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A Study of Jamā'ah Tablīgh in Malaysia and Indonesia

By

Kamaruzzaman Bustamam-Ahmad

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The book is dedicated to Prof. Joel S. Kahn
as my Guru in Anthropology,
Haji Bustamam-Ahmad (my father)
and Haji Budiman Muli (my grandfather)
who have showed the spirit of life in seeking of knowledge

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GLOSSARY

ABIM	Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia
AICC	Association of Indian Chambers of Commerce
Amīr	Head
amīr saf	leader for *khuruj*
baju koko	traditional Muslim clothes for praying
Barisan Nasional	National Front, one of the coalition parties in Malaysia
Bayān hidayah	religious sermon before *khuruj*
Bayān tangguh	religious sermon before returning home
Bidadari	beautiful woman in Paradise
Bumiputra	of Malay origin
Chillah	retreat for forty days.
Da'ī	Islamic preachers
Da'wa	Islamic missionary
Dalīl	guide
FIO	Federation of Indian Organisations
Fitnah	gossip
Halaqah	local headquarters
ġast	inviting people to mosque
HMI	Islamic University Students Association
IAIN	State Institute of Islamic Studies
'*Ibadah*	worship
Ijtima'i	public activities
Ikrām al-muslim	respect for Muslims
Imām	mosque prayer leader
IPB	India, Pakistan and Bangladesh
Istiqāmah	consistency
Istiqbāl	reception
JAKIM	Department of Islamic Development Malaysia
JAWI	Islamic Religious Department of Federal Territory
Janggut	beard
Jorh	regional meeting
KAMMI	Indonesian Muslim Student Action Union
Kampung	village

Karguzari	report of *da'wa* activities
Karknū	colloquial name for a member of the *Jamā'ah Tablīgh* in Malaysia and Indonesia
Kenduri	traditional feasts
Khawwas	intellectuals
Khidmat	voluntary service
Kopiah	cap/hat worn by Muslim men and by Indonesian men in general as a symbol of national identity.
Kota pelajar	city of students
khātib	Muslim who delivers *khutbah* during *Jum'ah* prayer
Khutbah	religious sermon during *Jum'ah* prayer
Khuruj	going out
Khusūsi	inviting respected people
KLIA	Kuala Lumpur International Airport
Labi-labi	traditional form of public transportation in Banda Aceh
MAIM	Islamic Religious Council of Melacca
Martūrat	female *karkūn*
MECA	Malayan Employer's Consultative
Meunasah	Acehnese term for a small prayer hall.
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
malam markāż	weekly gathering
Markāż	headquarters
Masjid	mosque
*Miswak*s	twigs of a tree used to clean teeth
Mohalla	a term to describe a neighbourhood or locality in the cities and towns of central and south Asia.
MMI	Indonesian Mujahidin Council
Muftī	Islamic jurist consult
Mu'āsyarat	social relationship
MUI	Indonesian 'Ulamā' Council
Muhrim	A close member of the family, man or woman, whom a Muslim cannot marry
Mushawarah	meeting
Najis	dirt, pollution
NCCI	National Chambers of Commerce and Industry
NEP	National Economic Policy
Niyyat	intention

Nizamuddin	International headquarters of *Jamā'ah Tablīgh* in India
NU	Nahdlatul 'Ulamā'
PAS	the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party
PII	Indonesian Muslim Students
PERMIM	Malaysian Indo-Muslim Organization
PKPIM	National Association of Malaysian Islamic Students
PKS	*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*, Prosperous Justice Party
PMII	Indonesia Islamic Students Movement
Purdah	veiling/screening of women
Pondok	Islamic boarding school
Rumah Putih	White House
Sangatan	consolidation
Sarong	traditional sheath dress for Muslim
Satpam	security guard
Suddhi	purification
Sultan	king
Shalāt	Muslim prayer five times a day, from early morning until late of night. The name of prayers are *shubuh*, *dhuhur*, *'ashar*, *magrib* and *'isha*.
Tafakkud	interview
Ta'āruf	introduction
Ta'lim	study
Takaza	request
Teungku Imūm	religious leader in Acehnese village
Tukang becak	trishaw driver
Tukang bangunan	labourer
UKM	Malaysian National University
Ulil amri	leaders
Ummah	Islamic community
UMNO	the United Malays National Organization
Umrah	a small *hajj*
Unjank	small wallet that hangs on the neck
Ustāż	teacher
Warung	traditional restaurant
YADIM	the Islamic *Da'wa* Foundation Malaysia

