. He added that the influence the *Tablighi Jamaat* exerted on the society was greater than the sheer number of its followers hinted at due to people like him who found in *dawat* an opportunity to reflect on their own lives and troubles. When I asked him who joined such tours and what attracted the rich Kyrgyz men to *dawat*, he responded that there were every type of men one finds in such tours; the rich and the poor, the simple peasant and the bureaucrat of higher echelons were found in the same group and that such groups were always established randomly. He considered this setting to be a simulation of real life where people from different walks of life crossed paths all the time. Moreover, my interlocutor also saw a parallelism between the composition of *Tabligh* tours and death; as one died the earth accepted them no matter who they were when alive. *Dawat*, he concluded, was a simulation of what real life was supposed to be and what afterlife would be. Upon my question as to why the rich joined *dawat* tours, BUREAUCRAT C brought his insight in the following manner:

...because like everyone else they need peace of mind. This country was communist twenty years ago. One day everything changed overnight. Some people got rich while the majority got poorer. You suddenly found yourself with the means to enrich yourself be it trade or bribery or whatever means available to you. You had cars and everything. But your classmate with whom you have been socializing for years ended up poor. You still saw him and developed a pang of guilt and remorse. What do you do if you are still capable of feeling remorse? You join a *dawat* tour and ask for forgiveness from Allah. And you are *inshallah* forgiven for your sins. You are as blank as a sheet. You no longer feel remorse and your enrichment at the expense of others is legitimized, at least in your own eyes. You see there are sick people, the destitute, the drug abuser, the alcoholic. You do something for them while doing *dawat*. You tell them

about gratitude and patience. But you also do something for yourself. You decide to give alms for the benefit of the destitute which did not cross your mind before you became involved with *dawat*. Gone are your sins, guilt and remorse, and you achieve the peace of mind you sought so ardently.⁷⁵³

BUREAUCRAT G, typical of Kyrgyz bureaucrats, was obviously unwilling to be interviewed by me about the *Tablighi Jamaat* as evidenced by his curt replies. He affirmed that the *Tablighi Jamaat* was a force to be reckoned in Kyrgyzstan and that people from different walks of life joined its ranks which included bureaucrats from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs where he also worked.⁷⁵⁴ When I pressed what his personal opinion was about the movement, he told me that the *Tablighi Jamaat* might become a force that accumulated too much power in the future, but that Kyrgyzstan was not at that point for the moment. Should that happen, he added, “we might need to ban them like our neighbours did. To prevent this we have the Commission [Directorate of Religious Affairs] which holds them in check.”⁷⁵⁵ When I asked whether he thought the *Tablighi Jamaat* was beneficial for the society, he replied that as long as the movement stayed away from politics, their good deeds, such as their combat with alcohol abuse would be appreciated.

BUREAUCRATS H and I, as if following the example of BUREAUCRAT G, showed their unwillingness to share their personal opinion with me and stuck to curt and impersonal replies which is understandable for the former works for the Directorate of Religious Affairs, and the latter for the *Muftiate*. BUREAUCRAT H said that should the *Tablighi Jamaat* cause any trouble or assume political power, the Directorate would step in to prevent any such unconstitutional act would materialize. Therefore, he hinted that no such threat existed as of the time

⁷⁵³ Interview, 26 December 2021, Bishkek.

⁷⁵⁴ Interview, 24 December 2021, Bishkek.

⁷⁵⁵ Interview, 20 December 2021, Bishkek.

the interview took place.⁷⁵⁶ When I asked to confirm whether the *Tablighi Jamaat* established a *madrassa* and that the group had a powerful presence at the *Muftiate*, BUREAUCRAT I replied that he had *Tablighi* co-workers but had no problem with them so far. As for the *madrassa*, he said that he was not aware that any such *madrassa* existed.⁷⁵⁷

When I dropped a visit to the Serakhsi Mosque, I intended to interview BUREAUCRAT F and, if possible, to observe any *Tablighis* who might be there as well. The latter did not materialize, but my interlocutor accepted to be interviewed which was no less than a favour, seeing as he worked there in his capacity as a government official. That his answers were somewhat evasive can be attributed to the same fact. In his short account, which favoured the *Tablighi Jamaat*, he declared his approval of the deeds of the *Tablighi Jamaat* which he found to be admirable for they spread good values among the population when there were myriad foreign and harmful influences coming from every direction and that these deeds did not go unappreciated among people. When I pressed him saying that there were people who found the ways of the *Tablighi Jamaat* to be less than desirable and more in the way of disturbance of the peace, BUREAUCRAT F brushed such claims aside, countering that alcohol consumption went down, and family relations were much better these days thanks to the relentless activities of the *Tablighi Jamaat*. However, he added that:

...their Pakistani style clothes are not fit for the Kyrgyz society. They look weird in those clothes. The *shalwar kameez* they wear resemble the long underwear our grandparents used to wear. I keep telling them not to wear underwear in the name of Islam. At the moment they have about 100.000-200.000 followers in Kyrgyzstan. How this will pan out there is no telling for the moment. It may result in further good deeds, but it may also lead to a bad outcome for Kyrgyzstan.⁷⁵⁸

⁷⁵⁶ Interview, 20 December 2021, Bishkek.

⁷⁵⁷ Interview, 20 December 2021, Bishkek.

⁷⁵⁸ Interview, 22 December 2021, Bishkek.

BUREAUCRAT J who accepted to be interviewed by me at the Diplomatic Academy of the Kyrgyz Ministry of Foreign Affairs where he works as an academician provided me with invaluable information as to the state of affairs in the Kyrgyz religious market and specifically the vacuum filled by the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan and how the Kyrgyz state regarded the movement. Upon my question as to the image of the *Tablighi Jamaat* vis-à-vis scholars and high-level bureaucrats in Kyrgyzstan, BUREAUCRAT J replied in a reserved manner that there was no consensus among these circles:

There are different views about whether the *Tablighi Jamaat* is harmful or not. To answer such a profound question one has to study the historical background of the movement in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere as well as its ideology because the answers are equally deep and complex. Moreover, one has to forecast what they do and what they will do in the future.⁷⁵⁹

Then, my interlocutor gave me some background information to prepare the setting for his personal opinion about the *Tablighi Jamaat* such as the fact that the seventy-year long rule of the USSR left the Kyrgyz without a national identity and that Kyrgyz people have lost their religion as a consequence. Before the Bolshevik rule, he continued, the Kyrgyz were nomads and had a distinct identity shaped around it, and while Muslims, Kyrgyz lifestyle was not influenced much by Islam. After the independence was gained, BUREAUCRAT J went on, Kyrgyzstan found itself in an ideological and spiritual vacuum which was taken advantage of by the Evangelical groups who flocked to Kyrgyzstan to preach Protestantism, same as the *Tablighi Jamaat* which brought its own version of *Hanafi* Islam. My interlocutor here drew a distinction between *Hanafism* and the *Wahhabi* school of thought; adding that when the *Tablighi Jamaat* first came to Kyrgyzstan it was certainly *Hanafi* and distinctly not *Wahhabi*. Apparently, this my interlocutor found to be desirable and advantageous for he believed that the *Tablighi Jamaat* spread good values especially among the rural population which played a very valuable role to keep the social fabric intact at a time when the state power faltered which was not

⁷⁵⁹ Interview, 27 December 2021, Bishkek.

seen during the Soviet times. They helped, he added, stop the dissemination of Evangelical ideas among people, the rural population being particularly vulnerable to such foreign influence. Because Kyrgyzstan at that time was unable to provide local population with enough number of *imams* who were knowledgeable about Islam to counter the assault of foreign influence in the shape of Evangelicalism, which never lacked the financial means, the *Tablighi Jamaat* as an apolitical organization that espoused a peaceful version of Islam was welcomed by the state apparatus in Kyrgyzstan to fill in the vacuum. However, BUREAUCRAT J has mentioned that of late things started to take a different turn as far as the *Tablighi Jamaat* was concerned which alarmed the Kyrgyz state that took advantage of the nationwide activities of the group so far. According to my interlocutor, questions arose among bureaucrats and intellectuals as to the nature of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, fears surfacing whether the group became a vessel of foreign influence itself. He brought up the issue of Pakistanization, saying that those days people became aware of the possibility that the *Tablighi* version of Islam was not what they thought it was, but a special Pakistani culture not necessarily a pure version of Islam. Consequently, he stated, the government had grown afraid of them because they feared that the *Tablighi* command center was outside Kyrgyzstan. There were also fears that some foreign powers might use them because it was believed that the *Tablighi Jamaat* was susceptible to foreign influence and manipulation. When I asked him if there was a concrete reason as to why the official review of the group transformed in such a rapid fashion, BUREAUCRAT J said that:

About a year ago we noticed that some strange ideas gained currency among the leaders of the *Tablighi Jamaat* which we likened to Salafi ideology. The movement began about that time to have its followers read a book by one Abu Izal Hanafi which is very popular with the Salafis. Therefore, it is possible to say that the *Tablighi Jamaat* is going through a change and transformation. In a sense the *Tablighi Jamaat* has become a wolf in sheep's clothing in Kyrgyzstan.⁷⁶⁰

⁷⁶⁰ Sadr ad-Dīn Abu'l Hasan 'Alī Ibn Abī al-'Izz, a 14th century scholar whose legacy is considered among the *Salafi* circles as untainted with Maturidi influence which they see anathematic.

Moreover, it seemed to my interlocutor that the current leadership of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan became involved in unregistered commercial activities that, to Kyrgyz government, clashed with the religious identity of the group and compromised it. The money flow thus created of course went under the radar which caused concerns as to what such made money was used for. Adding to these troubles was the concern that the group had too many followers among the police force and within the Ministry of Internal Affairs which reminded my interlocutor of the ways of the *FETÖ* in Turkey whose unchecked power and large number of disciples within the state apparatus encouraged them to make an attempt to grab power in Turkey using violence. He expressed that he feared that the *Tablighi Jamaat* employed a similar method in Turkey. Nevertheless, he added that in the context of Kyrgyzstan there was no perfect parallelism between the two cases as the *FETÖ* was powerful among the *intelligentsia* whereas the *Tablighi Jamaat* was more powerful among the rural population. He also mentioned that the Kyrgyz government was under pressure by China, Russia, and Uzbekistan to ban the *Tablighi Jamaat* altogether which had been going on for quite some time.

Up to this point, my interlocutor offered me little new information about the *Tablighi Jamaat*. However, from this point on, his account became more profound and thorough with information that was totally new to me:

Nowadays we have two fractions of the *Tablighi Jamaat* both operational simultaneously in Kyrgyzstan. On the one hand, we have the Indian fraction which follows the *Hanafi* tradition as the movement used to do in its initial stage in the early years of our independence. We believe that the Indian fraction represents ten percent of the entire *Tablighi* population throughout the nation. The second fraction we call the Pakistani fraction is *Hanafi* by appearance but totally *Salafi* in ideology and mindset. This fraction represents the ninety percent of the *Tablighi* disciples in Kyrgyzstan. As you see, the Pakistani fraction of the *Tablighi Jamaat* which is made up of *Salafis* has a decisive majority.

When I reminded BUREAUCRAT J that an influential Saudi *imam* in Mecca had recently denounced the *Tablighi Jamaat* and called them infidels, my interlocutor told me that the Saudi *'ulama* too were divided as to what to make of

the *Tablighi Jamaat*. According to him, there were some Saudi *'ulama* who repudiated the movement whereas there existed among the Saudi *'ulama* who had a positive opinion of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, and that such public repudiation should not be taken without a grain of salt:

The background and the context in which such dismissals took place should be taken into account. The Saudi *Wahhabi* ideology has no problems with the Pakistani fraction of the *Tablighi Jamaat* because they are both Salafis and they have no reason to cast them out. It is the Indian fraction of the *Tablighi Jamaat* that the *imam* you are referring to anathematized because the *Wahhabi* ideology and the Indian fraction are very different to one another. We the Kyrgyz Muslims are similar to the Indian fraction, and the Saudis to the Pakistani fraction.⁷⁶¹

When I commented that India as a secular state was very circumspect when it came to the *Tablighi Jamaat* but Pakistan seemed to lack such a rigorous and security-driven approach to the same group, BUREAUCRAT J replied that this was the underlying reason why the Indian fraction kept away from the influence of *Salafi* groups, whereas the Pakistani fraction was susceptible to *Salafi* indoctrination as there was little in the way of inhibition and control on the part of the government of Pakistan.

BUREAUCRAT K studied the activities of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan and visited India in company of Kyrgyz *Tablighis* more than once as a part of his fieldwork. Since he left academic life a few years ago, he lost his interest in the *Tablighi Jamaat*, but revisited his memories to guide me during our interview. He mentioned that he thrice joined *tabligh* tours during the time when he wrote his thesis, both in and outside Kyrgyzstan. His opinion about the *Tablighi Jamaat* is as follows:

Ten to fifteen years ago, one could find in our mosques Islamic books from a variety of authors from diverse religious backgrounds. Books written by Arabic and Turkish *'ulama* such as Said-i Nursi were found and read by mosque attendants back then. Nowadays, however, one can only lay their hands on the

⁷⁶¹ Interview, 27 December 2021, Bishkek.

books of Maulana Ilyas and other *Tablighis* at mosques. These books come in Kyrgyz and Russian translations. Therefore, the last decade saw a serious erosion of the diversity in resources a Kyrgyz Muslim could have access to. This lack of diversity now significantly limits the gamut of opinions mosque attendants are exposed to...As for the Nur Party you are referring to, I do not think that it is necessarily a *Tablighi* enterprise because the *Tablighi Jamaat* is not the only religious group in Kyrgyzstan, and the party members are all religious people. There might be *Tablighis* among them, but it is possible that people from other Islamic groups are also represented among the rank and file.⁷⁶²

When I inquired BUREAUCRAT K about his observations during the *dawat* tours he took part in, he told me that he took part in three different *dawat* tours where he observed each time that the level of education of other participants varied to a great extent. In one of the tours he observed that less educated people constituted the majority, whereas there were also times when educated men outnumbered the less educated. His experience with the *dawat* tours made him come to the conclusion that those participants who came from villages were ignorant, rude, and open to radicalization. When I pressed BUREAUCRAT K to elaborate, he added that anyone with no religious information or background were not prone to radicalization. It took, he was convinced, at least an elementary level of religious exposure to make a person become radicalized. This elementary level of exposure to Islam was provided in the context of Kyrgyzstan by the *Tablighi Jamaat*, advertently or inadvertently to the totally ignorant. Thus, my interlocutor believed that the *Tablighi Jamaat* created a fertile ground for radicalization for the semi-informed whose heads were turned by what little they learned and became prone to radicalization. For BUREAUCRAT K the semi-informed are particularly a matter of concern because they:

stop questioning what they are being told; ready to leave behind their old lives and start anew. The totally ignorant, on the other hand, are suspicious of the new flow of information and question it. The well informed are already armed with enough level of Islamic knowledge to counter radical ideas. That is how we ended up with the *Yakin Inkar* which is made up of semi-literate and semi-informed people who went to the extreme. The *Tablighi Jamaat* embraced the

⁷⁶² Interview, 28 December 2021, Bishkek.

people when they were totally ignorant of Islam, and transformed them into semi-informed Muslims. Once they received enough level of information to become deeply but distortedly entrenched in Islamic thinking, they were ready to be lured to radicalism that gave rise to the *Yakin Inkar*.⁷⁶³

BUREAUCRAT L, with whom I was only able to contact via telephone due to our clashing schedules, studied how women in Kyrgyzstan are radicalized and worked for the government before he left his post and started to work as an independent researcher. The interview started with his brief explanation of the *Tablighi Jamaat*'s status in Kyrgyzstan or lack thereof, to be precise. Like my previous well-informed interviewees he told me that despite being the Islamic movement with the largest number of followers and exerting the most influence in the nation, the *Tablighi Jamaat* was unregistered, its status was in limbo for it was neither registered nor unregistered, meaning from a bureaucratic point of view that the *Tablighi Jamaat* did not exist as far as Kyrgyzstan was concerned, and thus the group avoided to a great extent bureaucratic entanglements other religious movements were subject to. My interlocutor believed that the Kyrgyz state deliberately let the status of the *Tablighi Jamaat* remain ambiguous because it had a reason to facilitate the operations of the *Tablighi Jamaat* all the while its rivals were compelled to suffer higher levels of barriers to operate in the religious market which made it impossible for some religious movements to register. In doing so, continued my interlocutor, the Kyrgyz state wanted to revive the Islamic life in Kyrgyzstan just like the *Tablighi Jamaat* did and wanted to keep Islam free from political debates. The rest of his account is as follows:

That is why the apolitical *Tablighi Jamaat* was allowed to operate freely. At that time we did not have the same level of extremism we now have. We thought that by having the *Tablighi Jamaat*, a non-extremist movement, we would revive Islam and reshape our Islamic identity which we lost during the Soviet era without having to cope with the political troubles that came with the extremists like the *Wahhabis*.⁷⁶⁴

⁷⁶³ Interview, 28 December 2021, Bishkek.

⁷⁶⁴ Interview, 29 December 2021, Bishkek.

