TITLE: PIOUS MASCULINITY AS ETHICAL REFLEXIVITY IN THE TABLIGHI JAMAAT

ABSTRACT:
The Islamic fundamentalist, a figure imagined to be both excessively masculine and excessively religious, has emerged in the liberal-secular imagination as the preeminent threat in our contemporary political moment. This presentation challenges the liberal-secular assumptions that inform such a figure through an exploration of a distinct form of pious masculinity among Pakistani Tablighis, practitioners of the transnational Islamic piety movement, the Tablighi Jamaat. Pakistani Tablighis practice a ritualized form of face-to-face preaching (dawat) that they claim cultivates in them the pious virtues that allow them to live ethically with kin, neighbors and fellow citizens. I show how dawat is a mode of gendered subjectivation that aims to help men realize the distinct qualities of pious masculinity, which they view as a source of domestic and public order. I argue that dawat should be regarded as form of ethical reflexivity on the problem of male agency, a reflexive ethical stance on the relationship between masculinity and violence. I conclude by showing how the easy association between Islam and violence in liberal-secular theory erases the ethical work that Tablighis are doing to address the violent afflictions of postcolonial modernity in Pakistan.

The Tablighi Jamaat is a transnational Islamic piety movement that began in the 1920s in North India, but now has a major presence in many parts of the world, especially where there are large South Asian populations. Pakistan is one of the four major centers of the movement, with millions of people from Pakistan and around the world attending the annual congregation (ijtima) in Raiwind and hundreds of thousands attending the other annual congregations in various cities across the country. Since the 1980s, the Tablighi Jamaat has grown dramatically in Pakistan. A testament to this is the large mosque complexes (markaz) that have sprung up in all the major cities. These complexes serve as key institutional nodes in a network of mosques that, either formally or informally, are affiliated with the movement. Karachi, where my research was based, is one of the key centers of the movement in Pakistan.

Practitioners of the Tablighi Jamaat or Tablighis can be seen walking through Pakistan’s villages, towns and cities in groups of ten or twelve dressed in the traditional shalwar-kameez, pant-legs raised above their ankles, with long flowing beards and a white Muslim cap (topi), as per the Prophet’s example (sunnat). They travel for specified periods of time, anything from a
single day to an entire year, living in mosques, and “calling” fellow Muslims to come to the mosque to pray and listen to sermons. Tablighis aim to draw Muslims back to Islamic practice through their own distinct form of face-to-face preaching (dawat). The central claim of the Tablighi Jamaat is that Muslims have abandoned “religion” (din) and been led astray by “the world” (dunya) and must be brought back to Islam through dawat. Crucially, dawat is not primarily for those to whom it is addressed but reforms or corrects (islah) the practitioner and is therefore a disciplinary practice that cultivates virtues like humility, forbearance, and pious fear in the practitioner. Tablighis refer to dawat as “the mother of practices” (umm-al-amaal) because it cultivates “faith” (iman) and “certainty” (yaqeen) in the Tablighi, which enables him to fulfill the rest of his Islamic duties. In order to be efficacious, however, dawat must be conducted in precisely the form that it was conducted by the Prophet and his Companion. Two things stand out in this sacred form. First, dawat entails three types of sacrifice: life force (jaan), wealth (maal) and time (waqt). Second, dawat is a collective practice (ijtimai amal) rather than an individual practice (infiradi amal) and therefore must be conducted with other Muslims. Together, these two features mean that 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. This practice of leaving home and living in a group of pious men is said to cultivate virtues in the Tablighis and allow them to live as pious Muslims.

PARDAH AS GENDERED COSMOLOGY

Dawat in the Tablighi Jamaat is primarily a male activity in which women’s roles are circumscribed and subordinated. This is because Tablighis adhere to strict codes of gender segregation (pardah) that limit women’s movement beyond the home and prohibit them from coming into contact with non-sanctioned males (na mehram). Hence, the Tablighi Jamaat is
primarily a space of male sociality. Tablighis almost unanimously agreed that the biggest problem afflicting Muslims in contemporary times is that Muslims have abandoned *pardah* or gender segregation. As Abdul, a seasoned Tablighi, explained, “Men and women are opposites, like plus and minus. They attract one another. This is very dangerous. If this happens everything falls apart because families are destroyed.” The establishment of *pardah* is one of the most fundamental goals of *dawat* and is the condition for the flourishing of Islamic values. I make two arguments here: First, *pardah* encapsulates a gender cosmology structured by a male/female hierarchy that establishes male dominion over women. Second, *dawat* as a practice of ethical cultivation enacts, and thereby performatively creates, the very separation that it sees as the necessary basis for an Islamic order. The goal of *dawat* is to train men to live without women, and, as we will see, to perform tasks that are otherwise deemed feminine. This does not mean that women do not go on *dawat* tours, but their movement is circumscribed and the institution of *pardah* is vigorously upheld, which renders women’s participation subordinate and secondary.