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Banda Aceh, 17 September 2014

KBA

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

This book presents an ethnographic study of the Jamā'ah Tablīgh[1] in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and Banda Aceh, Indonesia. Jamā'ah Tablīgh (JT) is reputed to be the largest of the numerous movements and organisations dedicated to the revival, reform or revitalisation of Islam that emerged in the twentieth century. It was founded by a charismatic Indian *'alim* (religious scholar) Mawlana Ilyas (1855-1944), from his base in the Dar ul-'Ulum, a reformist Sufi *madrasah* (religious school) in Deoband near Delhi. From its base in India, Jamā'ah Tablīgh grew rapidly so that now it is active in "almost every country with a significant Sunni Muslim presence" (Sikand, 2007: 129).

Among the places to which Jamā'ah Tablīgh has spread and has had a great deal of success in attracting new members – initially from members of the South Asian Muslim diaspora and subsequently from among the majority population of ethnic Malays – is Malaysia. JT has also managed to establish a significant presence in neighbouring Indonesia, the country with the world's largest Muslim population.

It is often said that Islamic revivalism in Southeast Asia came from the Middle East and in recent years a number of studies of Islamic revivalism have stressed the connections between the two regions (Abu Bakar, 1991). Most such studies are particularly concerned with uncovering the roots of so-called Islamic radicalism in Southeast Asia by linking Islamic revivalism to the perceived growth of Islamic political agendas (based on the implementation of Islamic law and the establishment of an Islamic state), tracing these back to developments in Middle Eastern Islam.

My interest in studying Jamā'ah Tablīgh stemmed in part from my sense that, although it had perhaps become the largest movement for

[1] Jamā'ah Tablīgh is variously known as the "*jamā'ah*" (party), "*tahrīk*" (movement), "*nizām*" (system), "*tanzīm*" (organisation), "*tablīgh*" (missionary), and "*tahrik-i-imān* (faith movement).

Islamic revival in Malaysia, and attracts steadily increasing numbers of followers in Indonesia, it did not fit what was becoming the dominant model of a Southeast Asian Islamic movement, including its South Asian rather than Middle Eastern roots. This led me to a number of questions about the relationship between JT and the general understanding of Islamic organisations in the region. What are the sources of their views and beliefs, and who and what are the main influences on their ways of life? How do members see themselves as Muslims? To what extent do they identify themselves instead as members of a transnational Islamic community? What social networks have been formed among members of the Jamā'ah Tablīgh in Southeast Asia? In other words, how do they negotiate their transnational activities, such as travelling to preach Islam, while maintaining their group membership and family ties? And how are their families supported economically while they devote themselves to their religious activities?

There is quite large literature on Islamic revivalism and Islamic radicalism in Malaysia and Indonesia (Salleh, 1999: 39-64; Abu Bakar, 1980; Anwar, 1987, 2003; Baharuddin, 1983, 1998, 1999; Dobbin, 1974; Hafez, 1997; Mansurnoor, 1997, 2003; Eliraz, 2004; Lim, 2005; Thomas, 1988; Hamid, 2000; Azra, 2004; Jamhari, 2005; Sirozi, 2005; Effendy, 2004; Zada, 2002; Federspiel, 1999; and Crouch, 2005; Nagata, 1980, 1984, 1983, 2006; and Jomo and Shabery, 1992). Of these works, only a few deal peripherally with the role of Jamā'ah Tablīgh (Nagata, 1980 and Jomo and Shabery, 1992) while two focus almost exclusively on it: the first, by Abdul Rahman Haji Abdullah (1992), which compares JT with Darul Arqam,[2] and the second, by Abdul Aziz (2004), who studies the movement in Indonesia by looking at its nature and history in some certain provinces in Java.