The government body responsible for registering and keeping tabs on religious movements within Kyrgyzstan, the Commission, BUREAUCRAT L said, was undermanned at that time and simply lacked the means to watch every nook and cranny. Contrarily, the Commission is better manned these days, but extremism has become a serious problem over years what with the ISIS recruiting among Kyrgyz citizens which has become a reality after 2014. This was followed by a desire to change course which did not amount to the closure of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, but BUREAUCRAT L believes that the group still faces the risk of being closed down in Kyrgyzstan:

Four years ago the Commission wanted to ban the *Tablighi Jamaat*, but politics got in the way because the political situation was in favour of the movement back then. But I believe that the *Tablighi Jamaat* still risks being banned in the coming years...I am not totally negative about the way the *Tablighi Jamaat* is headed. It is not a lost cause yet. It can be elevated from the base situation they are now found in, but if left to their own devices they can go worse and do harm. Only time will tell. The *Tablighi Jamaat* is a big risk for Kyrgyzstan right now. Each year one thousand Kyrgyz citizens go to Pakistan for *dawat* purposes.⁷⁶⁵

Here I interrupted my interview with BUREAUCRAT L to confirm and comment on the last bit of information he gave me. Because Kyrgyzstan is home to seven million inhabitants, one thousand *Tablighis* visiting Pakistan each year is a very high number in proportion to the overall population. It far outnumbers the figures for Turkey. My interlocutor reiterated the figure, saying that he got the numbers from the state, meaning that state officials too are well aware of the extent to which Kyrgyz citizens are involved with the *Tablighi Jamaat*. He elaborated on why the *Tablighi Jamaat* constitutes a risk for Kyrgyzstan:

Not only are they numerous and constantly visit Pakistan, but also assume the ways of Pakistani people. They wear Pakistani clothes and employ the Pakistani jargon. Now they are transforming the Kyrgyz identity because they themselves assumed Pakistani identity...From a different point of view, I can say that they have done great work in Kyrgyzstan so far. People who abused alcohol previously quit such bad habits thanks to the *Tablighi Jamaat*. There is no denying this. However, what with the creeping Pakistani ways through the *Tablighi Jamaat*, it is not possible to foresee what will happen in a twenty-year

⁷⁶⁵ Interview, 29 December 2021, Bishkek.

window. There is simply too big an uncertainty about the *Tablighi Jamaat* and what the movement holds in store for us. This we consider too high a risk for Kyrgyzstan.

The interviews with the bureaucrats and academicians proved to be a mixture of trite answers and invaluable information. Nevertheless, even the curtest replies came as a confirmation of what the secondary literature already revealed, and some new information came up which the secondary literature on the *Tablighi Jamaat* did not have.

First of all, interviews with BUREAUCRAT A and BUREAUCRAT B revealed the way the Turkish Republic regarded the *Tablighi Jamaat*, as well as how Turkish official position changed in the span of five years that stretched between two interviews. The interview with BUREAUCRAT A indicated that Turkish officials took notice of the saliency of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in the religious marketplace of Kyrgyzstan but preferred to observe it from afar without attempting to intervene. Apparently, back in 2016 when I interviewed BUREAUCRAT A Turkey considered the *Tablighi Jamaat* the most important player in the religious market where Turkey itself occupied a niche position that did not cross paths with the movement. At this stage, Turkish officials saw no reason to be alarmed by the influence the *Tablighi Jamaat* exerted nationwide because the two parties catered to different segments of Kyrgyz society and were not in rivalry for ‘winning hearts’, so to speak. In 2021, when my second round of interviews took place, Turkish position changed vis-à-vis the *Tablighi Jamaat* as a function of the transforming Turkish position vis-à-vis the religious marketplace in Kyrgyzstan. At this stage Turkey responded to the new domestic developments which had overarching consequences abroad, particularly in Kyrgyzstan. The *FETÖ* operations in Turkey forced Turkish officials to assume a pro-active policy abroad as well with regard to *FETÖ* where the group was especially powerful. Kyrgyzstan is one such country where *FETÖ*’s presence is particularly noticeable among the Kyrgyz elite where the schools run by the group graduated many students who now occupy middle and higher echelons of the bureaucracy. While at this point *FETÖ* and the *Tablighi Jamaat* catered

mostly to different segments of Kyrgyz society, the former to the elites and the latter to the uneducated masses, I came to conclude that for Turkish official purposes both *FETÖ* and the *Tablighi Jamaat* had common elements which called for immediate action on the part of Turkey. Firstly, both groups, according to Turkey, had external, that is funded by the Western powers, funding that flew under the radar of Turkey which enabled them to avert any attempt to control their movements. Secondly, both groups, again according to Turkey, had their ideological bases outside Turkey and Kyrgyzstan. Turkey obviously considers this a great risk for such foreign ideology can be and, according to Turkey, is used by third countries to control Kyrgyzstan. I believe that should *Wahhabi* and *Salafi* groups have been active in Kyrgyzstan, they too would have been considered under the same rubric. Therefore, both *FETÖ* and the *Tablighi Jamaat* are equipped with enough means, both financially and ideologically, to escape Turkish surveillance and operate freely while under foreign influence in Kyrgyzstan. As a response to this perceived threat, Turkey constructed the Serakhsi Mosque which, it is hoped, will serve as the sole center for training Kyrgyz *imams* which was effectively left to the *Tablighi Jamaat* so far. It is for this reason that Turkey officially positioned itself as responsible for the training of the next generation of Kyrgyz *imams* through which she intends to influence how Islam is propagated to masses. Turkey's official reasoning in doing this is that the version of Islam transmitted to Kyrgyz people by the *Tablighi Jamaat* is not only 'foreign' but also 'harmful'. Apparently, the Turkish concept of the 'foreign' quality of the *Tablighi* version of Islam is linked to how Turkey territorializes the *Hanafi* branch of Islam. For Turkish officials, *Hanafi* Islam is one of the nodes of ideological and religious continuum that purportedly exists between Turkey and Central Asian Turkic republics. Turkey formulates the *Hanafi* branch of Islam as a common cultural trait that links Turkey to Kyrgyzstan, and the *Tablighi* Islam which accepts as equally true and admissible all schools of Sunni Islam with heavy influence from the Indian subcontinent, is a threat to Turkish cultural ambitions of strengthening ties with and exerting influence on Kyrgyzstan through common Islamic ideologies. In a sense, what

Turkey is attempting to achieve in Kyrgyzstan is the Turkeyization of Kyrgyzstan to save it from the ‘threat’ of Pakistanization

Interviews with Kyrgyz academics and, to a lesser extent, with bureaucrats reveal that this group has grown wary of the extent to which the *Tablighi Jamaat* has garnered public approval and, more importantly, political power in Kyrgyzstan. While not denying that the *Tablighi Jamaat* had in the past its uses as far as the Kyrgyz society is concerned such as its successful combat with drug and substance abuse, the academics and bureaucrats have come to the conclusion that should the movement continue to delve into politics, it will soon outlive its useful life which is already taking place according to several interviewees.

An important point here is that the more religious interviewees, including Turks, tend to see the *Tablighi Jamaat* in a more positive light than the others. Such interviewees emphasize the *Tablighi Jamaat*’s spiritual and practical contributions to the Kyrgyz society, and are not much moved by the arguments raised by the public against the movement, such as the *Tablighi* method of indiscriminate preaching to Muslims regardless whether such attention is wanted or not. I believe that my religious interviewees see no harm in this method which they probably view as a part of *’al ’amru bi-l-ma’rūf wa-n-nahy ’ani-l-munkar*. Therefore, for them, I believe, preaching to masses through such means is not wrong in itself but a commendable act and an obligation for all Muslims. These interviewees probably object not to what the *Tablighis* do but to how the *Tablighi Jamaat* appear before Muslims they seek to ‘re-convert’ to Islam, like the Pakistani-style clothes they wear. My religious interviewees believe that same commendable activities can be conducted while clad in usual garments. Thus, wariness of foreign influence among the *Tablighis* is a point of convergence between secular and religious interviewees. Another point of convergence is the perceived risk that the *Tablighi Jamaat* is shedding its previous apolitical stance and joining the political power struggle. For the religious interviewees, the *Tablighi Jamaat* has not yet reached at a point where it can be considered politicized, and therefore there is no ground to ban it, but the

state should continue to keep an eye on the situation. Therefore, it appears to me that my religious interviewees among the academicians and bureaucrats are content with the level of religiosity that is rising noticeably among man in the street, and that the *Tablighi Jamaat* accounts for this tendency is an argument in favour of the group. They would be satisfied should the *Tablighi Jamaat* continue to preach to the masses but stay out of politics.

As for my more secular interviewees, their approach to the *Tablighi Jamaat* is decidedly more influenced by their concerns for security than theological arguments. They are not very much concerned that people are becoming more religious thanks to the *Tablighi Jamaat*, because Islam is seen both by the religious and secular interviewees as a marker of Kyrgyz national identity which is considered lost during the Soviet Union. In that sense, for secular and religious interviewees alike, re-Islamization of Kyrgyz society is not just a matter of practical move to rid the society of its ailments such as widespread alcohol consumption or loss of moral values, but is tied to the construction and reinforcement of Kyrgyz national identity. The interviews did not point among my more secular interviewees to a particular concern for the indiscriminate preaching done by the *Tablighis* either. I believe this is because the indiscriminate *Tablighi* preaching that troubles the public so much, particularly secular segments, is not necessarily a security concern but an improper conduct at best that does not ring the same bells of alarm among secular bureaucrats and academicians that the perceived threat of Pakistanization does. The orientation of this group of interviewees is towards Kyrgyzstan's foreign relations and how external groups may influence the domestic situation in Kyrgyz religious marketplace, whereas more mundane affairs such as harassment of citizens by the *Tablighis* may have gone unnoticed. However, it is noteworthy that the concerns among the intelligentsia with regard to the perceived threat of 'Pakistanization' is widespread and reflects a general tendency among the public. Banners that read “*Кайран элим, кайда баратабыз?* [My poor people, where are we going?]" on various billboards emerged in Bishkek in 2016 almost overnight for the public to see. The banners displayed three images next to each

other where the first displayed Kyrgyz women dressed in traditional Kyrgyz dresses, the second that of *hijab*-wearing Kyrgyz women, whereas the third image featured Kyrgyz women clad in black *niqabs*. The banners were funded by a private foundation but later the office of Almazbek Atambaev, the President of Kyrgyzstan of the time supported the initiative who said that Kyrgyzstan “should not suffer the imposition of a foreign culture under the guise of religion. We need such banners.”⁷⁶⁶ Critical of the way more and more Kyrgyz women took to *hijab* in its various forms, the banners attempted to contrast them to the national and traditional female dress, suggesting that a non-traditional and foreign form of Islam was gaining currency among women which should cause alarm for the direction the nation was headed to. The banners caused an uproar in Kyrgyzstan where people from different walks of life including bureaucrats and intellectuals reacted to the message insinuated by the banners, fearing that such a message might alienate a large portion of Kyrgyz people and harm national unity.⁷⁶⁷ Interestingly, the head of the State Committee on Religious Affairs commented that such banners were not anti-Islamic nor provocative, and that wearing black was unheard of in Kyrgyz culture save for widows mourning for their husbands.⁷⁶⁸ For Emil Nasritdinov, the banners were

a very powerful illustration of how the religiousness and secularity of urban space in Bishkek today are contested. More and more people have started practicing Islam and the hijab is becoming a regular part of the everyday urban scene all across the city. The government’s fear of radicalization and such attempts to reclaim secularity often cause practicing Muslim community to defend their values and everyday practices.⁷⁶⁹

⁷⁶⁶ <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/27872844.html>

⁷⁶⁷ <https://ru.sputnik.kg/20160713/1027634490.html>

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[//24.kg/obschestvo/34592_orozbek_moldaliev_v_bannerah_kayran_elim_kayda_baratasyin_nich_ego_provokatsionnogo_net/](https://24.kg/obschestvo/34592_orozbek_moldaliev_v_bannerah_kayran_elim_kayda_baratasyin_nich_ego_provokatsionnogo_net/)

⁷⁶⁹ Emil Nasritdinov, “The War of Billboards: Hijab, Secularism, and Public Space in Bishkek”, unpublished article

The perceived threat of losing Kyrgyz national identity as a consequence of growing number of *hijab*-wearing women and the general tendency of ‘Pakistanization’ among the Kyrgyz elite has been expressed by Mairamkul Tilenchieva, a female Parliament member, who noted that “the hijab was never part of traditional Kyrgyz clothing for women. Today, the Arab and Pakistani dresses are being imposed on us. We have our own beautiful traditional clothing. We should stick to it.”⁷⁷⁰ A Kyrgyz journalist, Tynchtykbek Chorotegin, who is the head of the private foundation, Muras, that initiated the banners, noted that among Kyrgyz intellectuals including himself *hijab* was seen as a step towards the imposition of an alien culture on the Kyrgyz people which would result in Kyrgyz nationals joining ISIS who expressed that the Kyrgyz people were *Hanafis* who retained their national culture along with Islamic practices.⁷⁷¹

⁷⁷⁰ Emil Nasritdinov, “The War of Billboards...”.

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https://www.vb.kg/doc/343436_chorotegin:_naviazyvanie_chyjdoj_kyltyry_pyt_nashego_naroda_v_riady_igil.html

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

This concluding chapter is intended to serve as a wrap-up of the discussions about the activities of the *Tablighi Jamaat* as well as the social and intellectual repercussions of the group's strong presence in Kyrgyzstan put forward in detail in the previous chapters. This chapter also includes an interpretation of the data collected in Kyrgyzstan by the author during the two fieldworks from the vantage point of the religious economies approach which was not employed in the Central Asian context before in the literature on the sociology of religion.

It has been argued in the previous chapters that Kyrgyzstan constituted a unique case in the wider context of post-Soviet Central Asia because Kyrgyzstan came with a relatively liberalized religious market which exhibited an unmistakably pluralistic nature, unlike the other countries in the region which introduced severe limitations to their respective religious markets allowing very limited pluralism in that sphere. This is noteworthy because the entire region went through the same seventy-year long Soviet experience that created similar institutions and similar political, economic, and intellectual mindsets in the five Central Asian Soviet republics. However, the paths of these five republics diverged in the post-Soviet era, with Kyrgyzstan choosing a path different to the rest. Although the religious liberalization in Kyrgyzstan following the collapse of the Soviet Union is far from being perfect, and is indeed marked by several interventions on the part of political actors, the Kyrgyz case still is remarkably set apart from the other Central Asian republics. Despite the fact that Kyrgyzstan and the other republics witnessed a rush of various religious groups immediately after gaining their independence, the commitment to religious pluralism and liberalization of the religious market wavered in the other four republics to the point that today they allow very little in the way of pluralism and religious

liberties. Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, stayed the course, offering a haven for religious organizations from Islamic groups originating outside Kyrgyzstan to several Christian movements seeking to have a foothold in the region.

The *Tablighi Jamaat*, the subject of research in the present thesis, is a case in point. Today Kyrgyzstan is the only Central Asian republic where the group is allowed to operate, which was not the case in the early independence years when Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan too allowed the presence of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, only to ban and criminalize it soon afterwards. While the group became outlawed in the neighbouring countries and, as both the literature and testimonies indicate, went underground to avoid prosecution, the *Tablighi Jamaat* found in Kyrgyzstan what can only be called a fertile soil where the group grew numerically in a significant way and came to be recognized as a force to be reckoned with. This is also noteworthy because the Kyrgyz were traditionally considered to be the Turkic group that was to accept Islam at a relatively later period than the other Turkic groups in Central Asia. Moreover, due to the nomadic lifestyle of the Kyrgyz people, Islamization of the Kyrgyz people was thought to be somewhat superficial and of heterodox in nature, especially in contrast to their neighbors, the Uzbek, who are the epitome of orthodox and scholarly Islam in the entire region. In this context, the tenacity, perseverance, and growth of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan aroused scholarly interest among the specialists of Central Asia. The present thesis came into existence in an attempt to elucidate the social, cultural, economic, and political factors that enabled the *Tablighi Jamaat* to occupy its current station in Kyrgyzstan.