Tablighis believe that while some women may be more pious than men, that women are more closely associated with their lower self (nafs), while men were more inclined towards their spirit and generally have a greater capacity for the realization of pious virtue. Tablighis explained to me that men were, therefore, more likely than women to being oriented towards the spirit (rooh) or being “spiritual” (roohani). In this sense, women did not have the same capacity for realizing Islamic virtue as men. Hence, men were associated with transcendental values of religion, while women were associated with the domain of the world. This also maps onto the construction of the mosque as a male and spiritual space and the home as a female and worldly space.
This gendered division is not just the opinion of a few Tablighi men. It is actually a fundamental aspect of the structure of *dawat*. As I noted earlier, the efficacy of *dawat* is tied to leaving one’s home for definite periods of time ranging from three days to an entire year. While women also travel on *dawat* tours, these tours are far less frequent and women are accompanied by legally sanctioned males (mehram), usually a brother, husband or father. Women’s *dawat* tours are called *mastoorat*, a word that means “women” but the root of the word also means the parts of the body that must be kept hidden. In this sense, women must be hidden. While on tours women stay in the homes of a willing host who has a sufficient space to keep the itinerant women completely separate and invisible to the men that live in the house. The men on the tour stay in the mosque. Unlike men who travel from house to house, calling people to the mosque, women work through the personal networks of their host. One of the most telling aspects of the gendered distinction in these tours is that after the nightly prayers, a designated itinerant male gives a sermon (bayan) to both the women and men from behind a curtain. This act establishes the essential receptivity of women relative to men. When I asked Tablighis about this, they always cited the idea that men must also maintain “the *pardah* of the voice” (*awaaz ka pardah*) by which they mean that women’s voices, like their bodies, can incite male passions and therefore can be disruptive to religious practice and experience.

What I am suggesting here is that the establishment of *pardah* is both the stated aim of *dawat*, but is also enacted in *dawat* insofar as the efficacy of *dawat* depends on separating men and women. For the Tablighis I came to know, living away from women, in a community of men, was fundamental to their training (*tarbiyat*). While on *dawat* tours, Tablighis assume roles that are not expected of them at home, roles that are designated as female like cooking and cleaning. As one Tablighi explained to me, “when we are at home, our wives and mothers do
everything for us. Isn’t it true? You get your breakfast in the morning without any effort, eggs, paratha, and tea, whatever you want. Right? But when we are on the path of Allah, you have to do everything yourself and you are responsible for others too. This work draws you near to Allah.”

The “work” to which he refers is formalized institution called “service” (khidmat). 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. Service is considered essential work not only because it allows others to devote themselves to dawat, but, crucially, also because the Tablighi doing the service cultivates the virtue of humility and patience. It’s clear here that service is primarily “feminine” work.

Barbara Metcalf has argued that because Tablighi men conduct activities that are traditionally associated with women, like cooking, the Tablighi Jamaat creates more egalitarian gender relations. My own experience is that it is precisely because service is self-consciously a lower form of work that it cultivates empathy for women but does not imply equality. Men are doing this work only in the highly ritualized and valued context of the dawat tour, while women do this same work in the mundane and less valued space of the home. Dawat draws a structural parallel between woman/man in the home and man/God in the mosque. The mosque is itself often referred to as “Allah’s house,” and it is here that men enact the role of the female relative to a male deity. In the symbolically less valuable space of the home, women occupy the female role relative to men. In other words, women are receptive to men in the home just as men are receptive to God in the mosque.

By placing men in the symbolic position of female relative to a male deity, men acquire qualities like “softness” and “openness,” qualities deemed natural to women and associated with their bodies. These qualities have a dual character. Being soft makes women’s bodies enticing to
men, drawing men’s advances. But, women are also seen as “open’ and less capable than men of fending off men’s advances. These same qualities, however, are crucial to women’s roles as nurturing both as mothers and caregivers more generally. Women’s natural receptivity is dangerous unless women are “closed” through pardah, which then channels their natural inclinations towards nurture for the good of the family. Men, on the other hand, are hard and closed by nature, which makes them capable of action, including defending the family, an important trait for masculinity. Men, then, are construed as agentive and autonomous and women as receptive and dependent.