Particularly important for my study is the book edited by Muhammad Khalid Masud (2000) which gives rich data on the nature of this movement, already transnationalised from its emergence in 1926. There are also some studies of JT which treat it as a fundamentalist, radical, Sufist, missionary and/or terrorist organisation (Ahmad, 1991; Rashid, 2006; Sikand, 2007; Reetz, 2003, 2005). My study therefore does not aim primarily to fill a gap in the literature. As we shall see, the case of Jamā'ah Tablīgh challenges this way of characterising Islamic movements. My aim in analysing this movement is similar to that of Charles Taylor, who sought to characterise the Reform Master Narrative (RMN) within

[2] On Darul Arqam, see Seng (2005, 2005b); Nagata (2004); Hamid (2004); Salleh (1994); and Hassan (2006). This movement was banned in 1994 in Malaysia; see an analysis in Meuluman (1996: 43–78).

Christianity. In Taylor's words: "Reform demanded that everyone be a *real, 100 percent* Christian. Reform not only disenchants, but disciplines and re-orders life and society. Along with civility, this makes for a nation of moral order which give a new sense to Christianity, and the demands of the faith" (Taylor, 2007: 774).

Analysing Islamic Radicalism in Southeast Asia

As already noted, this study is a response to, among other things, much of the writing, particularly by non-Muslims, on Islamic radicalism or Islamic terrorism in Southeast Asia. Existing investigations have followed four main paths: first, there are those who investigate it in the context of internal conflicts – Indonesia and *Dārul Islām*, Malaysia and Islamic activism, and Thailand with its unresolved problems with Malay-Muslims in the south (see Serajul Islam, 2005). Second, there are studies that consider how the global panic has led to a change in the image of Islam in the region. During the 1980s, Muslims in Southeast Asia developed their own perspectives on what they had become, based on an interpretation of Islam influenced by the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict (Jones, 1980, Anwar, 1987; Mansurnoor, 2003). In other words, some Muslim pioneers in the region looked to the Middle East for models of how to revive Islam in the region (see also Azra, 1994: Laffan, 2003, 2004; Feener, 2004, 2004b). Third, there are scholars who see Islamic movements as a replacement for communism in Western policy after the end of the Cold War (see for example Dreyfuss, 2005). Here, the tendency is to write about Islam and Muslims as representing a new enemy, without taking into account Muslim feeling after the Cold War (Huntington, 1997; see also Lewis 2002, 2003). This trend has led Muslims to shift their interpretation of Islam closer to what has been called "American-Islam". Finally, most studies of Islam argue that Muslims must change their way of life if they want to escape from being classified as fundamentalists, radicals, terrorists, and salafists (see for example Dijk, 2003).

Many such analyses of Islamic movements in Southeast Asia and elsewhere are marked by what is, in my view, as a high level of terminological confusion. A set of terms and concepts – including Islamic fundamentalism, Islamic radicalism, Islamic terrorism, Islamic state, Islamic law, Islamic secularism, *jihad*, Wahabism, Salafism – all purporting to describe some aspects of Islamic thought or practice, circulate widely in this literature. Yet in most cases these terms are not clearly defined, and/or they present a misleading picture of how these

terms are actually used in the core texts of the Islamic studies, in the work of generations of Muslim scholars and by most Muslims, at least in Southeast Asia.

Fundamentalism and radicalism

Take for example the concept of Islamic fundamentalism, particularly as used by Western observers. Many argue that *fundamentalism* means a return to the original texts of Islam, the Qur'an and Sunnah, that impliy an archaism and textual/scriptural literalism that is characteristic of some Islamic practice and not others, and that there is moreover a close connection between fundamentalism in this sense and Islamic radicalism (Bruinessen, 1996). But is the widespread call for a "return" to the original Islamic texts really a form of archaism and scriptural literalism in the same sense as it is in Christianity? Is it true in only some forms of Islam and not others? And is there, as it is so often assumed, particularly in the west, therefore a causal connection between a so-called fundamentalist approach to the sources of Islam and political radicalism, even terrorism? After all, there is a sense in which all Muslims are "fundamentalists" in that they advocate a "return" to the original sources of their religion. Yet not all "fundamentalists" are political radicals, much less terrorists. Nor are all radicals theologically fundamentalist. This suggests that there is a great deal of confusion in the literature about this key concept.