The *Tablighi Jamaat* is a fruit of the 19th and early 20th century Islamic revivalism in what used to be the territories of the British Raj. The gradual weakening and the subsequent collapse of the Mughal Empire exposed its Muslim population to the encroachment of British colonialism which introduced novel technologies, ideas, and practices which contributed to the evolution of revivalist movements in India. Having lost to the British colonialism the privileged position of Islam among a wealth of other faiths, elite Muslims of

India, the *ashrāf*, came to realize that theirs was precarious minority status amidst a Hindu majority under the rule of a Christian nation. Faced with vibrant Christian missionary activities and the new-found lower status of Muslims that equated them with Hindus, the *ashrāf* became aware that if Islam was to remain a force in India, Muslims had to develop new methods of Islamic learning in order to compete with the aggressive and effective ways of Christian missionary schools, and bridge the intellectual gap between the *ashrāf* and ordinary Muslims, the *ajlāf* in order to mold a common Islamic identity in the multi-ethnic Muslim community which did not exist before. Before the British rule was established, Muslims of India comprised a diverse ethnic group occupying a vast geographical area who were divided by linguistic, ethnic, and class lines where an all-encompassing Muslim community did not exist even among the ruling Muslim imagination. As a response to these challenges the *Deobandi* school emerged which sought to marry Western methods of education with Sunni Islamic learning to reach the large masses who were uneducated and had little understanding of the orthodox Islam as taught at *madrasas*, the traditional centers of Islamic learning. However, it soon became apparent that the renewed efforts to bring the *ajlāf* to *madrasas* to create a common ground between them and the *ashrāf* was a too daunting a task. Feeling the threat of the *shuddhi* movement that sought to bring the *ajlāf* back to the fold of Hindu religion, a *Deobandi*-trained scholar named Maulana Ilyas decided that the *Deobandi* strategy was not working and a change of strategy was necessary. This is how the *Tablighi Jamaat* came into existence in the first half of the 20th century. Maulana Ilyas, a member of the *ashrāf* himself, acknowledged that instead of the *Deobandi* way, that is, waiting for the poor and uneducated Muslims to come to *madrasas* to learn Islam and abandon their customs mixed with Hindu practice, the educated Muslims should go where the *ajlāf* were found and teach them the basics of Islam without burdening them with the intricacies of classical Islamic teaching. Therefore, from the beginning the *Tablighi Jamaat* was devised as a travelling group of educators who would seek ordinary Muslims who had little understanding of Islam where they resided, and teach them the fundamentals of Islam, all the while making no efforts to converting non-Muslims. In devising

this method that would later become the distinctive *modus operandi* of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, Maulana Ilyas not only emulated the Prophet's method of inviting non-Muslim Arabs to Islam but also took inspiration from the itinerary Christian missionaries that roamed the British Raj who reached out to masses using vernacular languages and simple but effective messages. Therefore, the *Tablighi Jamaat* was from its earliest days a modern missionary movement destined for Muslims that put the emphasis on oral transmission in the form of the *sunna* and the *hadith*, as opposed to the Quran which as the written source of Islam was beyond the reach of the illiterate masses. Maulana Ilyas also believed that doing *tabligh* was the most immediate and fundamental task of any Muslim, and that it should not be mixed with politics because politics was divisive and Muslims were already divided among themselves. Therefore, the *Tablighi Jamaat* was born as an apolitical Islamic movement and purports to remain so.

After the death of Maulana Ilyas, his closest relatives expanded the *Tablighi* method and the movement became operational outside of the Raj, travelling abroad to seek Muslims who needed to be 're-converted' back to Islam. Through its distinctive itinerary method the *Tablighi Jamaat* did not only hope to teach Muslims how to become 'good' Muslims, but also expected the travelling *Tablighis* to put into practice what they preached. In fact, the most fundamental tenet of the *Tablighi* movement is to enforce orthopraxy and become better Muslims by way of preaching to others because, the *Tablighi* leadership believed that Muslims should first correct themselves and set an example to others if they wanted to preach what a Muslim should be like. Any Muslim who joins the *Tablighi Jamaat* can and in fact should join *tabligh* tours. After learning the very basics of Islam and the *Tablighi* approach to Islam, Muslims of any background, regardless of their educational level, are encouraged to preach to other Muslims. This was, in fact, realizing what Maulana Ilyas intended in the first place, that is, transforming Muslims, rich and poor, scholar and illiterate, town dweller and peasant, into itinerant preachers. That Muslims of little Islamic learning could preach using the very basic messages created a missionary movement where the medium was the message, that is, one did not need to be a learned scholar to

become a good Muslim, and that becoming so was a matter of orthopraxy and was attainable to any Muslim as long as they adhered to the tenets of the *Tablighi Jamaat* and stayed the course.

The *Tablighi Jamaat* came to Kyrgyzstan in groups from the subcontinent in the early years of independence and soon gained a foothold there. Assessing that the newly independent nation experienced turbulent times where state power was faltering and people had little understanding of Islam due to the Soviet past, the *Tablighi Jamaat* found a great vacuum in which *Salafi* groups and Christian missionary groups such as Evangelical churches were very active. The rural areas were especially prone to what the *Tablighi Jamaat* considered to be a risk of Christianization. The Kyrgyz state was also alarmed at the rate *Salafi* groups were gaining followers and becoming influential among the population. Furthermore, for the secular Kyrgyz state, Islam was a marker of identity for the Kyrgyz, and also for the Uzbek minority for that matter, which would be a cornerstone of the nation-building efforts of the state. Due to the deeply entrenched view among the Kyrgyz elite that the Soviet rule attempted to destroy the distinct Kyrgyz culture and identity through atheism propaganda, it became their priority to preserve the Islamic identity of the nation all the while preventing the dissemination of Salafism and political Islam. This was the crossroads where the Kyrgyz power elite and the *Tablighi Jamaat* crossed paths and an uneasy *modus vivendi* was developed where the Kyrgyz state, with a view to blocking the growth of Evangelical Christianity and *Salafi* Islam, turned a blind eye to the nationwide expansion of the activities of the *Tablighi Jamaat* which claimed itself to be apolitical. Therefore, to the Kyrgyz state, the apolitical and ‘correct’ Islam of the *Tablighi Jamaat* would serve as a safety valve that would ensure that Kyrgyz citizens would ‘re-gain’ their Islamic heritage and identity without being exposed to the ‘foreign’ and ‘harmful’ Islamic currents espoused by *Salafi* Islam. Today, the *Tablighi Jamaat* is almost omnipresent in the entire territory of Kyrgyzstan where the movement cuts across fault lines that divide the nation, such as class and ethnicity. In that sense, the *Tablighi Jamaat* is found in rural areas where the presence of the state is observed the least and no

other Islamic movement operates, in the south part of Kyrgyzstan where the marginalized Uzbek minority is concentrated, and in towns where access to education and Islamic organizations other than the *Tablighi Jamaat* is readily available. While the movement is operational in every nook and cranny in Kyrgyzstan, it is the rural areas where the presence and the influence of the *Tablighi Jamaat* is felt the most. As the Kyrgyz state lacks the means to assign *imams* to every remote village, the *Tablighi Jamaat* serves, in a sense, as the primary means to convey Islamic learning in these parts, taking also into consideration the fact that the *Tablighi Jamaat* does not demand or receive payment for its activities, and that joining *tabligh* tours is a low cost activity for most people. Moreover, the *Tablighi Jamaat* maintains strong and regular ties with *imams* throughout the nation, as a great majority of *imams* are trained by the *Tablighi Jamaat*, and attendants to *tabligh* tours are typically lodged in mosques where such *imams* work.

Nonetheless, the strong presence throughout Kyrgyzstan of the *Tablighi Jamaat* is ever a matter of contention in Kyrgyzstan. As the group gathered a strong following and, thus, enhanced its visibility throughout Kyrgyzstan, both public and the learned segments of the society including bureaucrats, politicians, and academicians raised their voice to express their disapproval of the group. The criticisms raised against the *Tablighi Jamaat* zeroed in on the perceived risk of radicalization, infiltration of religion into state structure in the form of the *Tablighi* bureaucrats, and the Pakistani-style attire and appearance of the members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* which provoked fears that the *Tablighi* version of Islam was not ‘pure’ Islam as once believed, but turned out to be the Pakistani interpretation of Islam. Therefore, the *Tablighi Jamaat* came under criticism from various segments that due to the movement’s strong presence Kyrgyzstan was distancing itself from its secular structure, and was going through a transformation in the model of Pakistan, a process which came to be known as Pakistanization. Moreover, people came to resent to be contacted by the *Tablighi Jamaat* unsolicitedly during *tabligh* tours almost to the point of being incessantly harassed by the itinerant missionaries. The purported apolitical nature of the

Tablighi Jamaat has also come under question for the movement filled a remarkable chunk of the ranks of some government bodies, and derived preferential treatment from the Kyrgyz state at the expense of other religious groups; casting doubts on the viability of the liberal image of the religious marketplace of Kyrgyzstan.

In an attempt to shed light on the case of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan and to make meaningful the interplay among the *Tablighi Jamaat*, the Kyrgyz society, and the Kyrgyz state, the author chose to employ the religious economies approach. The religious economies approach was developed in the mid-1970s in the United States by economists and sociologists as a response and alternative to secularization theory which was the dominant theory among sociologists of religion for decades up to that point. Secularization theory argued that in the modern age religion was to lose its significance it had enjoyed throughout history due to rationalization and the expanding role of the state which came to assume many functions of religion, replacing religion as the most prominent actor that governed people's daily lives. Consequently, secularization theory predicted that having been deprived of its social functions, and losing its ability to create meaning for life, religion would diminish in significance both for people and the states and be relegated to a very limited and private sphere. However, beginning from the 1960s sociologists of religion came to note that while secularization theory was substantiated in Western Europe, this was not the case in the United States where religion persevered and continued to occupy the same prominent role in daily life, with church attendance rates showing no sign of decline. Religious economies approach which came into existence in order to explain the American exceptionalism soon became a tool for sociologists of religion to explain, since the demise of the Communism, what has been popularly known as the Religious Resurgence on a global scale. Religious economies approach also found use in explaining the rapid growth of New Religious Movements that accompanied the so-called Religious Resurgence. While the approach was mostly used to elucidate the global expansion of Evangelical Christianity in its various forms, it has also been employed, although

to a much lesser extent, by sociologists studying other religions, including Islam. Central Asia, nevertheless, remained a geographical area that escaped this tendency so far. The present thesis intended to introduce religious economies approach to the study of Islam in Central Asia, and contribute to the understanding of the factors that enabled the *Tablighi Jamaat* to come to occupy its current prominent role in the Kyrgyz social life in the post-independence era. Since religious economies approach was not used by scholars of Central Asian Islam before, the present study also serves as a test that will appraise the extent to which religious economies approach is empirically applicable to a society which significantly diverges socially, culturally, politically, and historically from the American context where the approach was developed. A case can also be made that Islam in the post-Soviet space exhibits unique traits which renders it difficult to approach Islam in Kyrgyzstan simply as a subset of the wider Islamic world. In that sense, the application of religious economies approach in the context of Kyrgyzstan might hopefully offer scholars a unique perspective in a secular, Muslim society with a socialist background where being Muslim has gained new meanings since the arrival of the *Tablighi Jamaat*.

Religious economies approach argues that in a competitive and free religious marketplace customers are free to choose which firm they are to adhere to. This leads to a setting where the ossified religious identities of the monopolistic religious marketplace are no more. Indeed, customers are now disposed to experiment with their religious identities, choosing among a given set of religious firms the religious identity to their preference and assuming it. This way people are able to ‘hop’ from one religious firm to another should they feel themselves dissatisfied with their existing religious identity. Therefore, dissatisfied clients are always on the lookout for a new religious firm which might better suit their needs or which may offer them rewards and compensators in a more motivated or plausible manner. This in turn leads to a religious marketplace which is truly consumerized where clients are not passively accepting what they are being offered but are actively in search for better options.

Sociological observation of Protestant churches in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s showed that some Protestant churches remained robust and gained attendants whereas other Protestant churches were weakened and witnessed significant loss of membership which resulted in financial problems for such dwindling churches. Dean Kelley attributed this puzzling phenomenon to what he called church strictness. Church strictness refers to the ability of churches to demand from their members strong commitment in terms of financial and temporal contribution, or lack thereof. According to Kelley, strict churches are such churches that demand that their members commit their time and financial contribution to the church cause, and live in accordance with the tenets of their churches. This involves members making significant changes to their daily lives, abandoning what their churches deem sinful or undesirable practices, adopting strict religious customs and habits, and establishing lasting and coherent social ties with their fellow church attendants. Members are also expected by strict churches to spend time and money for the church, which means attending not only church services on a weekly basis but also other activities initiated by their church. Altering one's habits, practices, and customs to comply with the demands of a strict church increases in-group cohesion, incentivizing church members to adhere to the values of the group and engage in activities sanctioned by the church, all the while disincentivizing them to become involved in activities incompatible with the values of their church, rendering them too costly for church members who do not wish to be kicked out of their church, and, indeed, social milieu. Lenient churches, on the other hand, place less limitations on the activities of their members, allowing them to engage in out-of-church activities and demanding less commitment in terms of compliance, time and money.

Kelley observed that strict churches were able to stay afloat financially, and kept growing in terms of church attendance, whereas lenient churches lost membership, and experienced financial troubles as a consequence. Kelley explained that strict churches provided their members with meaning and answers to ontological questions all the while offering them a rich and coherent social life

around other church members which incentivized them to comply with the rules and expectations of their church and commit themselves which resulted in church members leading better lives, such as quitting bad habits. Unable to force their members to adhere to strict rules and place high expectations that required them to make significant changes to their lives, lenient churches, on the other hand, fell short of providing their members with existential meaning, which offered little incentive to people who wished and were willing to change their lives for the better. Church strictness thesis, therefore, argued that people who wished to lead better lives sought meaning in their lives, and were willing to make sacrifices in the form of monetary and temporal commitment and lifestyle changes. Churches that demanded commitment from their members, in turn, remained robust. Churches that were unwilling or unable to place such high levels of expectations and were ready to accept members regardless of their commitment, therefore, did not retain their membership and became weakened in time. This is how Kelley explained the rapid growth and perseverance of churches such as the Baptist Churches, Pentecostal Churches, and the Latter Day Saint Church which are very demanding from their followers in terms of commitment when the more established churches such as the Episcopal Church which are noticeably less demanding experienced decline in church attendance.

Religious economies approach used Kelley's thesis to argue that strict churches erected high barriers to entry for potential members to weed out free riders and encourage people to seek membership only if they stood ready to comply with the rules of the church, meet the expectations, and make significant changes in their lives. Those who are not willing to commit themselves but wanted to reap the benefits of church membership, free riders, would thus be eliminated and a robust congregation with high levels of in-group cohesion would ensue which would benefit all members. In this scheme, one's own commitment and contribution to the church cause was not enough. In fact, members of strict churches demanded that other members or would-be members too showed the same high level of commitment and contributed equally to the church. Religious economies approach contends that religious firms offer their members benefits in

the form of rewards, such as group cohesion, satisfaction and feeling of fulfillment which are immediately attainable, and compensators such as salvation which are attainable only in the Afterlife. By resolving the free riding problem, strict churches improve the rewards they offer their members because religious rewards a religious firm offers its customers are club goods which are excludable but non-rivalrous. Excludability here refers to the fact that such goods are enjoyed only by paying customers, that is, committed members to strict churches, whereas non-paying customers, the free riders, are excluded from such benefits. Therefore, by committing themselves to in-group activities through their time and monetary contribution, religious customers enjoy rewards and benefits unavailable to others who did not commit themselves. Non-rivalry, on the other hand, refers to a situation where the consumption of a good by some consumers does not lead to a diminished consumption levels by other consumers. That is to say, by committing themselves to a religious firm, customers enjoy benefits and rewards in various forms such as fulfillment and salvation without reducing the ability of other committed members to enjoy the same benefits and rewards. In that sense, committed church attendants enjoy rewards together; and one attendant's 'share' in rewards does not diminish or grow at the expense of others. That is why, members of strict churches demand that others commit themselves as well, because others' efforts will have a bearing on their overall religious experience. Therefore, religious economies approach argues that in-group activities benefit all committed members and their enjoyment of rewards depend on the extent to which members are committed to the cause.

Religious economies approach also holds that high barriers to entry to weed out free riders may take the form of behavioral expectations such as avoidance of alcohol consumption as well as unusual or 'eccentric' practices such as dressing code which encourage group cohesion and in-group activities all the while punishing out-group activities because such religious customers are usually faced with ridicule, isolation, and marginalization by the wider society. Therefore, for religious firms, erecting high barriers to entry serves as a means to create high costs for members who engage out-group activities, encouraging cost-avoidance

and committing themselves to the values and practices of the firm. This in turn discourages free riders, and contributes to the overall level of satisfaction among committed members.

In order to put to the test the arguments of religious economies approach in the context of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan, interviews are conducted with Kyrgyz nationals from all walks of life, including ordinary people who are not affiliated with the *Tablighi Jamaat*, academicians and bureaucrats, as well as members of the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Interviews were grouped according to where the interviewees stood vis-à-vis the *Tablighi Jamaat*, that is, interviews with the members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* are to be found under the rubric of ‘The *Tablighi Jamaat* Defined by the *Tablighis* from Kyrgyzstan’, interviews with the non-*Tablighi* people come under the rubric of ‘The *Tablighi Jamaat* Perceived by the Kyrgyz Public’, whereas the subchapter titled ‘The *Tablighi Jamaat* perceived by the Bureaucracy, Intellectuals, and the Academia in Kyrgyzstan’ covers how the learned sections of the Kyrgyz society and the bureaucracy views the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Interviews are also conducted with several *Tablighis* in Cameroon which came in useful in comparing the nature of the activities of the *Tablighi Jamaat* and public perception of the movement in diverse settings.