Men’s tendencies towards action and autonomy, on the other hand, tends towards excess agency and a drive towards autonomy which leads towards social conflict and fissures. Dawat cultivates in men the receptivity (understood as softness and openness of the heart) that is natural to women. Scholars of the Tablighi Jamaat have recognized this feminine quality: To quote Metcalf again, “the gentleness, self-abnegation and modesty of the Tablighis, coupled with their undertaking of a range of activity associated with women’s work, marks them as inculcating what may be core religious values but are also designated as quintessentially feminine” (Metcalf 2000: 50). What I have argued in this section is that feminine stance is itself part of the structure of dawat as a religious discipline and a mode of ethical cultivation. Let me now turn to Tablighi ideals of pious masculinity associated with the character of the Prophet

PIOUS MASCULINITY AND MORAL REPRODUCTION

“There are those husbands who come home and it’s like a wolf has come home!,” explained Hazrat, a Tablighi elder in one of his sermons. “The wife is so scared that her breath escapes her and the children hide in corners. Isn’t that right? There’s a hadith from Bibi Ayesha that when the Prophet came home, it was like the first day of spring!” Hazrat frequently evoked
this image of the Prophet as the ideal of a soft (narm) and cool (tanda) temperament (mizaaj) against the hard (sakht) and hot (garm) temperament of most Muslim men. Hazrat continued that there are only a few sins for which one is punished in this life, rather than in the Hereafter. These include dishonoring the Prophet, bothering a pious Helper of Allah (Allah ka wali), and disrespecting one’s parents. “One should not even say ‘uff’ to one’s parents,” Hazrat explained, voicing the sound one makes when one is frustrated and dissatisfied. “When parents ask you to do something, you should consider this a gift from Allah.” In this statement, the Prophet, those close to Allah, and parents occupy similar structural positions as objects of respect and veneration. Just as one should occupy a position as a pious listener in relation to God and Prophet, and one should assiduously listen to the demands of one’s parents. Similarly, just as the God cares and the Prophet cared for his true followers, one must care and show warmth (shafqat) to those who are younger and weaker, including children and women. In other words, to follow the model of the Prophet is to meet the obligations that pertain to one’s station in a hierarchy. This ethics is summarized in the oft-heard phrase; “respect (izzat) for one’s elders (baron), kindness (shafqat) for the small (choton).

The term “big” and “small” here refer to older and younger, but they are also much broader apply to those who are above oneself and those below oneself in a hierarchy. Hierarchy is organized around two axes: age and gender. Religious authorities, parents, the elderly, older brothers and even sisters fall into the former category, while wives, younger sisters and children fall into the latter category. The young and women must show respect to elders and men, while elders and men must show care for the young and women. In this and countless other sermons, Hazrat would explain how it is the failure of Muslim men to live according to this Islamic ethics that was the source of the greatest problems for Muslims. Specifically, men lacked the virtues of
forbearance, humility and pious fear, which created in them aggression and violence, even aggression and violence directed at their own kin. This was among the greatest sources of problems inside home and often led to the dissolution of families. By making men soft and receptive, dawat created a person who, like the Prophet, was able to deal with kin in an ethical fashion.

For Tablighis, dawat forestalls the moral dissolution of the home, which is the gravest threat to the Islamic community and the surest sign of the state of moral chaos (fitna). When asked to give examples of signs of chaos, Talighis refer to the ethical degeneration of kin relationships; parents are not fulfilling the needs of their children; brothers fight with one another over property; husbands divorce wives over minor infractions; wives have no regard for their husbands needs; children abandon their elderly parents, and so on. As one Tablighis asked rhetorically, “when there is no peace inside the home, how can there be calm in the world outside?” Stories about husbands beating their wives or brothers usurping the property of another brother cut through both everyday discourse and provide much of the content for sermons. When I asked Tablighis what they saw as the most significant threat to family life, they always said that men lacked sufficient control over their lower self and that this created in them aggression, hubris and willfulness. These qualities made it impossible for men to exhibit respect for elders or express kindness and care towards women and children. Dawat created receptivity to legitimate authorities like parents, religious authorities and God and made it possible to exhibit care for women and children. It is by inculcating such virtues in men, Tablighis insisted, that one could forestall the moral dissolution of the home. Moreover, this excessive masculinity also creates conflict between neighbors, ethnic communities, and Muslim nations. For Tablighis, dawat is the remedy for growing conflict among Muslims because it brings Muslims into ethical relationships.
and thus is understood as the basis for the moral reproduction of the home and the Islamic community

CONCLUSION: PIOUS MASCULINITY IN TIMES OF MORAL CHAOS

Much has been written in recent years about Pakistan as a crisis-ridden country and Karachi in particular as the most representative of Pakistan’s crisis. I need not recount the many forms of violence that afflict Karachi in present company. For Tablighis, Karachi’s crisis – evidenced both by everyday and dramatic forms of violence and by deep ethno-linguistic and sectarian divisions – was among the clearest signs that Muslims had abandoned Islam and had fallen into a state of moral chaos (fitna). Indeed, it was the failure of Muslims to live in Islamic terms that explained the crisis, and it was against this background of political crisis that the Tablighi Jamaat experienced such dramatic growth from the 1990s onwards. For Tablighis, this crisis represents the moral failings of Muslims, and can only be remedied through *dawat*.