In Islamic studies, returning to *al-Qur'ān* is called *ushūliyyah,* which means to go to the foundations of Islam. As Khaled Aboud El Fadl points out:

> Although many have used the label *fundamentalist*, it is clearly problematic. *All* Islamic groups and organizations claim to adhere to the fundamentals of Islam. Even the most liberal movement will insist that its ideas and convictions better represent the fundamentals of the faith. In the Western context, using the term *fundamentalist* to describe extremist Christian groups that insist on the literal meaning of scripture, regardless of the historical context of a text, appears to be quite reasonable. But as many Muslim researchers have noted, the term *fundamentalist* is ill-fitted for the Islamic context because in Arabic the word become *us[h]ūli*, which means "one who relies on the fundamentals or basics." So the expression *Islamic fundamentalism* conveys the unavoidable misimpression that only fundamentalists base their interpretations on *al-Qur'ān* and the traditions of the Prophet - the basic of fundamental sources of Islamic theology and law (El-Fadl, 2005: 18-19).

There is a related debate over the potential compatibility or incompatibility of Islam and secularism (see, for example, An-Naim, 2007). Here it has been argued that in the Islamic tradition, fundamentalism and secularism may go together, while in the Western tradition the two are strongly opposed. It is therefore widely and mistakenly assumed that fundamentalism leads necessarily to extremism and that "hard–line" Islamic movements must be treated with suspicion. In Islam, a person who wants to submit himself to Allāh must begin with *imān* (belief or faith). Anyone who intends to become a Muslim should be from the outset believe that Allāh is his creator. This belief incorporates elements of mind and soul. To become a Muslim is to observe the five pillars (*shahādat,* prayer, fasting, alms, pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina), and to embed them in one's religious experience. My study aimed at finding out how believers strengthen their beliefs before submitting themselves to Allāh. Can we say that anyone who wants to seek a way to Allah is a fundamentalist and hence also a radical? To what extent do we need to understand the inner world of *Muslim*s (people who submit themselves to be "slaves of Allāh" and to witness that Muhammad is His Prophet) and *Mukmin* (believers)?

Salafism and Wahabism

A common theory of the rise of modern Islamic movements is that they are mainly influenced by pioneering Islamic thinkers like Muhammad Abd Wahab (1703-92), the founder of what is usually called the Wahabi or Salafi movement in Saudi Arabia. This movement in turn has been linked to the discourse of Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328),[3] which has in turn been connected back to the thought of Imām Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (780-855), one

[3] For a biography of Ibn Taimiyyah, see Suma, 2002. His full name was Ahmad ibn ʻAbd al-Halim ibn ʻAbd al-Salām ibn Taimiyyah. He was imprisoned for his beliefs. Peters writes that "his approach towards religion and law was fundamentalist, in the sense that he emphasized the example of the pious ancestors (*al-salāf al-sh̲ālih*) as the highest authority" (Peters, 1996: 43). However, in his biography, Peters (1996:43) noted that "Ibn Taimiyyah mastered several Islamic areas of knowledge such as *tafsīr*, *muhaddist* (the expert on the tradition of the Prophet), *ushūl al-fiqh* (Islamic legal theory), and that he was also the author of several books. The only way to link him to Ibn Hanbal is through his teacher Syams al-Dīn ʻAbd Rahmān ibn Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Maqdisi (597-682) who was the first of Judge during the reign of Sultan Baybars (1260-77). See also Khan (1983); Hallaq (1993).

of the legal theorists in the Sunni tradition.[4] His thought was a response to those Muslims who sought an understanding of Islam through reason, not revelation (the Qur'anic texts), an approach promoted by *Mu'tazilah*.