Research findings about the *Tablighi Jamaat* and the *Tablighi* presence in Kyrgyzstan, as well as the analysis of data as gleaned from interviews with the three groups noted above are indicative of the explanatory value of religious economies approach. Interpretation of the data is as follows:

A strict church, the *Tablighi Jamaat* relies on new members for growth, hence the emphasis on *dawat*, all the while screening out free riders is kept at an optimal level where, as the *Tablighi* interviewees have explained, potential members who are yet unwilling or unready to contribute to the cause and comply with the norms of the group are not turned away but are allowed to attend *dawat* tours, experience the routines of being a *Tablighi*, and decide for themselves whether to join or not. As difficult tasks such as cleaning the toilets of mosques

or cooking for the entire party during the *dawat* tours, or being absent from home and away from family for long periods of time while doing *tabligh* might seem too condescending or unnecessarily hard to comply for some potential *dawatçis*, such unready or unwilling participants soon realize that the *Tablighi* way of life is too demanding for them, or that they are not ready to face with negative public reaction and admonition from family members, deciding ultimately against joining the group which solves the free rider problem for once and all. The undecided, on the other hand, are not immediately screened out; they are allowed to partake in group activities such as recitation sessions and *tabligh* tours, and are not required to grow long beards and wear *shalwar kameez* and turbans at once, or at any point, for that matter. Interviews demonstrated that the *Tablighi Jamaat*, therefore, does not turn away outliers among potential members but makes an investment in them with the hopes that they may yet decide in the future to join the group and assume its norms, behaviors, and values, including stigmatizing practices such as wearing Pakistani-style clothing and sporting long beards. The ones that decide against joining the *Tablighi Jamaat* are not excluded from group activities as the *Tablighi Jamaat* hopes that their negative decision for the time being is not decisive as they may also yet change their minds and take up the challenge anytime. For members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* who fail to continue to comply with the required lifestyle are not ostracized either, but are repeatedly if pesteringly encouraged to revert back to the *Tablighi* ways.

Interviews conducted with all the three groups, on the other hand, indicate that the liberalization during the independence era in Kyrgyzstan of the monopolistic religious market of the Soviet Union contributed to the proliferation of religious life throughout the nation. The *Tablighi Jamaat* is but one of the players in this relatively liberalized but definitely pluralistic religious market where people, at least on paper, are free to choose which spiritual path to take. This can be inferred from the interviews which reveal that some if not all the *Tablighis* interviewed were exposed to the religious ideas of or experimented with other Islamic groups that were available to them before they became affiliated with the

Tablighi Jamaat. It is understood from interviews that several Islamic groups from Turkey and the Gulf states have also become active in the religious market, seeking adherents among the people. These interviews have revealed important insight and information with regard to the way members of a religious movement, the *Tablighi Jamaat*, view the functioning of the religious market in Kyrgyzstan and how these people position not only the *Tablighi Jamaat* but also themselves as ordinary Kyrgyz within the larger society and the religious market. The testimonies of the *dawatçıs* confirm that the dynamics that resulted in the current prominent position the *Tablighi Jamaat* occupies within the nation's religious market can best be understood through the lens of the religious economies approach.

Firstly, the *Tablighi* interlocutors stated unequivocally and uniformly that spiritual life in Kyrgyzstan in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the early years of independence gained a momentum and went through a rapid growth, as it did in the other Central Asian republics. The numerical growth of adherents or potential adherents was coupled with the expanding number of religious movements that became available to people in comparison to what the monopolistic religious atmosphere of the Soviet Union offered them. The very first tenet of the religious economies approach holds that religious freedom gives rise to a competitive religious market which in turn begets as robust and pluralistic religious atmosphere, unlike what secularization theory anticipated, that is, religious pluralism leads to a decline of overall levels of religiosity. From the viewpoint of Kyrgyz Muslims, the monopolistic religious market of the Soviet Union which offered Muslims and Muslims only, as religious identity was inalienable from ethnic identity per the Soviet system, a demystified and highly folklorized version of state-sanctioned Islam was not satisfactory. The lack of interest on the part of Kyrgyz Muslims towards the watered down 'official' Islam is evidenced by the survival among the Kyrgyz of the 'folk' Islam which is mystical as opposed to the former, and the perseverance of orthodox Islam through *mullahs* and teaching circles, all operating underground. This can be interpreted as an indication of a popular demand for

spirituality among the Kyrgyz despite serious limitations on access to religion, that is, supply of spirituality, during the Soviet Union. With the independence and the subsequent elimination of the limitations on the religious market, both the supply side and the demand side experienced tremendous growth. Therefore, it can be surmised that the expanding gamut of religious firms came to serve the needs of the larger swaths of Kyrgyz people who had diverse religious needs and demands which remained unfulfilled during the Soviet Union where the state monopoly on religion was unable to cater to the religious needs of all its clients. As per the religious economies approach, the more variety the religious firms exhibited, the more people found their niche in the pluralistic religious market in Kyrgyzstan which resulted in elevated levels of religiosity among the Kyrgyz in the post-independence era.

Secondly, that religious firms actively seek clients rather than clients seeking religious firms to their liking and preference and the religious market becoming a competitive marketplace where firms that cater best to the needs of their clients remain robust, another tenet of the religious economies approach, is materialized in the religious marketplace of Kyrgyzstan. The relative success of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan here is both accounted for by this tenet and constitutes a case in point for it. As the interviews with the *Tablighis* have revealed and as the literature on the group has established, the *Tablighi Jamaat* is noted for its active *tabligh* method where members of the group seek clients not by establishing *madrasas* and other religious institutions but by going door-to-door to familiarize people with their ideas and inviting them to mosques where the *Tablighis* take up temporary residence for short periods of time. As attending a mosque necessitates no monetary spending, and involves spending little time and can thus easily be considered a part of daily life, any Muslim can go and join the *tabligh* circles in nearby mosques as opposed to attending a *madrasa* that involves serious monetary, intellectual, and temporary commitment which does not suit to everyone. It is also noteworthy that *madrasas*, schools, and similar Islamic educational institutions are principally found in large towns and cities, whereas villagers with little means cannot attend them. Therefore, the

conventional Islamic centers of learning which are mainly run by more established and wealthier Islamic organizations, mostly from Arabic countries and Turkey, fall beyond the reach of remote villages and neighborhoods in Kyrgyzstan. It is for this reason that the *Tablighi* way of preaching that involves seeking potential clients wherever people live, town and village, gives the *Tablighi Jamaat* an overwhelming edge over its competitors, other religious firms that do not go on *tabligh*-like tours and rely instead on schools and *madrasas* for attracting clients. The *Tablighi Jamaat* thus is able to reach out to a much more varied mass of clients, both city dwellers and villagers, the wealthy and the poor, and the more informed as well as the religiously ignorant. The *Tablighi* interviewees also revealed that both the message delivered and the way it was delivered differed from those of competing religious firms which adds yet another edge. As the *Tablighi Jamaat* does not aim to train Islamic scholars and caters to the man on the street, its message is very simple, free of sophisticated discussions and details, its message appeals to anyone, including those without proper Islamic education which is not in short supply in Kyrgyzstan.

The comprehensiveness and effectiveness of the simplicity of the *Tablighi* message is enhanced by the oral way of transmission of the knowledge the *Tablighi Jamaat* relies on. Preferring oral communication over written materials, the *Tablighi Jamaat* is able to reach out even to the least schooled, as well as establish a more personal and sincere communication channel with broad swath of Kyrgyz Muslims who are reluctant to be involved with the more scholarly content of the competing Islamic firms with which most of whom do not cross paths anyway. In this way, the *Tablighi Jamaat* fills a niche in the religious market of Kyrgyzstan where the majority of clients are little informed about Islam and are far from being able to understand the intricate doctrines of other competitors. With little in the way of sophistication, the message the *Tablighi Jamaat* delivers, the interviews reveal, penetrates the day-to-day lives of the people it addresses and manages to encourage them to make a difference in their own lives. Moreover, this the *Tablighi Jamaat* makes possible by empowering the very people it reaches out to, freeing them from the burden of becoming a

disciple of a *sheikh* as Islamic Sufi orders do or having to learn complex Islamic teachings which come in the written form which is the way most Islamic groups prefer. By becoming a *Tablighi*, the *Tablighi Jamaat* purports, any Muslim may become a good Muslim in the mold of the Prophet and the Companions should they make an effort themselves without the mediacy of a spiritual leader they are supposed to look up to. This is reminiscent of the famous phrase coined by Marshall McLuhan that “the medium is the message.” In a way, the message the *Tablighi Jamaat* delivers to Kyrgyz people, independent from its content, is that ordinary Kyrgyz Muslims can become good Muslims, align their lives with the teachings of the Prophet themselves, and they can help better other Muslims’ religious lives and, that, moreover this process does not require them to be schooled in a *madrasa*. The simple message the *Tablighi Jamaat* delivers the Kyrgyz people is that being profoundly informed about Islam and committing years to an Islamic education including learning enough Arabic to understand the Quran, which is beyond the reach of most Kyrgyz Muslims and is the message of the competitors of the *Tablighi Jamaat* including also the Turkish *Diyanet* and its Kyrgyz counterpart, is not what Islam and living as an upright Muslim are about. Instead, according to the *Tablighi Jamaat*, gaining enough Islamic knowledge which any Muslim can do and putting into practice what little one knows are sufficient to becoming an upright Muslim and following in the footsteps of the Prophet.

The religious economies approach theorizes that religious firms cater to the needs of their clients and offer them rewards which come in various shapes including worldly and otherworldly rewards. In the case of the *Tablighi Jamaat*’s activities in Kyrgyzstan, the rewards, be them worldly or pertaining to the afterlife which are the supernatural compensators, which the group offers its clients, in the case of rewards pertaining the current world, or promises, in the case of supernatural compensators, are not significantly different than what its Islamic competitors do. Regarding the former, the rewards include divine blessing and peace of mind, whereas the latter rewards include admission to Heaven. Therefore, it is plausible to argue that clients are faced with a situation

where all firms competing for their attention, adherence, commitment, and involvement offer more or less the same set of rewards which are prescribed by the Quran, the *hadith* and the *sunna* traditions. Therefore, no Islamic organization or movement is able to actually offer or promise the Kyrgyz what others are not. For that reason, the set of rewards offered and promised being more or less same and stable, there cannot be any competition in that department. In this state of affairs, competition arises not from what rewards are offered or when they are to be delivered, but by the plausibility of their deliverance and the extent to which any given firm is capable of motivating its adherents to commit themselves to the cause which will, hopefully, result in the deliverance of the rewards both during one's lifetime and in the afterlife. Therefore, the only way for the *Tablighi Jamaat* to gain an edge over its competitors with regard to rewards is to motivate its clients better by convincing them that they will reap the promised benefits should they commit themselves to the *Tablighi* activities rather than other Islamic movements on the market. In a sense, for the *Tablighi Jamaat* to outcompete its competitors, it has to convince clients that it is through the *Tablighi Jamaat* and not its competitors that they will attain the rewards being offered, which suggests that in this scheme a firm is to claim an unfaltering monopoly over truth. Therefore, it is not surprising that the *Tablighi Jamaat*, or any Islamic movement for that matter, claims that not only does its path lead to the truth and divine rewards but also that it is the only true path, the others being in error. These postulations are in line with what the *Tablighi Jamaat* asserts and what the *Tablighis* interviewed have expressed. The Kyrgyz *Tablighis* have repeatedly claimed that theirs was the true path modeled after the Prophet, that other movements were unable to match the *Tablighi Jamaat* because their methods did not follow the prophetic model, and that as a corollary those who adhered to other movements, no matter how sincerely they acted, were misled by worldly concerns which will result in their failure to attain the desired rewards. Bolstering the *Tablighi* position is their ability to motivate their adherents to go through difficult tasks and endure hardships in the form of detachment from the world on a daily basis, isolation, admonition, and being away from family for

extended periods of time, which the *Tablighi Jamaat* claims is the only way to merit divine blessing and other rewards.

As for the Kyrgyz religious marketplace and the *Tablighi Jamaat*, interviews with the members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* confirmed that the situation in Kyrgyzstan is in such a state that, to some extent, the religious consumerism has obtained. While the extent to which religious consumerism has prevailed in Kyrgyzstan is far from being at the same level as the current state of affairs in the United States, which is completely consumerized and commercialized, it nevertheless stands in remarkable contrast to the monopolistic religious marketplace of the Soviet era. In the Soviet Union, religious identities were assigned by birth and were fixed without any way for clients to seek another religious identity no matter how dissatisfied they were with it. In the absence of religious competition, the religious identities assigned, described, prescribed, and demarcated by the Soviet Union did not go beyond being of a folkloric and superficial nature and offered little motivation for clients, which, indeed, was the very design and intention of the state. Therefore, the *Tablighi* interviewees who upon encountering the *dawatçis* have abandoned their assigned religious identity, that is being a Kyrgyz Muslim *à la soviétique* and what came with it, and joined the ranks of the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Several interviewees have also declared that they became involved with other Islamic movements for a while before settling with the *dawatçis*, therefore enjoying their new religious freedom and ‘hopping’ from one firm to another in the recently liberalized religious market in Kyrgyzstan. In the case of PUBLIC C who was involved with the *Tablighi Jamaat* for a period of time but left the group afterwards, the religious ‘hopping’ experience went even further and assumed another layer where the interviewee went from being an assigned Muslim by birth by Kyrgyz SSR to being a *Tablighi* to being a non-affiliated Muslim in the space of a little more than a decade, which further indicates the extent to which Muslims in Kyrgyzstan acquired agency in religious matters in the independence era as opposed to the total lack of it during the Soviet Union.

In light of these research findings, it is possible to conclude that religious economies approach is a powerful and effective theoretical tool for explaining the factors leading to the growth and the perseverance of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan. Religious economies approach through its supply-side emphasis on the changes of overall levels of religiosity is able to explain why following the collapse of the Soviet Union the newly independent Kyrgyzstan experienced a surge in religiosity nationwide. The pull-effect of the newly-found pluralistic religious market in Kyrgyzstan, as theorized by the approach, is well substantiated through interviews with the members of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, the Kyrgyz public, as well as the academicians and bureaucrats in Kyrgyzstan. Religious economies approach also successfully explained why the *Tablighi Jamaat* as a strict church was able to create such a strong sense of pull among Kyrgyz public despite many difficulties that came with being affiliated with the group, including the demanding nature of doing *tabligh* work and the social marginalization that accompanied it. Religious economies approach also proved to be a convincing tool for elucidating the reason why of all Islamic groups active in Kyrgyzstan it is the *Tablighi Jamaat* that created the most noticeable, influential, and dominant levels of pull effect that attracted so large swathes of Kyrgyz people. The distinctive method employed by the *Tablighi Jamaat* accounts for its success nationwide as discerned by the religious economies approach.

When public perception of the *Tablighi Jamaat* as revealed by interviews with the Kyrgyz public is examined through the vantage point of religious economies approach, we came to the conclusion that the data corroborated one main argument of the approach, that is, adherents to strict churches ran the risk of public ridicule, marginalization, and isolation due to the ‘eccentric’ practices their congregation enforced on them and they adhered to. Interviewees among the Kyrgyz public, by formulating an association with conversion to the *Tablighi Jamaat* and prior criminal activity, violence, and substance abuse, express, inadvertently or intentionally, their conviction that the *Tablighi Jamaat* is good for such people only, and that ‘normal’ people have no reason to join the group.

By this way of thinking, they vindicate themselves, pitting themselves as virtuous citizens who do not need to be told what to do by others as opposed to degenerate people for whom the *Tablighi* instructions offer an honourable way out for they are incapable of leaving behind their vices on their own. Here, the practicality that comes with appreciation of the social relief created by the activities of the *Tablighi Jamaat* and the reformed people through their affiliation with the movement blend with the interviewees' conviction of their own worth and uprightness. Therefore, the non-*Tablighi* Kyrgyz public interviewed have expressed their approval of the *Tablighi Jamaat* and their ways, only in the sense that such 'eccentricities' worked for what they considered as the less-than-ideal elements of the society. Nevertheless, the interviewees from the Kyrgyz public also implied their wish to put a distance between themselves and those who were 'reformed' by the *Tablighi Jamaat*, and, as a corollary, the *Tablighi Jamaat* itself. In their perception, being contacted by the *Tablighi Jamaat* also implied that to the *Tablighi Jamaat* they too were in need of reform; destroying the very 'solid' bridge they erected, exposing the imagined nature of the social, cultural, and, perhaps, economic distance between themselves and the 'reformed' elements of the Kyrgyz society. In that respect, the existence of the social stigma that comes with adhering to a strict church was corroborated by the interviewees who, upon being asked whether they would like to be contacted by the *Tablighi Jamaat*, were disturbed by the mere thought that the stigma they attached to members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* might not be as removed from them than they perceived it to be. That they, the 'upright' citizens, appeared to the *Tablighi Jamaat* as on equal footing with what they saw as the poor, uneducated, violent, and socially undesirable elements of the Kyrgyz society, and that the *Tablighi Jamaat* imagined both parties as elements of a single 'ummah, and even a single nation, equally in need of to be 'saved', seem to be the very gist of what interviews with the public have revealed. What constitutes the Kyrgyz nation as imagined by the non-*Tablighi* Kyrgyz public, whose self-awareness is unmistakable in the interviews, is markedly different to the Kyrgyz nation in the imagination of the *Tablighi Jamaat* which is blind to the class lines that divide the Kyrgyz society. Therefore, it would not be wrong to argue that the contents

of the Kyrgyz nation in the imagination of the members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* are more encompassing and egalitarian than what comprises the ideal Kyrgyz nation imagined by the non-*Tablighi* Kyrgyz public. All in all, regarding the interviews with the Kyrgyz public, the religious economies model is convincing in its explanatory power as long as the social marginalization and stigma that comes with being a *Tablighi* is concerned from the vantage point of the Kyrgyz public who are not affiliated with the group.

