

Islam on the Move: The Tablighi Jama'at in Southeast Asia, by Farish A. Noor, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2012, 255 pp., €24.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-90-8964-439-8

Reviewing literature about the Tablighi Jama'at, in almost any context, invariably reminds the reader of Douglas Adams' marvellous quip "mostly harmless." The Tablighi Jama'at have, since the 1920s, made themselves one of planet earth's largest and most successful itinerant lay missionary organizations, simply by travelling Islamic lands, challenging secular culture through lay preaching. Their task is to encourage Muslims to follow more dutifully and more sincerely an extremely conservative and intellectually Spartan interpretation of the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad. However, these peripatetic peregrinators of the Islamic world, with their strong collective bonds, have largely escaped much in-depth academic scrutiny, owing to the very opaque and nebulous structure of their organization, philosophies and activities. It is, after all, much easier to research established institutions and ulema than highly mobile ones consisting of loose networks of personal contacts and intimate communications. Furthermore, much Tablighi activity is often dismissed by educated Muslims as frustratingly inaccessible, making this remarkable book almost unique and certainly worth taking the time to peruse.

For members of the Tablighi Jama'at, it appears, Islam revolves around an intense personal and cultural mimesis of the Prophet and his Companions (the *Ṣaḥāba*), without, however, any thought given at all to a critical analysis or study of the archaic sources or the normative impressions of the faith they profess (in fact, such study is actively discouraged). This makes Farish Noor's calculated and deliberative tenacity in researching this subject and his efforts here all the more impressive and valuable. There are seven chapters followed by an excellent bibliography that is genuinely useful for future researchers in this field. The first chapter details the historic arrival and geographic spread of the Tablighi Jama'at in the region. Noor provides a first-rate analysis of the socio-political atmosphere and period. This is followed by a chapter examining the movement's foundational literature, which is, in a modern sense, essentially fundamentalist, myopic and narrow. Noor draws attention to the fact that "in the interpretation of Islam as offered ... a set of chosen signifiers in Islam's vocabulary have been deliberately foregrounded and elevated to the status of master signifiers and nodal points that string together the chains of equivalences that mark the contents and parameters of the Tablighis' discourse" (21). He argues that the Tablighi Jama'at is more than just emulative mimicry. Basically they have constructed an idealized Prophetic type of behaviour and conduct that is presented as normative Muslim comportment or decorum. The third chapter elucidates the preceding epistemic material by exploring the role of such diachronic and vernacular religious literature in identifying and demarcating the movement from other Muslim social groupings over the past several decades. Part of their success lies in their commitment to non-violence and firm abstention from worldly politics at any level. This is succeeded by a chapter of conversion narratives drawn from the author's fieldwork – demonstrating the personal internalization of Tablighi identity, the exclusivist nature of this theological project and the blatant priority given to activities that involve men rather than women. Chapter five discusses the sartorial code, the rites and rituals of mutuality and association, and internal disciplinary measures. Noor also examines here his own ideas on why the movement has maintained its relative cohesion and distinctive identity when so many other Muslim groups have been racked with internal schisms. The penultimate chapter looks at how outsiders, Muslim and non-Muslim, perceive the movement and addresses allegations of their risk to international security in an age of anti-terrorist discourse, and queries whether the Tablighi Jama'at pose a threat to modern postcolonial states.

Finally, the four-page concluding chapter summarizes the main thesis of the book and surmises that, ultimately, it is simply “a mass movement of itinerant missionaries who walk the earth, literally, in their quest to become better Muslims” (193).

Noor's vivid and exciting book addresses major questions such as how it was possible for the Tablighi Jama'at to spread so fast and so far, without a common *lingua franca* or a charismatic leader as such. How did a non-political organization with little finance conceptualize Islam and transfer these particular ideals of Islamic chivalry and honour to societies outside their original base in western India – to places and peoples across Southeast Asia, where local folk did not owe them any particular loyalty beyond vague (and notoriously weak) notions of pan-Islamic solidarity? What tactics have they used in the past (and in the present) to address this ideological conflict and experiences of socio-political repudiation?

The history and sociology of the Tablighi Jama'at in these lands over the past few decades presents a challenging existential *bricolage*; it calls for a dedicated and persistent scholar to deconstruct and decipher the unique theological interpretations of Islam here and to sympathetically articulate the degree of sincerity, personal sacrifice and commitment of the organization's members. Noor also demonstrates an insightful command of documentary resources in order to articulate a truly gripping human story. Focussing on Southeast Asia, he challenges the prevailing stereotypes, pejorative views and garrulous hyperbole about the Tablighi Jama'at as simply an overactive minority group within Islam, and compellingly exposes a fuller and nuanced comprehension of the complexity of Islam the faith and Muslims as ordinary people. As Noor neatly surmises, “The Tablighi Jama'at is a fundamentalist-literalist movement that seeks to restore to Muslim society a sense of the pristine perfection of Islam at its foundational moment, when Islam was directly transmitted to the first community of believers by the Prophet himself” (67).

This is a truly impressive piece of work that will appeal to a wide audience and will be the definitive work on this complicated subject for a very long time to come.

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