Many analysts argue that contemporary Islamic terrorism or *jihadism* is part of Wahabism or Salafism (Al-Rasheed, 2008: 8-9). [5] As Sela has observed:

> The writings of Ibn Hanbal and Ibn Taymiyya had a great influence on the Islamic radical movements, especially on the Wahhabiyya Movement (1703-1878), named after the founder and leader of this movement, Muhammad Abdel Wahhab, who denounced the religious practices prevalent in the Ottoman Empire and succeeded in spreading his interpretation of the *Qur'ān* and the *Hadīth*. Like Ibn Hanbal and Ibn Taymiyya, Abdel Wahhab called for a return to original sources of Islam, and combined with the political power of Ibn Saud in Najd, brought large parts of the Arabian Peninsula, including Mecca and Medina, under the domination of the Wahhabi concept of Islam (Sela, 2002: 434).

In this view, the historical links between Ibn Hanbal, Ibn Taymiyyah and Abdul Wahhab constitute the roots of Islamic fundamentalism, Salafism or Wahhabism which subsequently led to Islamic radicalism.[6]

However, is it really possible to link the thought of Ibn Hanbal in the 9th century to Ibn Taimiyyah who lived in the 13th century, to Abdul Wahhab who was the pioneer of Salafism in 18th century? Each of these thinkers had his own interpretation of Islam, located in his own era, such as Ibn Hanbal who was a legal thinker who promoted *al-Qur'an* and Sunnah against the rationalisation promoted by Mu'tazilah (see Hourani 1976: 59-87).

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[4] On the impact of this thought in Islamic history see Arnell (1998: 78-86). Ibn Hanbal, besides being a jurist was also a sufist. He was jailed for opposing the ruler who advocated Mu'tazilah. He was moved from jail to jail because he did not agree that al-Qur'an was *makhlūk* (a creation) (see this in Haque, 1992: 95-112).

[5] For a brief discussion of the definition of *terrorism*, see Schmid (2004: 404), who lists the key elements of terrorism as: (1) the demonstrative use of violence against human being; (2) the (conditional) threat of (more) violence; (3) the deliberate production of terror/fear in a target group; (4) the targeting of civilians, non-combatants and innocents; (5) the purpose of intimidation, coercion and or propaganda; (6) the fact that it is a method, tactic or strategy for waging conflict; (7) the importance of communicating the act(s) to larger audiences; (8) the illegal, criminal and immoral nature of the act(s) of violence; (9) its predominantly political character; (10) its use as a tool of psychological warfare to mobilise or immobilise sectors of the public.

[6] See also Ali (2002).

Jihād

Another problem in such analyses is the understanding of the notion of *jihād*. The term *jihād* comes from the word of *jahada* which means to endeavour, strive, labour, take pains over, to overwork, overtax, fatigue and exhaust something (Wehr, 1976: 142). Some, especially Western, scholars have understood the term to mean holy war against infidels (Cook, 2005), thereby making it the root of radicalism (Abuza, 2004). However, the term *jihād* is also found in the discourse of knowledge and *tashawwuf* (Vikor, 2000). It is not always linked to holy war or terrorism (Peter, 1996). Sa'īd Hawwa in his *Jund Allāh* (soldier of Allah) (n.d.) classifies *jihād* into five categories: *al-jihād bi al-lisān* (*jihād* with conversation); *al-jihād al-ta'limī* (*jihād* with science or knowledge); *al-jihād bi al-yad wa nafs* (*jihād* with hand (power) and soul); *al-jihād al-siyāsī* (*jihad* with diplomatic power); *al-jihād al-māl* (*jihād* with economic power).