Nevertheless, religious economies model offers little insight on how the Kyrgyz public accounts for the success of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan other than the interviewees' belief that the movement caters to people who are experiencing serious troubles in their lives. Certainly, as interviews with the members of the *Tablighi Jamaat* revealed the *Tablighi Jamaat* caters to a much wider swathe of people; people who do not abuse substance or have criminal past are also drawn to the message of the group. Religious economies approach from the vantage point of the non-*Tablighi* Kyrgyz public is somewhat silent in elucidating this aspect. This is partly attributable to any shortcoming of the religious economies approach. We can argue that the interviewees from the Kyrgyz public are not very informed about the *Tablighi Jamaat*, and indeed very few of them ever came into direct contact with the group. Therefore, their own experience with the *Tablighi Jamaat* is limited mostly to what they hear about the group, rather than their own personal encounter with them. This lack of personal experience with the group limits their awareness as to who joins the *Tablighi Jamaat*. One interviewee, PUBLIC B, had a personal encounter with the group through her brother who had a troublesome past, but his reformation through his affiliation with the group and the brother's insistence that follow his steps by quitting alcohol consumption must have convinced PUBLIC B that the group's ranks are filled with people like her brother and that the *Tablighi Jamaat's* entire *raison d'être* was to reform such troubled people. Another interviewee, PUBLIC A, had personal encounter with them, as well. He, like PUBLIC B, has a practical approach to the group, as he appreciates the *Tablighi Jamaat's* efforts to reform troubled people. However, as he is well-informed about Islam and is already

affiliated with a Sufi brotherhood in Turkey, he is convinced that the *Tablighi Jamaat* attracts those Kyrgyz people who are little informed about Islam. PUBLIC A also partly attributes the *Tablighi Jamaat's* current success in Kyrgyzstan to the group's collusion with the ruling elite and bureaucracy, and believes that their distinct *modus operandi* is only partly responsible for the success. This particular point, also made by BUREAUCRAT J, seems to be substantiated because similar accounts are also found in the literature. That religious economies approach is silent about a possibility of collusion as a factor in a strict church's success is noteworthy. It is possible, at the risk of making an essentialist observation, to attribute this to the fact that the approach was developed in the United States where strict churches are headed and populated by Americans who have better internalized the separation of the church and the state. Furthermore, the time-honoured presence of autarchism among the American public can be considered another factor that accounts for the consistency of religious economies approach in the American context. The Kyrgyz case is markedly different to the American one where the former has long been characterized, at least during the Soviet Union, by the strong presence of the state at every aspect of life. The Soviet secularism was thus marked not by lack of state intervention in the religious marketplace, as is the case in the context of the United States, but by the state's total control and manipulation of it. Therefore, the Kyrgyz religious marketplace, despite being relatively liberalized and pluralized, still bears the influence of the Soviet heritage. It is therefore possible to argue that, from the vantage point of the Kyrgyz public, religious economies approach is only partly able to explain the growth of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan, and that the approach is less compatible with cases, such as Kyrgyzstan, where religious marketplace is lacking the same level of religious liberties as they are enjoyed in the United States, and where the underlying socio-political characteristics is not centered around the principles of free-market, civil libertarianism, autarchy, decentralization, and voluntarism, which are the attributes in the American case that influenced both the mechanism of the American religious market and the formulation of religious economies approach. Therefore, it can be argued that religious economies approach is more

adept in explaining the inner workings of the religious marketplace in the United States whence the approach took its inspiration, than the religious marketplace in Kyrgyzstan where religious clients are populated by Kyrgyz nationals whose disposition is markedly different to Americans. Whether this difference can be attributed to Islam is beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, absence of liberal values or their incompleteness cannot only be attributed to Islam, as lack in Kyrgyzstan of a free-market and the culture of liberty that comes with it was caused by the Soviet Union. There are Muslim societies, such as the Muslim community in the United States which consists mostly of immigrant Muslims, where a more liberty-focused attitude religion obtains. It can be argued that trans-local religious communities, including Islam in the form of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, adopt to local mindsets as much as they transform them.

As for interviews with the bureaucrats and academicians, the author believes that marrying the data and religious economies approach is much less straightforward than it was with the data gleaned from the members of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, and indeed, it seems that religious economies approach comes somewhat short of elucidating the perception of the *Tablighi Jamaat* among the learned sections of the Kyrgyz society and bureaucrats. Nevertheless, it is plausible to argue that religious economies approach is applicable to the interviews with academicians and bureaucrats in two ways. Firstly, the narrative of interviewees informed the author about the vacuum filled by the *Tablighi Jamaat* in the newly liberalized religious marketplace during the early years of independence, which is in line with what interviewees from the *Tablighi Jamaat* and the public have revealed. Like the *Tablighis* and the public, the learned segment of the Kyrgyz society too argued that the liberalization of the religious marketplace after the collapse of the religious monopoly during the Soviet Union resulted in a proliferation of religious life with various religious firms entering it. This in turn resulted in a tendency of growth in overall levels of religiosity nationwide. Secondly, like the interviewees from the Kyrgyz public, their personal opinions with regard to the *Tablighi Jamaat* can be considered a subset of public opinion. Therefore, the criticism raised against the *Tablighi* garments by the public as explored in the

previous subchapter is echoed by the set of interviewees in the subchapter dealing with academicians and bureaucrats. The distinctive lifestyle of the *Tablighis* which the movement sees as an essential part of the *Tablighi* identity alienates not only the public but also academicians and bureaucrats which further reinforces the feeling of distinction from the larger society and solidarity among the members of the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Therefore, like the case with the Kyrgyz public, the interviews indicate that the academicians and bureaucrats have a practical perception of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in the sense that they find the movement to be ‘useful’ in reforming certain elements of the society and blocking the Salafist encroachment, but have little desire to be put in the same basket as them which the *Tablighi Jamaat* does, because certain interviewees considered themselves above the sort of people the *Tablighi Jamaat* appeals to, whereas other interviewees, such as BUREAUCRAT F, consider themselves to be in no need of the *Tablighi* teachings for they believe that they are better informed about Islam than uninformed masses who glean simple tenets about Islam through their association with the *Tablighi Jamaat*. The same class lines, be them economic or intellectual, that divide people drawn to the *Tablighi Jamaat* and the Kyrgyz public also exist as far as Kyrgyz bureaucrats and academicians are concerned. As to why the case of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kyrgyzstan from the vantage point of bureaucrats and academicians can only be partly explained by religious economies model, it is possible to say that the same set of factors that characterized the shortcomings of the approach with regard to the Kyrgyz public are also applicable. The Kyrgyz religious marketplace, despite the liberalization process, is still lacking in that department, and religious economies approach appears to be more comprehensively explanatory in fully liberalized religious markets than in semi-liberal religious marketplaces, such as the one in Kyrgyzstan.

That religious economies approach is only partially effective in explaining the *Tablighi Jamaat*’s success in Kyrgyzstan suggests that it is not as effective as a ‘grand narrative’ that sets out to elucidate human behavior with regard to religion on a universal scale as it explains the uniqueness of the American case,

the American exceptionalism, in religion. It appears that religious economies approach comes in handy in non-Western, non-liberal or semi-liberal contexts, such as Kyrgyzstan, so long as its American foundation deeply entrenched in the Protestant tradition is acknowledged, its claim to universality is taken with a grain of salt, and its limited explanatory power in alien contexts is reinforced with interpretations paying attention to or based on local dynamics.

In closing, in the present thesis it is demonstrated that the *Tablighi Jamaat*'s success in gaining popularity among the Kyrgyz public could be explained by employing religious economies approach. From this point of view the success of the group in Kyrgyzstan is attributable to a combination of factors including the liberalized religious marketplace in Kyrgyzstan which led to a surge among population of overall levels of demand for spirituality and religiosity, the movement's accomplished client-driven marketing strategy that carved out a niche position for itself in the unsaturated religious marketplace, and the strict demands of the group from its clients who found in the *Tablighi Jamaat* an Islamic movement that was able to offer its committed clients a strong sense of fulfillment, a close-knit social and religious community, a satisfying religious identity, as well as a forceful push towards adopting a lifestyle in imitation of the Prophet Muhammad which encouraged customers to make strenuous efforts to improve themselves and help others to follow the same route to improvement through preaching and practice. The main argument of the present thesis was that the *Tablighi Jamaat* outcompeted its rivals thanks to its aggressive and distinct marketing strategy which gave it an edge over others because the *Tablighi Jamaat* actively sought potential members no matter where they were and was able to empower ordinary clients. Such ordinary clients were convinced by the group's powerful message that not only was it necessary but also sufficient to commit oneself to the *Tablighi* cause to attain the worldly and otherworldly rewards offered by the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Furthermore, the *Tablighi Jamaat* came to their doors with the message that any ordinary, committed *Tablighi* could attain rewards and that they did not need to be profoundly knowledgeable about Islam to accomplish it. The data collected from interviews with the members of

the *Tablighi Jamaat* demonstrated that religious economies approach is an efficient model for explaining the *Tablighi Jamaat*'s success if the vantage point of the members is taken on its face value. However, interviews with the Kyrgyz public and the learned segments of Kyrgyzstan demonstrate that market dynamics, the desire among the Kyrgyz people to commit themselves to a demanding religious movement as the *Tablighi Jamaat*, and the *Tablighi Jamaat*'s efficient marketing strategy to reach them are only partly responsible for the group's overall success in Kyrgyzstan. It has become clear through data gleaned from these interviewees that there were additional factors at work such as the preferential treatment the *Tablighi Jamaat* received from the Kyrgyz state structure that helped the group outcompete its rivals and dominate the pluralistic religious marketplace in Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, an argument could be made that religious economies approach was able to shed light on the question at hand only partially, and that factors arising from the imperfect liberal mechanism of the Kyrgyz religious marketplace should also be taken into account to satisfactorily explain the *Tablighi Jamaat*'s success in Kyrgyzstan. Last but not the least, this research has revealed that there are indications that the *Tablighi Jamaat* has grown out of its initial apolitical stance only to covertly assume a political agenda to promote its interests in Kyrgyzstan; and that the politicization of the *Tablighi Jamaat* may constitute a venue for further research.

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APPENDICES

A. LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

1. *TABLIGHI* INTERVIEWEES:

TABLIGHI A: A fifty-year old man

TABLIGHI B: A fifty-two-year old man

TABLIGHI C: A fifty-year old man

TABLIGHI D: A fifty-year old man

TABLIGHI E: A twenty-year old young male

TABLIGHI F: A young male of twenty years of age who first impressed me as he delivered a typical *Tablighi* sermon to the mosque attendants once the noon prayer was concluded

2. PUBLIC INTERVIEWEES:

PUBLIC A: An ethnic Kyrgyz businessman who studied in Turkey and still maintains close ties with Turkish business associates both in Kyrgyzstan and Turkey

PUBLIC B: An ethnic Kyrgyz female housepainter

PUBLIC C: An ethnic Uzbek from Osh who was formerly affiliated with the *Tablighi Jamaat* but has since left the movement altogether and now lives in Turkey, doing PhD

PUBLIC D: A small-time Turkish shopowner in Bishkek who was involved on a sporadic basis with the *Tablighis* but never became too involved as to call himself one

PUBLIC E: An ethnic Kyrgyz female shop clerk who went on to *Tabligh* tours in the Russian Federation but has since reduced the frequency of her socialization with the group

PUBLIC F: A Turkish businessman who is married to a local woman and who has been living in Kyrgyzstan for over two decades

PUBLIC G: The Turkish cook also a long time resident in Bishkek, who works at the restaurant of the said Turkish businessman – Public F

PUBLIC H: An ethnic Russian waiter who works at a posh café in a classy neighborhood of Bishkek

PUBLIC I: An ethnic Kyrgyz waitress who works at a posh café in a classy neighborhood of Bishkek

PUBLIC J: An ethnic female Kyrgyz university student from the University of Central Asia

PUBLIC K: An ethnic female Kyrgyz university student from the University of Central Asia

PUBLIC L: A member of the *Süleymançı* movement in Kyrgyzstan

PUBLIC M: A member of the *Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Vakfi* in Kyrgyzstan

3. ACADEMICIANS AND BUREAUCRATS INTERVIEWED:

BUREAUCRAT A: A Turkish official in Bishkek who worked there in 2016

BUREAUCRAT B : A Turkish official in Bishkek who was working there in 2021

BUREAUCRAT C : A Turkish bureaucrat

BUREAUCRAT D : A Kyrgyz employee at the Turkish Embassy in Bishkek

BUREAUCRAT E: A Turkish official

BUREAUCRAT F: A Kyrgyz imam working at the Serakhsi Mosque

BUREAUCRAT G: One Kyrgyz member of the Kyrgyz Ministry of Foreign Affairs

BUREAUCRAT H: A Kyrgyz national who is a member of the Directorate of Religious Affairs

BUREAUCRAT I: A Kyrgyz national who is a member of the *Muftiate*

BUREAUCRAT J: A Kyrgyz academician who is a member of the Diplomatic Academy within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

BUREAUCRAT K: An independent Kyrgyz researcher who left academia before the interview took place

BUREAUCRAT L: An independent Kyrgyz researcher who left academia before the interview took place

B. CURRICULUM VITAE

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EDUCATION

Degree	Institution	Year of Graduation
MS	Sabancı University History	2003
BS	Koç University Business Administration	2001
High School	Etlik Lisesi, Ankara	1997

WORK EXPERIENCE

Year	Place	Enrollment
2009-	Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon	Expert
Present	Ajansı	
2004-2007	The Ohio State University Department of History	Research Assistant
2002-2004	Sabancı University	Teaching Assistant

FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Advanced English, Advanced French, Intermediate Russian

PUBLICATIONS

1. Türkiye'nin Sahra Altı Politikası, in Küresel ve Bölgesel Yeniden Yapılanma Sürecinde Güçlü Dış Politika, MÜSİAD Araştırma Raporları: 88, Ocak 2014, İstanbul, pp. 93-106
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2. Özbekistan ve “Arap Baharı”: Anna Karenina İlkesi ya da Potansiyel Bir “Devrim”in İmkânı, Uluslararası Hukuk ve Politika, Cilt: 9, Sayı 33, ss 89-121, 2013 (co-authored with Turgut Demirtepe)
3. Accommodation or Assimilation? Chinese Government Policies Toward Uyghur Minority, USAK Yearbook, Vol. 5. Year 2012, pp. 151-174 (co-authored with Turgut Demirtepe).
4. Treading on Thin Ice: Islam and Nation Building in Central Asia, Journal of Central Asian and Caucasian Studies. 2011, Vol. 6 Issue 12, pp 148-175.
5. “Quo Vadis Kırgızistan?: Sovyet Sonrası Kırgızistan’da İslami Hareketler”, Journal of Central Asian & Caucasian Studies. 2011, Vol. 6 Issue 11, pp. 18-50.
6. “From ‘Pride of Universe’ to ‘Muhammad’: Teaching Islamic History in the Early Republican Era. Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Sabanci University, 2004.

C. TURKISH SUMMARY / TÜRKEÖZET

Bu çalıřma Tebliğ Cemaati'nin Sovyet sonrası Kırgızistan'da kendisine bulduđu yayılma imkânı ile devamında bu ÷lkede kurduđu geniş ve derin etki alanını arařtırmaktadır. Sovyetler Birliđi'nin 1991 yılında yıkılmasıyla bađımsızlıđına kavuřan Kırgızistan tıpkı diđer Orta Asya Cumhuriyetleri gibi erken bađımsızlık yıllarında dini sahada liberalleřme yoluna gitmiřtir. Bunun sonucu olarak bütün Orta Asya bölgesinde hem yerel dini hareketler hem de dıř kaynaklı dini gruplar rahatça faaliyet göstermeye bařlamıřtır. Ancak, 1990'lı yılların sonuna gelindiđinde bölgede dini sahada liberal politikalar büyük ölçüde gerileyerek yerini devletlerce getirilen ciddi dini kısıtlamalara ve katı kontrole bırakmıřtır. Bunun göreceli olarak tek istisnasını Kırgızistan oluřturmaktadır. Diđer Orta Asya Cumhuriyetleri'nde yerel ve dıř kaynaklı dini hareketler önemli ölçüde kısıtlanmış olmasına karřın Kırgızistan'da yerel ve dıř kaynaklı dini hareketlere sađlanan serbestinin nispi olarak sürdürüldüđu gözlemlenmiřtir. Bölgede Hint alt kıtası kökenli Tebliğ Cemaati Kırgızistan haricindeki ÷lkelerde kanun dıřı sayılarak hareketin faaliyet göstermesi yasaklanmıřtır. Bu durumda, neden Kırgızistan'ın bölgedeki benzer tarihi, politik ve demografik özelliklere sahip diđer ÷lkelerin izinden gitmediđi ve Tebliğ Cemaati'nin faaliyet göstermesine izin vermeye devam ettiđi sorusu ön plana çıkmaktadır. Dolayısıyla, Kırgızistan'ı diđer bölge ÷lkelerinden din politikası bađlamında ayıran faktörler açıklanmaya muhtaçtır. Buna ek olarak, Tebliğ Cemaati'nin Kırgızistan'da sadece serbestçe etkin olmaya devam etmesi deđil, aynı zamanda ÷lke çapındaki en güçlü dini hareket haline gelmiř olması da dikkat çekmektedir. Dolayısıyla, Kırgızistan'da halen aktif şekilde faaliyet gösteren ve büyük çođunluđu dıř kaynaklı İslami hareketlerden oluřan dini hareketler arasında Tebliğ Cemaati'nin bu kadar güçlü bir pozisyon elde edebilmiř olmasını mümkün kılan etkenler de arařtırılması gereken bir nokta olarak görülebilir. Bu nedenle, aynı Müslüman kitlelere hitap eden, yerel ya da dıř kaynaklı tüm İslami gruplar içerisinde Tebliğ Cemaati'ni ön plana çıkaran ve ona rakiplerine göre avantaj sađlayan faktörler de arařtırma konusu olmalıdır. Bu arařtırmanın üç temel soru üzerinde yoğunlařtıđı

söylenbilir: İlk aşamada, diğer Orta Asya Cumhuriyetleri'nin aksine Kırgızistan'ın dini sahada nispi liberal bir politika izlemeye devam etmesini sağlayan etkenler nelerdir? İkinci olarak, Tebliğ Cemaati'nin Kırgızistan'da faaliyet gösteren bütün İslami hareketler arasında ön plana çıkması ve ülkedeki en etkin dini hareket haline gelmesi nasıl açıklanabilir? Bu temel iki soruyla ilişkili biçimde, üçüncü olarak Tebliğ Cemaati ile Kırgız Devleti ve Kırgızistan halkı arasındaki ilişkiler hangi dinamiklere dayanmaktadır, sorusu gelmektedir.