The link between masculinity and violence in South Asia has been examined by anthropologists studying both religious and secular movement movements. Thomas Blom Hansen has argued that the rise of Hindu Nationalism in India is intimately bound up with ideals of masculinity. Hansen shows that in British orientalism, Hindus were cast as feminine and weak relative to their more virile and masculine Muslim counterparts, and Hindu nationalism represents an effort at “recuperating masculinity” from the Muslim other. Writing about the origins of the Jamaat-i-Islami in India, Irfan Ahmad has shown how the party recast narratives about the Prophet in the direction of masculinist fantasies of power, autonomy and virility. Islamism here partly represents a response to the emasculation of Muslim men first by the British colonial administration and later against the threat of Hindu nationalism. In Pakistan, the link between violence and masculinity has been developed in Oskar Verkaaik’s *Migrant and...*
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*Militants: Fun and Urban Violence in Pakistan.* Verkaaik shows how street humor, transgressive masculinity and physicality in the MQM party create the grounds for more dramatic forms of violence, including ethnocide, and how such violence is constitutive of everyday reality in Karachi.

The Tablighis that I did research among shared with these scholars the idea that the sources of violence are to be found in excessive and untamed masculinity, which could only be molded and brought into line with pious ideals through *dawat.* I heard many narratives about the local *ghunda* who had his life radically transformed by *dawat.* In these narratives, a *ghunda* who was once an object of fear and a source of mayhem in the neighborhood draws all the other gang members away from their illicit activities and radically transforms their neighborhood. Such narratives serve to reinforce the claim that *dawat* is the solution to all problems, but specifically to the problem of violence, domestically and in the nation and global Islamic community.

Let me conclude by suggesting how this ethnographic account of pious masculinity can help us rethink the paradigm of security that has emerged in relation to Pakistan and other parts of the Muslim world since 9/11, one that is singularly focused on Islamic militancy and extremism. In this security framework, piety movements like the Tablighi Jamaat have come under increased scrutiny for being “stepping stones” towards jihadist militancy. Tablighi religiosity is seen as dangerous not because of explicit discourse endorsing violence, which it does not, but because its strong emphasis on ritual and bodily discipline, which in a liberal secularity paradigm is seen as fostering uncritical and unthinking subjects who are easily recruited into reactionary and violent political causes. Tablighis somatic and affective excess is seen as a forfeiture of critical reason and rationality, which when taken out of the private sphere
and made the basis for public order violates the liberal-secular distinction between private and public, reason and passion, which are seen as the basis of tolerance and civic engagement.

My argument here is that in fact dawat and its attendant forms of pious masculinity should be thought of as a mode of ethical reflexivity on the problem of male agency and ultimately violence. In a gender order organized around female receptivity and male agency, the fear of feminization and subordination and the need to “recuperate masculinity” is crucial for understanding violence across religious and secular divides. Without rejecting the presuppositions of the gender order, dawat is a means to reflect on this problem and to create men who actively distance themselves from this model of masculinity in favor of alternative model. Through ritual, Tablighi anchor this model in the holy personages of the Prophet and Companions and thus give it, or at least try to give it, an unassailable moral force.

Let me then conclude by highlighting how this ethnographic account of pious masculinity as ethical reflexivity can help us rethink a paradigm of violence that has emerged since 9/11, one that is singularly focused on so-called “religious” actors and on what has come to be called “religious violence.” As William Cavanaugh (2009) has argued, the notion of religious violence presupposes a transhistoric object called “religion” that can be separated from “secular” forms of violence, a fact that rests on the premise that religion is an objective, singular and unified entity (see also Asad 2003). Tablighis and militant Islamic groups are being lumped together on the basis of presumed similarities, especially religious typifications like beards, rather than on any careful consideration for how these signs of religiosity fit in broader religious and ethical life worlds. The notion of “religious violence” obscures the dimensions of violence, like male agency, that cut across the religious/secular divide. Moreover, by drawing a sharp distinction between religion and the secular, irrational and rational, the notion of “religious violence”
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rationalizes forms of violence that it deems secular. We can see this logic at work in the Global War on Terror where the discourse of terror enables “the state’s extension of the space of violence in the cause of security” (Asad 2007: 46). The notion of “religious violence” serves to authorize the violence of secular power in the modern world. Not only does this liberal-secular framework rationalize the violence that arises from secular power, it elides the ethical work that Islamic practitioners like Pakistani Tablighis are doing to address the violent afflictions of postcolonial modernity.