In *al-Qur'ān*, *jihād* has different meanings in different contexts, (see al-'Āqīl, 1993: 325-238). But the most appropriate translation is how to implement justice and control desire or temptation. It is narrated that the Prophet, after coming back from a war, said to his *sahabat*: "we just returned from the small *jihād*, now we are in the beginning a big *jihād* that is fasting". In this sense, for Muslims, holy war is not a "*big jihād*" since it refers only to the fight against infidels who commit acts of violence against Muslims in Muslim regions (Al-Baqarah (2); 190-4). On the other hand a big *jihād* (*jihād al-akbar*) refers mainly to the control of the soul and heart. However, most Muslims appear to be concerned only with "small *jihād*" while the "big *jihād*" is almost never taken into account.

Carrying out an ethnographic study of Jamā'ah Tablīgh in two countries provides us with better understanding of what a "return" to *al-Qur'an* and Sunnah means to practicing Muslims and the socio-political implications of such a return. This study investigates Islamic religious experiences among Jamā'ah Tablīgh members, in the process of overcoming some of the terminological confusion that plagues much contemporary analysis of Islam, fundamentalism, radicalism and terrorism.

As I demonstrate in the following chapters, Jamā'ah Tablīgh can be seen as "fundamentalist" and "radical" in the sense that its founder and members want to return to the original texts of Islam. However, this aim is pursued without violence, through a form of *jihād* that we can understand as closest to that of *al-jihād bi al-lisān* (*jihād* with conversation) and *al-jihād al-ta'limī* (*jihād* with science or knowledge). The central points of this are the efforts of the movement to base itself on the experiences of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina and in particular the utilisation of the

mosque as the centre of all Tablighist activities (discussed in Chapters 2, 3 and 4). This can be seen as part of a desire to re-establish an Islamic caliphate. Yet the absence of violence or even aspiration to form of state power suggests once again the need to define our terminology clearly when describing Islamic movements.

Islam and the Social Sciences

Modern social sciences are themselves embedded in mainly Western, post-Christian or secular traditions of thought and analysis that have their origins in the Protestant reformation, the European Renaissance and the so-called European Enlightenment (see for example Asad, 2003, Taylor, 2007), creates particular problems for the analysis of Islamic reformism, as well as other non-western religious and philosophical traditions. When Islamic reformism emerged, especially in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, the social sciences had begun their own ways of theorising and understanding social life. As Binder has argued, this has involved a continuous attempt to apply rational discourse to all dimensions of human life, include religion (Binder, 1988). Julia Day Howell and Martin van Bruinessen maintain:

> The social sciences for most of the twentieth century have been dominated by modernization theories by proliferating what Max Weber called "rational" social forms. The rational-critical thought necessary to support the proper functioning of modern firms and other bureaucratic institutions, so the argument goes, would render religion less and less plausible and attractive (Howell and Bruinessen, 2007: 5).

In the early 1900s Muslim pioneers seeking to revive Muslim society were influenced by these modes of thinking, adopting Weberian and Marxist ideas in an attempt to "apply rational discourse" (Mulyadi, 2006, 2005) to their own societies. Many of them spent time in the West or at least studied the Western social sciences and then came back to their own societies to "return to *al-Qur'an* and Sunnah". Sayyid Qutb, the founder of *Ikhwān Muslim* (Muslim Brotherhood) went to the United States to study social sciences (Khatab, 2004; Haddad, 1983; Shepard, 1992). While the West had its "Martin Luther" and "Protestantism", Islam had "Islamic Lutheranism" and "Islamic Protestantism". Sayyid Qutb promoted Islamic revivalism for the Muslim world, which involved building the Islamic community, struggling for an Islamic state, moving away from a system based on ignorance and promoting *jihād*. Most contemporary Islamic movements, if not all, use this basic approach to revive the Islamic

community (*ummah*) by their use of the linking term *Jamā'ah* (group or "caravan"), as in Jamā'ah Tablīgh, Jamā'ah al-Islāmiyyah, Jamā'ah Dārul Arqām, Jamā'ah Islāmi (an Islamic party in Pakistan) and Jam'iyat al-Subhān al-Muslimin (Dekmejian, 1985; Marty and Appbleby, 1991).