Tebliğ Cemaati'nin dünya çapında faaliyet gösteren bir İslami hareket olması ve kimi kaynaklara göre de dünyanın en büyük İslami hareketi sayılması nedeniyle bu harekete ilişkin nispeten zengin sayılabilecek bir literatürün tarih, sosyoloji, ilahiyat ve siyaset bilimi disiplinlerinde mevcut olduğu söylenebilir. Öte yandan, Orta Asya'da dini sahada yarı-liberal olarak nitelendirilebilecek tek ülke Kırgızistandır ve diğer Orta Asya ülkeleri hem dini hareketlere ciddi kısıtlamalar getirmiş hem de bu konuda araştırmacılara serbesti tanımamaktadır. Dolayısıyla Orta Asya bölgesinde İslamiyet ya da diğer dinler konusunda yapılacak her türlü akademik çalışmanın hemen hemen sadece Kırgızistan'da sürdürülebilir olduğunu söylemek mümkündür. Bu nedenle de Kırgızistan'da dini sahaya ilişkin zengin sayılabilecek bir literatür bulunduğunu iddia etmek yanlış olmayacaktır. Kırgızistan'da Tebliğ Cemaati'nin etkinliği araştırmacıların dikkatini çekmiş olup bu konuda akademik çalışmalar bulunmakta fakat daha fazla çalışmaya ihtiyaç duyulduğu da dikkat çekmektedir. Tebliğ Cemaati'nin Kırgızistan'daki varlığına ve faaliyetlerine ilişkin çalışmaların nitel ve nicel olarak geliştirilmesinde yarar bulunmaktadır çünkü Tebliğ Cemaati konusunda yapılacak akademik çalışmalar araştırmacılara özel güçlükler çıkarmaktadır. Bu harekete ilişkin sağlıklı bilgiye ulaşmak araştırmacılar için kolay değildir ve tüm Sovyet Sonrası Orta Asya Cumhuriyetleri'nde olduğu gibi Kırgızistan'da da gerek bürokrasi, gerek akademi, gerekse halk nezdinde dini konularda araştırmacılar mülakat yapmakta zorlanmaktadır. Bu nedenlerle Tebliğ Cemaati'ne ilişkin olarak yapılmış çalışmalar yeni çalışmalar ile desteklenmeye ve daha doyurucu bilgi toplanmasına ihtiyaç duymaktadır.

Bu çalışmada Tebliğ Cemaati'nin Kırgızistan'daki faaliyetleri ve etkinliği ele alınırken dini ekonomiler yaklaşımı teorik çerçeve olarak benimsenmiştir. Dini ekonomiler yaklaşımı rasyonel seçim teorisine temeline oturmakta olup, kökeni mikroekonomi alanında geliştirilen teorik çerçevenin 1970'lerde Chicago Üniversitesi ekonomistlerinin mikroekonomik modellerini din gibi diğer sosyal alanlara uygulamasına dayanmaktadır. Sözü geçen on yıla kadar din sosyolojisinde hakim olan Sekülerleşme Teorisi'nin, başta Amerika Birleşik Devletleri (ABD) olmak üzere çok sayıda ülkedeki dini hareketliliği açıklamakta ampirik olarak yetersiz kalması, hem Amerikalı din sosyologlarını hem de Chicago ekolünden gelen mikroekonomistleri farklı arayışlara itmiştir. Böylece ortaya çıkan dini ekonomiler yaklaşımı, bir anlamda Sekülerleşme Teorisi'nin temel dayanaklarını tersine çevirmektedir. Sekülerleşme Teorisi sekülerleşmenin sanayileşme, modernleşme, kentleşme ve bürokratikleşme süreçleriyle paralel olarak toplumsal ve bireysel düzeyde nüfuz ettiğini ve kaçınılmaz biçimde dinlerin hem devlet, hem toplum, hem de bireysel alanda gerileyerek etkinliğini kaybetmeye mahkum olduğunu öne sürmüştür. Buna ek olarak, Sekülerleşme Teorisi dini sahada yaşanan liberalleşme ile birlikte bireylerin dinden gittikçe uzaklaşacağını, yani din üzerindeki kısıtlamaların kaldırılmasının dinler ve dindarlık aleyhinde çalışacağını iddia etmiştir. On dokuzuncu yüzyıldan bu yana Sekülerleşme Teorisi bu lineer öngörüye sahip olmakla birlikte, Batı Avrupa ve kısmen de Doğu Avrupa'da hızla azalan kiliseye gitme oranlarıyla ampirik olarak destek bulmuş, ve Max Weber ve Emile Durkheim gibi öncül sosyologlar tarafından savunulmuştur. Buna karşılık, 1960'lardan bu yana ABD, Latin Amerika, Orta Doğu gibi farklı coğrafyalarda Sekülerleşme Teorisi'nin öngörülerinin somutlaşmadığı, bilakis bu toplumların dindar kalmaya devam ettiği gözlemlenmiştir. Dolayısıyla, bu fenomenin açıklanması için alternatif yaklaşımlara ihtiyaç duyulmuş ve dini ekonomiler yaklaşımı ortaya çıkmıştır. Dini ekonomiler yaklaşımı bireylerin din sahasında seçimlerini bilgiye dayanarak ve rasyonel biçimde alternatiflerini tartarak yaptıklarını, kendileri için en yararlı gördükleri seçeneği tercih ettiklerini, bireylerin, İngilizce'de *agency* olarak kullanılan ve Türkçe'de kişinin kendi yaşamına ilişkin kararları kontrol edebilmesi, kendi başına davranma, özerk eylemde bulunma gibi tanımlarla da

karşılanan, eylemlilik güçlerini kullanarak kendi çıkarları doğrultusunda dini seçimler yapabildiklerini öne sürmektedir. Yani Sekülerleşme Teorisi'ne göre bireyler çevrelerinde yaşanan gelişmelerden pasif olarak etkilenmekte ve dinden uzaklaşmakta iken, dini ekonomiler yaklaşımına göre bireyler dış dünyada yaşanan ve kendilerince de gözlemlenen sekülerleşme gibi gelişmeler karşısında pasif bir role bürünmemekte, tam tersine kendi eylemliliklerini kullanarak aktif şekilde tepkiler geliştirerek pozisyonlar almakta olup yeni dindarlaşma modülleri talep etmektedirler. Buna paralel olarak, dini sahada yaşanan liberalleşme sonucu bireyler karşılarında çok sayıda farklı ve farklılaşmış dini hareketler, dini ekonomiler yaklaşımının jargonuna göre dini şirketler ya da firmalar, bulmakta olup, kendi arzu ve taleplerini karşılayan dini firmalara dahil olmayı seçmektedirler. Bir başka şekilde ifade etmek gerekirse, eskinin tekelci dini piyasasında kendi taleplerine uygun bir dini ürün bulamayan ve tekelci dini hizmetlerden duyduğu tatminsizlik nedeniyle resmi dinden uzaklaşan bireyler, tekelci dini sahanın liberalleşerek çoğulcu hale evrilmesi ile kendi taleplerini karşılayacak şekilde dini ürünlerini farklılaştıran dini firmalar ile irtibata geçmekte ve kendilerini en çok tatmin eden firmayı bulduklarında yeniden dindarlaşmaya başlayabilmektedir. Dolayısıyla, Sekülerleşme Teorisi'nin aksine dini ekonomiler yaklaşımına göre dini tekellilik dindarlığı değil dinden uzaklaşmayı tetiklemekte, dini özgürlükler ve dini çoğulculuk ise toplumsal düzeyde dindarlaşmanın artmasına neden olmaktadır. Burada dini ekonomiler yaklaşımının piyasacı doğası arz talep dengesi üzerine inşa edilmiş olup bireyler yani dini taleplerde bulunan tüketicilerin yerine dini firmaların yani dini arzda bulunanların piyasa yapıcı rolü vurgulanmaktadır. Dini ekonomiler yaklaşımına göre herhangi bir zamanda dünyanın herhangi bir yerinde dini talep az çok sabittir; zaman zaman dış dünyada olup bitenler dolayısıyla dalgalansa da tüketicilerin talebi sabit kabul edilebilir. Değişkenlik gösteren dini arzdır. Yani dini piyasa eğer serbestse bireyler, dini ekonomiler yaklaşımının jargonuyla tüketiciler, değişik dini taleplere sahip olup piyasada rekabet halinde faaliyet gösteren firmalar değişik talepleri göz önünde bulundurarak dini ürünlerini farklı talepleri karşılayacak şekilde farklılaştırmakta ve tüketicilerin kendi nişlerini bulmalarının önünü açmaktadır. Buna karşılık Sekülerleşme Teorisi dini arzda

bulunan firmaları göz önüne almaz. Dini arz bağımlı değişken olup dini piyasada talepte bulunan tüketiciler piyasa yapıcıdır ve dini piyasanın seyri dini talebin bir fonksiyonudur. Sekülerleşen toplum daha az dini ürün talep etmekte, buna cevaben dini firmalar talep yetersizliğinden dolayı küçülmektedir. Dolayısıyla Sekülerleşme Teorisi'ne talep-tarafından yaklaşım denirken dini ekonomiler yaklaşımı arz-tarafından yaklaşım olarak nitelendirilmektedir.

Amerikan liberalliğine ve bundan öte Amerikan liberter düşüncesine dayanan dini ekonomiler yaklaşımı ilk planda ABD'de Protestan, ve özellikle Evanjelik, Kiliselerin nasıl olup da toplumsal düzlemde güçlü kalmaya devam ettiklerini, Amerikan toplumunun Sekülerleşme Teorisi'nin en önemli savunucularından Peter Berger'in deyimiyile "azgınca" dindarlığını koruyabildiğini, ama aynı zamanda Amerikan devlet düzeninin seküler niteliğini sürdürebildiğini açıklamakta kullanılmıştır. Ancak yaklaşım kısa sürede ABD sınırlarını aşarak hem çeşitli Hristiyan toplumların hem de diğer din mensuplarının sekülerleşme, kentleşme, sanayileşme gibi süreçlere rağmen dindar kalmaya devam etmelerini sağlayan dinamikleri açıklamak için kullanıma sokulmuştur. Öte yandan şunu da belirtmekte yarar vardır ki, dini ekonomiler yaklaşımı sekülerleşme sürecinin kendisine muhalefet etmemekte, yani devlet düzeyinde sekülerliğin gerçekleştiğini kabul etmektedir. Hatta toplumların da buna koşut olarak sekülerleşebileceğini kabul ettiği söylenebilir. Buna karşılık dini ekonomiler yaklaşımı Sekülerleşme Teorisi'ne muhaliftir. Yani devletlerin sekülerleşmesinin kaçınılmaz biçimde toplumların dinden uzaklaşmasına neden olacağı öngörüsüne karşı çıkmakta, toplumsal ve bireysel dindarlığın dış dünyadaki gelişmelerle birlikte, adeta denizlerde gözlemlenen gelgit gibi, azalıp çoğalacağını söylemektedir.

Yine 1970'lerde ABD'de geliştirilen ve dini ekonomiler yaklaşımı ile büyük oranda ortak temellere sahip olan Kilise Katılığı (*Church Strictness*) Teorisi'ne göre, ABD'de yaşanan dini canlılık her kilisede ve dini cemaatte aynı ölçüde gözlemlenmemektedir. Bu kuramı ortaya atan Dean Kelley, birçok sosyolog ve ilahiyatçının tespit ettiği gibi, ABD'de Presbiteryen, Episkopal ve Luteran gibi

köklü kiliselerin ve cemaatlerin zamanla zayıfladıklarını, mensuplarını başka kiliselere kaptırdıklarını ve dolayısıyla mensuplarından eskisi kadar çok bağış toplayamadıkları için niteliksel gerileme sürecine girdiklerini gözlemlemiştir. Buna karşılık, görülmektedir ki ABD’de başta Mormon Kilisesi, Yehova Şahitleri, Pentecostal Kiliseler ve diğer Evanjelik Kiliseler olmak üzere, bazı nispeten genç kilise ve cemaatler mensuplarını kaybetmemekte ve hatta genellikle yeni mensuplar kazanarak ekonomik olarak güçlü bir varlık sürdürmeye devam etmektedirler. Kelley bu dikotomiye dikkat çekerek zayıflayan kiliseleri Yumuşak Kiliseler (*Lenient Churches*), güçlü biçimde var olmaya devam eden kiliseleri ise Katı Kiliseler (*Strict Churches*) olarak nitelendirmiş ve bu durumu açıklamaya çalışmıştır. Kilise Katılığı Teorisi’nin dayandığı gözlemlere göre Yumuşak Kiliseler mensuplarından güçlü bir bağlılık ve fedakârlık talep etmemekte, mensupları cemaat-içi etkinliklere katılmaya davet etmekte ama bu konuda kati bir ısrarda bulunmamaktadır. Ayrıca bu kiliselerin mensupları nasıl bir hayat sürerlerse sürsünler cemaatleri tarafından hoş karşılanacaklarını ve kiliseden ihraç edilmeyeceklerini bilmektedirler. Buna karşılık, Katı Kiliseler mensuplarının kilisenin değerlerine ve ilkelerine kati surette bağlı olmalarını talep etmekte ve cemaat-dışı aktivitelerden uzak durmalarını teşvik etmektedir. Bu kiliselere mensup insanlar kiliselerinin değerlerinden ayrıldıklarında ya da hayat tarzlarını kilisece onaylanmayan biçimde sürdürdüklerinde kilisede istenmeyeceklerini bilirler. Kelley’e göre Yumuşak Kiliseler herkese kucak açmalarına ve zorlayıcı olmamalarına rağmen mensup kaybederken, katı kurallar uygulayan ve cemaat-dışı aktivitelerle karşı hoşgörü göstermeyen zorlayıcı hareket tarzını benimseyen Katı Kiliseler ABD’de canlı kalmaktadır. Kelley bu çelişkili gibi gözüken durumu, hayat tarzlarını değiştirip daha iyi bir insan olmayı arzulayan insanların kendilerini zorlayan ve dolayısıyla onları hayatlarını dönüştürmeye teşvik eden sosyal ortamlara ihtiyaç duymalarına yormuştur. Dini ekonomiler yaklaşımını benimseyen araştırmacılar ise, bu durumu ekonomideki kulüp malı kavramıyla açıklamışlardır. Buna göre kulüp malları pozitif dışsallığa sahip olan ve sadece belirli bir gruba mensup olanların faydalanması için üretilen mallardır. Üyeler tek başlarına tüketmek istedikleri bu malın yüksek maliyetini bir gruba dahil

olarak düşürmektedirler. Grup üyelerinin bu mallardan yararlanmaları diğer üyelerin aleyhine işlememekte, fakat kulüp üyesi olmayanların bu malları tüketmesine izin verilmemektedir. Dolayısıyla kulüp üyesi olmanın da birtakım şartları olmalıdır ve herkes bu kulübe kolayca üye olmasın diye bu şartlar yüksek tutulmaktadır. Dini ekonomiler yaklaşımı dini cemaatleri dini mallar üreten kulüpler olarak kurgulamakta ve öne sürülen dini tatmin, ahirette felaha kavuşma gibi vaatleri dini mal olarak algılamaktadır. Dolayısıyla dini gruplar yeni mensupların sayısını kısıtlı tutmak ve sadece gruba katkıda bulunabilecek kişileri mensup olarak kabul etmek için yüksek giriş şartları öne sürmekte, dini mallardan istifade etmek isteyen ama dini gruba da katkıda bulunmaktan kaçınan ‘bedavacı’ları böylece elemektedirler.