Many problems, however, are generated by any attempt to marry Islam with the insights of the modern social sciences, with their Christian, secular or Western presuppositions. This is evident in those attempts described above to understand Islamic fundamentalism or Islamic extremism by beginning with the conceptual framework of the Western social sciences, which results in claims that fundamentalism leads necessarily to extremism and that "hard-line" Islamic movements must be treated with suspicion (see Jamhari, 2005, 2003).

As noted above, the relationship between so-called fundamentalism and secularism in Islam is quite different from that in post-Christian thought. For the Mawlana Ilyās, founder of Jamā'ah Tablīgh, returning to *al-Qur'ān* and Sunnah means to go back to the "Islamic fundamentals". However, for Mawalana Ilyās and other Muslim reformers, going back to *al-Qur'ān* and Sunnah meant to be "secularist," and therefore to become "globalist" and "internationalist". This is because Jamā'ah Tablīgh aimed to be "cosmopolitan" in the same way that Christendom was, i.e. through spreading religion through missionary activity (*da'wa*) to all of humankind. April Carter writes:

> Early Christianity had emphasized *human equality*, often finding converts among *slaves* and women and *ignoring ethnic* or *political distinctions*. Moreover, Christian beliefs and the idea of a universal Church provided a basis for asserting the potential worth of *all human beings* and *cosmopolitan of the world* (Carter, 2001: 14). (Italics mine).

Hodgson uses the term *Islamdom* to describe the Islamic equivalent:

> The term "Islamdom" will be immediately intelligible by analogy with "Christendom". "'Islamdom", then, is the society in which the Muslims and their faith are recognized as prevalent and socially dominant, in one sense or another – a society in which, as have Jews in Christendom. It does not refer to an area as such, but to *a complex of social relations*, which, to be sure, is a juridical and territorial term, "Dār al-Islām": yet, in contrast to "Muslim lands" it is clearly collective – frequently an important point (Hodgson, 1974: 29).

Thus one can describe Jamā'ah Tablīgh as a "society that carries the spirit of religion" which is called "Islamdom". This movement seeks to provide a path towards God through its teachings. In this way, JT is linked

to a basic foundation of Islamic and Christian thought – that Islamic and Christian teachings provide a path to God. Schimmel writes that "The Christian tripartite division of the *via purgativa*, the *via contemplative*, and the *via illuminative* is, to some extent, the same as the Islamic definitions of *sharī'ah*, *tharīqah*, and *haqīqah*' (Schimmel, 1975: 98).

It might be assumed that anthropology has been immune from these problems of the "contamination" of social scientific discourse by Western assumptions, since anthropology adopts a method assumed to provide more or less unmediated access to the meanings and cultural values of its objects, i.e. people in "other" cultures and societies. To this claim I would respond that the anthropological goal of eliminating ethnocentrism on the part of the Western ethnographer, while an important effort, is nonetheless illusory. Ethnographic writing is still structured to meet the requirements of "proper" anthropological knowledge-making, which are in turn derived from the same "rationalistic" traditions that underpin all forms of western discourse. This is an argument that has been made fairly convincingly within the discipline itself over the last couple of decades (see Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Marcus and Fisher, 1986; Kahn, 1985). The example of Clifford Geertz, the best known anthropological analyst of religion in Indonesia, is a case in point. Although a strong advocate of placing the cultural meanings of his "informants" at the centre of his analysis, Geertz never claimed that his own writings amounted to anything but anthropological accounts, not unmediated descriptions or translations of the meaning systems of others.[7] Moreover, it is quite clear that Geertz's doctoral research was designed to test Weber's theories of religious rationalisation in an Islamic context, which explains the pervasive use of Weberian concepts, terms and presuppositions in Geertz's own ethnographic reporting. Geertz writes about his own understanding of Islam as follows:

> The multiple legal interpretations of the Koran and the Hadith finally crystallized into four orthodox schools, all considered equally *valid and sacred*. After the second and third Islamic centuries, no further extension of the law was permitted; the "gate of ijtihād" (individual interpretation of the Koran and Hadīth) swung shut, and henceforth *no scholar*, however eminent, could qualify as an authoritative lawmaker. The body of orthodox Islam (called Sunnite Islam after the Arabic *sunna*, "custom"), made up of

[7] See various discussions of anthropological "interpretation" in Geertz (1975). See also Kahn, (1989).