Bu tezde yazarın dini ekonomiler yaklaşımını benimsemesinin başlıca nedeni Sovyetler Birliği’nin çöküşünün hemen ardından bağımsız Kırgızistan’da dini baskı ve kontrolün hafifletilmesinin akabinde tecrübe edilen dini çoğulculuk ile birlikte ülke çapında dindarlık genel düzeyinin dikkate değer biçimde artış göstermesidir. Bu gözlem, dini ekonomiler yaklaşımının dini piyasada tekelliliğin kalkmasının ve piyasanın rekabetçi çoğulcu bir tabiata kavuşmasının ardından dini sahada canlanma yaşanacağı tahminiyle örtüşmektedir. Dolayısıyla yazar dini ekonomiler yaklaşımının Kırgızistan bağlamında yaşanan dini canlanmayı ve Tebliğ Cemaati’nin ülkede geniş etkinlik alanı bulmasını açıklayabileceğine kanaat getirmiştir. Öte yandan dini ekonomiler yaklaşımı din sosyolojisinde 1970’lerden bu yana Sekülerleşme Teorisi’ne alternatif bir kuram olarak var olmakla beraber, Amerikan akademisi dışında geniş bir destek bulmamıştır. Dini ekonomiler yaklaşımı Amerikan akademisinde din gibi moderniteyle birlikte hep irrasyonel olarak etiketlenen bir sahaya gereksiz biçimde rasyonellik atfetmekle ve mekanik olmakla suçlanmış, ampirik açıdan ise teyit edilemediği öne sürülmüştür. Ayrıca indirgemeci olarak takdir edilmiş ve ABD’nin nevi şahsına münhasır tarihi dinamiklerinin de Amerikan dini hayatındaki canlılık için açıklayıcı olduğu ifade edilmiştir. Özellikle de ABD’de Protestan Kiliselerin başarısını ve Amerikan istisnailiğini açıklaması açısından değerli bulunmakla beraber, yaklaşım zaman içerisinde diğer dinlere ve

coğrafyalara teşmil edilip de, tıpkı eleştirdiği Sekülerleşme Teorisi gibi, bir 'büyük anlatı'ya dönüştürülünce ABD dışında da eleştirilerin hedefi olmuştur. Her ne kadar İslam toplumlarını analiz etmek için nadiren kullanılmış olsa da, dini ekonomiler yaklaşımı bazı araştırmacılar tarafından bir Amerikanizm örneği olarak görülmüş ve İslamiyet gibi Protestanlık'tan çok farklı tarihi, sosyal ve teolojik dinamiklere dayanan dinlerin modern ve post-modern çağdaki seyrini açıklamak için uygun bulunmamıştır. Ayrıca dini ekonomiler yaklaşımı bugüne kadar Orta Asya bağlamında hiç kullanılmamıştır. Bütün bu nedenlerle yazarın daha konvansiyonel teorik çerçeveler yerine dini ekonomiler yaklaşımını kullanmış olması bir yandan yenilikçi olarak değerlendirilebilirse de diğer açıdan ampirik olarak rüştünü ispat etmediği iddia edilen bir teoriye başvurulması riskli bir seçim olarak da takdir edilebilir. Dean Kelley'nin Kilise Katılığı Teorisi'nin de Kırgızistan'daki Tebliğ Cemaati'nin başarısını açıklayıcı olabileceğini düşünen yazar, Kırgızistan'da kimi dini hareketler çok başarılıyken diğerlerinin zayıf kalması gerçeğinin açıklanmaya muhtaç olması nedeniyle söz konusu teoriyi uygulamaya karar vermiştir.

Tebliğ Cemaati 20. yüzyılın ilk yarısında İngiliz hakimiyetindeki Hint alt kıtasında ortaya çıkmıştır. O dönemlerde Britanya kökenli çeşitli Evanjelik gruplar ülke çapında misyonerlik faaliyetleri marifetiyle Hindu ve Müslümanları Hristiyanlık'a geçmeye ikna etmek için yoğun faaliyetler yürütmektedir. Bu faaliyetleri de yerel dillerde, çoğu okuma yazma bilmeyen ya da düşük eğitimli kitlelerin anlayabileceği sözlü iletişim kanallarıyla yürütmektedirler. Öte yandan Hindular da *Arya Samaj* gibi Batı'dan esinlenmiş reformist hareketler kanalıyla Müslümanları ve Hristiyan olmuş Hintlileri yeniden Hindu dinine döndürmeye çalışmaktadır. Bu süreçte çok dilli ve çok etnik gruba bölünmüş Müslüman toplumunda birlik duygusu mevcut değildir. Etnisite ve dil farklılıklarına ek olarak Müslümanlar arasında eğitim ve maddi imkanlarla ilişkili sınıfsal farklar bulunmakta ve Britanya kolonyal yönetimine ya da Hindu çoğunluğa karşı beraber hareket etmek imkansız hale gelmektedir. Çoğu Hintli Müslüman eğitimsizdir ve maddi imkanları kısıtlıdır. Ayrıca kısıtlı dini bilgiye sahip olan ve ulema arasında eclaf adıyla da bilinen bu Müslüman kitleler komşuları olan

Hinduların çoğu dini inanış ve pratiğini benimsemiştir. Hatta eclafın çoğunun çok da uzak olmayan bir geçmişte Müslümanlığa geçtiği gerçeği düşünülürse, cahil Müslüman kitlelerin eski dinlerinden tamamen kopmadıkları da söylenebilir. Dolayısıyla konvansiyonel İslami eğitim merkezleri olan medreseler bu kitlelerin erişimine kapalıdır ve bu kitlelerin ihtiyaçlarına cevap verebilecek durumda değildir. Britanya eğitim sistemini örnek alan Deobandi hareketi tarafından açılmış reforme medreseler dahi eğitimsiz Müslüman kitlelerin komşuları olan Hindulardan etkilenen senkretik bir İslam anlayışını sürdürmelerine engel olamamıştır çünkü hedef kitle bu medreselere gidememekte ve gidebilseler dahi buradaki ayrıntılı dini eğitimi anlayacak bilgi düzeyinden yoksun bir biçimde yaşamaktadırlar. Bu nedenlerle Mevlana İlyas Kandehlevi adlı Deobandi asıllı bir alim, ciddi bir taktik ve strateji değişikliğinin şart olduğunu, aksi takdirde Hint alt kıtasında İslamiyet'in yok olmaya mahkum olduğunu düşünmüş ve Tebliğ Cemaati'ni kurmuştur. Buna göre, devir eğitimsiz kitlelerin medreselere gelmelerini bekleyerek bu eğitim kurumlarında halkın eğitilmesi devri değil; basit, kısa mesajlarla bu kitlelere gidecek tebliğcilerin nominal Müslümanları 'gerçek' Müslüman yapmaları, yani aksiyon devridir. Peygamber döneminde ilk Müslümanların sokak sokak, ev ev gezerek insanları İslam'a davet etmelerini model alan ve şüphesiz ki Hint alt kıtasındaki gezgin Metodist misyonerlerin etkili yöntemlerinin tesirinde kalan Mevlana İlyas, kendileri de basit İslami eğitimden geçmiş ve benzer basit, kısa, tekrara dayanan mesajlarla donatılmış Tebliğcilerin köy köy, ev ev gezerek nominal Hint Müslümanlarını 'doğru' İslam'a davet etmelerini öngörmüştür. Mesajın etkinliğini artırabilmek amacıyla tebliğ faaliyetleri yazılı olmaktan ziyade sözlü iletişime dayanmakta, derin dini konulardan uzak durulmakta, mezhepçilikten kaçınılmakta ve siyasete hiçbir surette girilmemektedir. Tebliğ Cemaati daha ilk günlerinden itibaren apolitik tutumunu sürdürmüş olmakla beraber, bu tutumun temel dürtüsünün siyaseti lüzumsuz laf kalabalığı olarak gören aksiyoner dünya görüşünden öte, Britanya yönetiminin 1857 Sipahi Ayaklanması'nın faturasını Müslümanlara kesip özellikle ulema sınıfını ciddi baskı altına almasından kaynaklanan bir korkunun tetiklediği siyasetten uzak kalma arzusu olduğu anlaşılmaktadır.

Mevlana İlyas'ın yaşadığı dönemde tüm alt kıtaya yayılan tebliğ faaliyetleri kendisinin ölümünden sonra dışarıya da açılmış ve hızlı biçimde Müslümanların yaşadığı her coğrafyada Tebliğ Cemaati görünür olmaya başlamıştır. Günümüzde Tebliğ Cemaati'nin Hindistan, Pakistan ve Bangladeş'te merkezleri bulunmakta, her yıl dünyanın dört bir tarafından milyonlarca Müslüman yıllık Tebliğ ictimalarına katılmak için bu merkezlere seyahat etmektedir. Bu ictima merkezleri hem eğitim alanı olarak kullanılmakta, hem çeşitli ülkelerden gelen Tebliğcilerin faaliyetleri hakkında bilgi verip Tebliğ elitlerine danışmaları için fırsat oluşturmakta, hem de farklı etnisitelerden Müslümanların birbiriyle tanışıp kaynaşmalarını sağlamaktadır. Tebliğ faaliyetinde bulunan insanlar ulema sınıfına dahil olmak zorunda değildir. Aslında, Tebliğci olarak isimlendirilen bu insanların ezici çoğunluğu dini bilgisi kıt, sıradan insanlardan oluşmaktadır. Dolayısıyla Tebliğ Cemaati klasik İslami eğitim ve öğretim metodu olan ulema eliyle dini eğitimi tersine çevirmiş, çok derin bilgiye sahip olmasa da salih niyetle hareket eden her Müslüman'ın tebliğ faaliyetinde bulunabileceğini ve hatta bulunmasının farz olduğunu öne sürerek, tıpkı ruhban olmayan vaizler yoluyla dinin yayılmasını sağlayan Metodizm'in sıradan Hristiyanları yetkilendirerek ruhban sınıfının mertebesine yükseltmesi gibi, sıradan Müslümanları da ulema sınıfı gibi dinin yayılmasında yetkilendirmiştir. Bu nedenle ekseriyetle sıradan insanlardan oluşan Tebliğ gruplarının ziyaret ettikleri Müslümanlara basit mesajlarla gelmesi ve onlara iyi Müslüman olmak için İslami ilimler tahsil etmelerine gerek olmadığı fikrini aşılması, Marshall McLuhan'ın "aracı mesajın kendisidir," ilkesini hatırlatmaktadır.

Tebliğ grupları ziyaret ettikleri mahallerde camilerde konaklamakta ve ev ev dolaşarak Müslüman erkekleri camide namaz sonrası Tebliğcilerce okunacak vaazı dinlemeye davet etmektedir. Bu amaçla camiye gelen Müslümanlara tebliğin ve imanın önemine ilişkin kısa bilgiler verildikten sonra bu insanlar derhal üç günlük tebliğ turuna dahil olmaya teşvik edilmektedir. Böyle turlara katılan kişilerin bilgi düzeyi önemli değildir. Bu kişilerden konuşmalarını ve tebliğ grubundaki tecrübeli Müslümanları dinleyerek taklit etmeleri, kendilerini zikir ve tefekkür ile meşgul etmeleri istenmektedir. Ziyaret edilecek mahaldeki

camiyeye gelen Tebliğciler ilk iş olarak grubu tebliğe çıkacak ve camide kalacak kişiler olarak ikiye ayırmakta, camide kalanlar da öncelikle caminin tuvalet ve zemin temizliğini yapmaktadır. Tebliğe çıkan grup ise kapı kapı dolaşarak Müslüman erkekleri camiye davet etmektedir. Tebliğ cemaati sünnetin katı biçimde taklit edilmesini öngörmekte ve Müslümanların Hint alt kıtasına özgü *şalvar kamiz* denen uzun entarileri ve sarıkları giymeleri, sakal bırakmaları gerektiğini öne sürmektedir. Tebliğ turları çeşit çeşittir. Üç günlük turlar, kırk günlük turlar ve her Tebliğci'nin hayatında en az bir kez katılması tavsiye edilen dört aylık turlar Mevlana İlyas tarafından tespit edilmiş ve halen sıkı biçimde uygulanmaktadır.

Tebliğ Cemaati Kırgızistan'a bağımsızlık döneminde, 1990'lı yılların ortalarında Pakistan ve Hindistan'dan gelen ve Kırgızca ya da Rusça bilmeyen gezgin tebliğci gruplar kanalıyla ayak basmıştır. Bu erken dönemde komşu Kazakistan'da da henüz hareket yasaklanmamıştır. Kazakistan ve Özbekistan'da yasaklanmasının ardından Tebliğ Cemaati Orta Asya bölgesindeki tüm faaliyet ve çabalarını Kırgızistan'a kaydırmıştır. Kısa sürede Kırgızistan vatandaşları arasında takipçi bulan Tebliğ Cemaati tüm ülke çapında en uzak köylere dahi erişmiş ve ziyaretler esnasında konakladıkları camilerde görev yapan imamlar ve devlet bürokrasisi ile iyi ilişkiler kurarak tüm Kırgızistan'daki imamların büyük kısmını kendi yanlarına çekmiştir. Buna ek olarak, günümüzde ülkede yetişen imamların ekseriyeti Tebliğci eğitimci tarafından eğitilmekte ve dolayısıyla harekete sempati beslemektedir. Tebliğ Cemaati'nin Kırgızistan'da enteresan bir pozisyonu bulunmaktadır. Herhangi resmi ya da bürokratik bir yapısı bulunmayan bu hareket Kırgızistan'da bir dini cemaat ya da hareket olarak kayıt altına alınmamıştır. Yani resmiyette Kırgızistan'da Tebliğ Cemaati diye bir oluşum bulunmamaktadır. Dolayısıyla Kırgız bürokrasisi tarafından kayıt altına alınan ve bu süreçte ciddi engellemelerle karşılaşan çeşitli İslami ya da gayri-İslami dini cemaatin yaşadığı güçlükleri Tebliğ Cemaati tecrübe etmemektedir. Bu durum da Tebliğ Cemaati'nin ülkede çok rahat biçimde hareket etmesinin ve ülkenin her köşesine erişebilmesinin önünü açmıştır. Kırgızistan'da Tebliğ Cemaati *Davatçılar* adıyla bilinmekte, Tebliğ Cemaati olarak pek

tanınmamaktadırlar. Tebliğci erkekler genelde uzun sakalları ve entarileri ile kolayca tanınmaktadır. Bu şekilde görünümüne sahip olan Tebliğciler halk arasında *sakalçandar* yani sakallılar olarak adlandırılmaktadır. Başkent Bişkek'te *Çong Meçit* denen Eski Ulu Cami Tebliğcilerin merkezi sayılabilir ve genelde en büyük Tebliğci topluluğu bu camide görülür. Tebliğ Cemaati tüm Kırgızistan'da aktif olmakla beraber daha çok Kırgız etnik grubunda karşılık bulmakta, ekseriyetle ülkenin güneyinde yaşayan ve ortalama olarak Kırgızlardan daha dindar olarak bilinen Özbek azınlık nezdinde daha zayıf bir mevcudiyet göstermektedir. Buna neden olarak Özbeklerin Kırgızlardan daha erken bir tarihte İslamiyet'e geçmeleri ve geleneksel olarak dini eğitimi de içeren bir mahalle kültürüne sahip olmaları gösterilmektedir. Yani Özbekler kendilerini zaten Özbek ulemeden İslamiyet'i öğrenmiş bilgili Müslümanlar olarak görmekte ve Tebliğ Cemaati'nin konvansiyonel olmayan tebliğ metodlarıyla anlatılan İslam anlayışının Özbekler için yetersiz kaldığına inanmakta, Tebliğ Cemaati'nin çok daha heterodoks bir İslam anlayışını benimsemiş olan Kırgızlara hitap ettiğine kanaat getirmektedirler. Günümüzde Tebliğ Cemaati sadece eğitimsiz halk kitleleri nezdinde değil, eğitilmiş kuşak ve Kırgız *nomenklaturası* arasında da ciddi biçimde mensup bulmuştur. Öyle ki, 2021 yılına kadar uzun süre Kırgızistan Müftüsü olarak görev yapan ve Hac paralarını zimmetine geçirmek suçlaması karşısında istifa etmek zorunda kalan Maksatbek Hacı Toktomuşev görev yaptığı süre boyunca açık biçimde Tebliğ Cemaati'ne destek vermiş olup kendisinin de Hint alt kıtasındaki Tebliğci medreselerde eğitim gördüğü bilinmekte ve Tebliğci olduğuna dair yaygın görüş bulunmaktadır.

Bu araştırma kapsamında yazar Kırgızistan'ı 2016 ve 2021 yıllarında iki defa ziyaret etmiş ve başkent Bişkek'te mülakatlar yoluyla saha çalışması yürütmüştür. Yazar mülakatların değerlendirilmesinde tematik analiz metodunu kullanmıştır. Tematik analiz sosyoloji ve tarih gibi çok sayıda sosyal bilimler disiplininde sıkça başvurulan bir araştırma metodudur. Metod bu yaygın kullanımını farklı teorik çerçeveler ile uyumlu olabilmesine borçludur. Tematik analiz özellikle geniş niteliksel verilerin değerlendirilmesinde kullanışlıdır.

Arařtırmacılar tematik analiz marifetiyle geniř veri setlerinde ortak temalar ve örüntüler tespit etmekte ve böylece ham verilerini anlamlandırarak bilgiye dönüřtürebilmektedir.

Saha çalıřması kapsamında Tebliğ Cemaati mensupları, Kırgız bürokratları, akademisyenler, Türk STK mensupları ve Kırgız kamuoyu ile mülakatlar yapılmıřtır. Mülakat yapılan Tebliğcilerin tamamı erkektir; kamuoyu mensupları arasında ise kadınlar da bulunmaktadır. Öte yandan, halen Türkiye’de ikamet etmekte olan ve geçmiřte Kırgızistan’da yařarken Tebliğ Cemaati ile tebliğ turlarına katılmıř bir Kırgız vatandařı ile Türkiye’de mülakatlar yapılmıřtır. Ayrıca yazarın tez yazım sürecinde görevli olduđu Kamerun’da da yerel Tebliğciler ile mülakatlar yapılmıř ancak bu mülakatlardan elde edilen veri sadece saha çalıřmasında elde edilen veriyi tasdik etmek ya da řerh düşmek amacıyla kullanılmıřtır. Tebliğ Cemaati mensupları ile yapılan tüm mülakatlar yüz yüze gerçekleştirilmiř; buna karřılık akademisyenlerle ve Kırgız kamuoyu ile yapılan kimi mülakatlar telefon marifetiyle gerçekleştirilmiřtir. Mülakatlara ek olarak yazar Tebliğ Cemaati’nin az sayıdaki kendi basılı yayınlarından ve literatürden yararlanmıřtır. Sözlü iletiřimi yazılı iletiřime tercih ettiđi bilinen Tebliğ Cemaati’nin basılı yayını azdır ve bu yayınlar genelde sünnet ve hadisler üzerine eđilmektedir. Basılı materyal azlıđının bir diđer nedeni Tebliğ Cemaati’nin geride yazılı malzeme bırakmaktan kaçınmasıdır. Bu da hareketin özellikle Müslümanların azınlıkta olduđu ülkelerde siyasi odaklarla irtibat kurulmasına neden olacak ve belki de bu otoritelerce suç teřkil ettiđi iddia edilebilecek malzeme vermeme arzusuna yorulmaktadır. Buna ek olarak, Tebliğ Cemaati aksiyon odaklı, sürekli tekrar edilen kısa mesajlara dayanan, sözlü iletiřimin samimi ve kiřisel dođasına inanan ve İslami ilmin okumaktan ziyade taklit ve ortopratikte tahsil edebileceđine kanaat getirmiř bir hareket olması nedeniyle, yazılı materyallerin azlıđı grubun genel düşünce yapısıyla ve varoluř nedeniyle çok uyumludur. Var olan az sayıdaki Tebliğci basılı materyal de bireysel olarak okunmaktan ziyade toplu řekilde ve yüksek sesle lider tarafından dinleyici kitlesine okunmakta, böylece bireysel tüketime yönelik olabilecek yazılı mesaj iřitsel bir toplu mesajla dönüřtürölmektedir. Zaten Mevlana İlyas’ın

talebesi tarafından kâğıda aktarılan mesajlar da kitlelere sesli biçimde iletilmek üzere yazılı hale getirilmiştir ve çoğunlukla sohbet havasında geçmektedirler. Bu eserlerde yazar ya Mevlana İlyas'ın mesajını birebir ileten bir aracı olarak kendini konumlandırmakta ya da kendi cümleleriyle Mevlana İlyas'ın mesajını aslına mümkün olduğunca sadık kalarak tefsir eden bir kişi pozisyonunda görülmektedir. Her durumda mesajın muhatabı asla tekil kişiler değildir; genellenebilir ve her Müslüman tarafından benimsenebilir olması amacıyla bu kitaplarda sadece gruplara -Müslümanlar, Tebliğciler vs.- hitap edilmektedir.

Kırgızistan'da yapılan mülakatlar öncelikle şunu göstermiştir ki Tebliğ Cemaati'nin gezgin misyonerlik metodu Amerikan Pentecostal Kiliseler, Mormonlar ve Yehova Şahitleri'nin kapı kapı dolaşarak kendi dini anlayışlarını insanlara anlatmalarını andırmaktadır. Bununla ilişkili olarak, yine mülakatlardan yola çıkarak denebilir ki tıpkı söz konusu Hristiyan kilise ve gruplar gibi Tebliğ Cemaati de bir Katı Kilise olarak nitelendirilebilir, çünkü Tebliğ Cemaati de mevcut ve müstakbel mensuplarından katı bir biçimde hareketin değerlerine uymalarını ve tam bir adanmışlık beklemekte, mensubiyet için gerekli giriş şartlarını bilerek yüksek tutmaktadır.

Mülakatlar sonucu öne çıkan bulgulardan biri dini ekonomiler yaklaşımının Tebliğ Cemaati'nin Kırgızistan'da güçlü bir varlık göstermesini Tebliğ Cemaati üyelerinin bakış açısından açıklayıcı olduğudur. Ancak yaklaşım bürokratların ve akademisyenlerin Tebliğ Cemaati'ne ilişkin çekincelerini açıklamakta aynı derecede başarılı gözükmemektedir. Burada dikkat çeken sonuç şudur ki Tebliğ Cemaati üyelerinin kendi ifadeleri zahiren kabul edilirse, dini ekonomiler yaklaşımı hareketin dini piyasadaki rakiplerine nazaran başarısını açıklama gücüne sahiptir. Buna karşılık yine ortaya çıkan bir diğer sonuç da Kırgızistan'daki yarı-rekabetçi ve yarı-liberal dini piyasanın kendine özgü dinamikleri mevcuttur ve bu dinamikler yaklaşımın ortaya çıktığı ABD'deki özgün dinamiklerden çok farklıdır. Bu nedenle yazar dini ekonomiler yaklaşımını Kırgızistan'da ancak kısıtlı bir ölçüde kullanışlı bulmuş ve Kırgızistan'a özgü siyasi faktörlerin de Tebliğ Cemaati'nin bu ülkedeki

başarısını ve güçlü konumunu açıklamak için dikkate alınmasının gerekli olduğuna kanaat getirmiştir.

Dini ekonomiler yaklaşımınca öne sürülen argümanları test etmek amacıyla Tebliğ Cemaati mensupları ile mülakatlar yapılmış olup, görüşmelerde ortaya çıkan ortak Tebliğci görüşü, tebliğ turlarına çıkmakla ilişkili güçlüklerin (ev ve aileden uzak kalma, seyahat ve konaklama esnasında konfor yokluğu, camilerde tuvalet temizliği yapmak, halktan tepki görmek, aile üyeleri ve sosyal çevre tarafından dışlanmak vb.) oldukça işlevsel olduğuydu. Bu güçlükler Tebliğ Cemaati ile irtibat halinde kalarak grupça üretilen dini malları tüketmek, mesela sevap kazanmak, isteyen ama Tebliğ Cemaati'nin talep ettiği hayat tarzı değişikliklerini (alkol ve uyuşturucuyu bırakmak, zinadan kaçınmak, entari ve sarık giymek vb.) benimsemek istemeyen 'bedavacı' insanları elemeye yarıyordu. Tebliğ Cemaati tarafından talep edilen adanmışlığa hazır olmayan ve isteksiz olan kişiler güçlükler karşısında pes ediyor ve kendiliklerinden Tebliğ Cemaati ile irtibatlarını kesiyorlardı. Böylece geriye adanmış mensuplar kalıyordu. Öte yandan adanmış mensuplar dini malları tüketirken Tebliğ Cemaati'nin diğer müntesiplerinin de kendileri ile aynı derecede adanmış olduğunu görüp harekete daha da bağlanarak dini mallardan tam ölçüde tatmin elde ediyordu. Tebliğciler ile yapılan mülakatların tasdik ettiği bir diğer argüman da Kırgızistan'daki dini piyasanın liberalleşmesi ile birlikte sayısı artan dini hareketler sayesinde daha fazla tüketicinin dini piyasada kendi nişlerini bulduğu ve böylelikle ülke çapında genel dindarlık düzeyinin arttığıydı. Bu grupla yapılan mülakatlar Tebliğ Cemaati'nin ücra köylere kadar gitme zahmetine katlanmakla büyük bir niş pazara hitap ettiğini de göstermekteydi. Çünkü köylerde yaşayan insanların dini ihtiyaçlarını karşılamak için mevcut din arzı oldukça kısıtlıdır. Birçok dini organizasyon başkent Bişkek ve diğer şehirlerde faaliyet göstermekte ve kırsal kesimde yaşayan insanlara erişmek için herhangi bir çaba göstermemekte, Kırgız Müftülüğü ise sınırlı imkanları nedeniyle ücra köylere ya imam gönderememektedir ya da gönderilen imamlar yeterli dini bilgiye sahip kişiler değildir. Bu talepleri yaptığı din arzı ile karşılayan Tebliğ Cemaati bu şekilde kırsal kesimdeki dindarlık genel düzeyinin de yükselmesini sağlamaktadır. Bütün

bu bulgular dini ekonomiler yaklaşımının argümanları ile uyumaktadır. Bu bulgular aynı zamanda Dean Kelley'nin Kilise Katılığı Teorisi ile de uyum içindedir. Çünkü Kırgız Tebliğcilerin ifadelerine göre uzun süreli tebliğ turlarına çıkmak gibi Tebliğci olmanın bir parçası olan güçlükler, bu insanların başkalarına vaaz ettikleri pratikleri öncelikle kendileri uygulamaya başladıkları, sabırlı olmayı ve şükretmeyi öğrendikleri için hayatlarını iyi yönde değiştirmelerine yol açmıştır. Bunun sonucu olarak da Tebliğciler Tebliğ Cemaati'ne daha da adanmışlık duymaya başlamıştır. Mülakat yapılan Tebliğcilerin birçoğu daha önce başka İslami yapılar ile irtibatta oldukları halde bu diğer hareketler onlarda Tebliğ Cemaati'nin yaptığı düzeyde değişim tetiklememiştir. Dolayısıyla bir yandan bu insanlar diğer İslami hareketlerden tamamen ayrılarak Tebliğ Cemaati'ne intisap etmiş diğer yandan ise Tebliğ Cemaati hayatlarının vazgeçilmez bir parçası haline gelmiştir.

Kırgız kamuoyuyla yapılan mülakatlar da Tebliğ Cemaati'nin gerçekten niş bir kitleye hitap ettiği görüşünü doğrular niteliktedir. Düşkünler, alkolikler, uyuşturucu müptelaları, tutuklular ya da hapisten salıverilmiş olanlar Tebliğ Cemaati sayesinde önceki hayatlarındaki sorunlarından uzaklaşarak daha düzenli ve toplumca kabul gören bir hayat yaşamaya başlamıştır. Bu insanlar Tebliğ Cemaati'ne intisap etmektedir ve bu hareketle iltisaklı olmaktan doğan güçlüklerle katlanmayı göze almaktadır. Çünkü Tebliğ Cemaati'ne mensubiyet bu insanlara maddi ve manevi kazanımlar sağlamaktadır. Kırgız kamuoyundan mülakat yapılan kişiler, bu tür sorunlu insanların Tebliğ Cemaati sayesinde daha iyi bir hayat sürmeye başlamalarından memnuniyet duymaktadır. Fakat Tebliğ Cemaati'nin gezgin ve insan ayırmayan tebliğ metodu ise kendilerini rahatsız etmektedir. Çünkü Tebliğciler karşılarındaki insanların tebliğ edilmeyi talep edip etmediklerine bakmaksızın her Müslüman'a yaklaşmaktadır. Bu durum seküler Kırgız vatandaşları ile Tebliğ Cemaati arasında sürtüşmelere neden olmaktadır. Dini ekonomiler yaklaşımına göre bu tür anlaşmazlıklar ve sürtüşmeler dini firmaların katlanmaya hazır olduğu bir sorundur çünkü böylelikle grup-içi etkinlikler pekiştirilmekte ve grup-içi kaynaşma artmaktadır. Ancak, vaazı arz eden değil de vaaza maruz bırakılanlar, yani Tebliğcilerce tebliğde bulunulan

ama bunu istemeyenler, söz konusu olunca dini ekonomiler yaklaşımının durgunlaştığı ve herhangi bir açıklama getiremediği görülmektedir. Tebliğ Cemaati'nden memnuniyet duymayan insanlar da dinden uzaklaşabilmektedir. Buna karşılık, bu tür memnuniyetsizliklerin aynı zamanda, Tebliğ Cemaati tarafından irtibata geçilmekle bu insanlarda kendilerine dair ahlaki bir eksiklik duygusu oluşmasından da kaynaklanabildiği anlaşılmıştır. Tebliğce irtibata geçilen ve Tebliğ Cemaati'ne iltisak eden sorunlu insanlardan kendilerini ahlaken daha yüksek konuma yerleştirmiş olan bu memnuniyetsizler, Tebliğ Cemaati'nin kendileri ile düşkünler arasında bir ayırım yapmayışından rahatsızlık duymaktadır.

Mülakat yapılan son grup olan akademisyenler ve bürokratların ifadelerine göre Tebliğ Cemaati Kırgız hükümetleri için kullanışlı bir araçtır çünkü İslamiyet Kırgızlar için bir kimlik nişanı olduğu için hükümetler Kırgız vatandaşlarının İslami etkinliklerle daha fazla işgal etmesini istemektedir. Tebliğ Cemaati'nin apolitik bir İslami hareket olması hükümet için olmazsa olmaz bir durumdur çünkü hükümet Kırgız halkının İslamlaşmasını, yani Kırgız milli kimliğini benimsemesini, isterken bir yandan da dini aşırılık ve Siyasal İslam'ın cazibesine kapılmalarını istememektedir. Bu nedenle Kırgız hükümeti için halkın dindarlık düzeyinin apolitik Tebliğ Cemaati tarafından yükseltilmesi ve Siyasal İslam ile dini aşırılığın bu denklemin dışında kalması bir kazan-kazan durumudur. İşte bu nedendir ki Kırgız hükümeti diğer İslami ve dini hareketlere kanunlar, yasaklar, düzenlemeler marifetiyle türlü güçlükler çıkartıp bunların yayılmasını kısıtlarken Tebliğ Cemaati'nin ülke çapında bu denli yayılmasına göz yummuş ve hatta zımni serbestlik tanımak suretiyle kolaylık sağlamıştır. Öte yandan akademisyenler ve bürokratlarla yapılan mülakatlar göstermiştir ki Kırgız toplumunun bu eğitilmiş kesimi Tebliğ Cemaati'nin apolitik olma iddiasına artık şüpheyle yaklaşmaktadır. Gerçekten de, Tebliğ Cemaati'nin Kırgızistan'da çok ciddi bir güce ulaştığı, politika ile ilgilenmeye başladığı, politik davranışlar geliştirdiği ve bürokraside tehlikeli düzeyde kadrolaştığına inanmayı gerektirecek nedenler bulunmaktadır. Yazar tarafından mülakat yapılan bu grup ayrıca Tebliğ Cemaati'nin iddia ettiği gibi 'doğru' ve 'zararsız' bir İslam

versiyonunu ülkede yaymayı bıraktığı ve Tebliğci İslam'ın artık 'doğru' İslam sayılamayacağını ifade etmişlerdir. Aslında, bu kişilerin ifadelerine göre Tebliğ Cemaati'nin zaman içerisinde İslami doğası bir evrim geçirmiş, 'ılımlı' sayılabilecek İslami değerler yerini Selefî bir İslam anlayışına terk etmiş ve dolayısıyla Tebliğ Cemaati gitgide bir milli güvenlik riski haline gelmiştir.

Sonuç olarak bütün bu bulgular ışığında denebilir ki, Tebliğ Cemaati'nin nevi şahsına münhasır gezgin tebliğ metodu ve hareketin Katı Kilise olarak adlandırılmasını sağlayan özellikleri, yani dini ekonomiler yaklaşımının en temel argümanları, Tebliğ Cemaati'nin Kırgızistan'da edindiği güçlü pozisyona ve kazandığı başarıya ancak kısmi şekilde açıklama getirebilmektedir. Tebliğ Cemaati'nin Kırgızistan'daki mevcudiyetini ve halk nezdindeki güçlü yerini açıklamak için Kırgız hükümetinin Tebliğ Cemaati'ne göz yumduğu ve kendi çıkarları uğruna Tebliğ Cemaati'ni araçsallaştırdığı da bir gerçek olarak alınmalı ve hesaba katılmalıdır. Dolayısıyla dini ekonomiler yaklaşımı, geliştirildiği liberal ve demokratik bağlamlar, örneğin ABD, dışında kullanıldığında tıpkı kendisine bir tepki olarak doğduğu Sekülerleşme Toerisi gibi bir 'büyük anlatı' haline dönüşmekte ve ya indirgemeci olmakta ya da açıklayıcı gücü zayıflamaktadır. Mevcut örnekte dini ekonomiler yaklaşımı Tebliğ Cemaati'nin Kırgızistan'da bağımsızlık yıllarından günümüze kadar edindiği güç ve etkiyi ancak kısmen açıklayabilmekte, Kırgızistan'daki yarı-liberal dini piyasada devletin yapıcı, müdahaleci ve manipülatif elinin oynadığı inkar edilmez rol de mutlaka göz önünde bulundurulmalıdır.

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