> the contents of the Koran, the Hadīth, and the *sharī'a*, has been fixed since the tenth century (Geertz, 1960: 122).[8]

This study offers a social scientific interpretation of a particular Islamic organisation, Jamā'ah Tablīgh. It does so in full recognition of the tensions between the knowledge produced by the modern social sciences and that generated within Islam. In this study, I not only provide ethnographic interpretations of the subjectivities of Jamā'ah Tablīgh members, but also use supporting knowledge provided by Islamic scholarship. This combining of social sciences and Islamic scholarship is one of the objectives of this study.

There are some anthropological studies on Islamic movements and the processes through which Muslims seek to become closer to God. Pnina Werbner (2003), for example, describes religious experiences among Sufist group. She views Sufism as a transnational religious movement and has never respected national boundaries. In her words, "these various forms of transnational movement through which space is deterritorialised and reterritorialised" (Werbner, 2003: 5). In recent years, there have been studies on Islamic transnationalism which not only focus on Islamic movements (Mandaville, 2001; Allevi and Nielsen, 2003), but also Islamic education such as the role of *madrasah* in South Asia and Southeast Asia (Noor, Sikand, and Bruinessen, 2008).

Furthermore, Jason's (2009) study of young Gambian conversion to Jamā'ah Tablīgh tells another story of how Muslims desire to become closer to God. In his study, Jason maintains:

> In the case of the Tabligh Jama'at the emphasis is less about pragmatic gain than a spiritual experience of closeness to God. By converting to the Tablighi ideology, Gambian youth … reach a higher level of piety that draws them closer to God. It appeared that conversion represents a new expression of religiosity for them, in which the emphasis is on personal piety and moral reform (Jason, 2009: 155).

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[8] This is his doctoral thesis at the Department of Social Relations at Harvard University in 1956. This work, according to Geertz, intended as "the realization of [the] aspiration to build strong, stable, prosperous and democratic "New Indonesia." (p. x). See also Geertz (1985: 271-7). His work, especially *The Religion of Java,* has been criticised by many scholars such as Hodgson (1974), Steenbrink (1984), Bachtiar (1985) and Lukens-Bull (2005). However, when I found his testimony about his knowledge of Islam, it is unlikely that he learned Islam prior his departure to Indonesia in 1950. What Geertz did was to test the Weberian concept (modernist or reformist) in Java as Weber did with Calvinism in Christianity. See Geertz (2002: 1-19); Handler (1991: 603-13).

Seen from this perspective, it seems that anthropological studies can tell us something about the situation of religious experience among Muslim followers, especially the process of "meeting" with God. The works of Werbner (2003) and Jason (2009) provide a portrait of how anthropology approaches the study of Muslim society. However, Lukens-Bull argues that:

> I would like to suggest that an anthropological definition of Islam begin at the same point that a Muslim definition of Islam does. This is not an unusual proposition; many have proposed such a starting point. However, I would like to start with the Islamic definition of "Islam" as submission to God. All Muslims will agree with this definition. Where they differ is in defining *how* one should go about submitting to God. A comparative study of the different conceptions of how to submit to God (that is, how to be a Muslim) should be the central task of an anthropology of Islam (Lukens-Bull, 1999: 17).

Thus, in this study we will employ an "anthropology of Islam", which is oriented to comprehending how Tablighists submit their selves to Allah. The study will therefore focus on the processes of becoming and being *karkun* and the level of religious awareness among them. In this context, Jason's study investigates the processes of being "born again in Islam" and the social circumstances of their re-commitment to being a good Muslim. In Islam, one way to be a good Muslim is Sufism. This is because during the process of meeting God, some Muslims face many spiritual experiences, which are named as *shatiyat* (words of ecstasy) (Ernst, 1997, 1994). Thus, it is not mistaken when John O. Voll says that "there is little recognition that while membership in the militant groups maybe in the thousands, there are many millions of Muslim who are not fundamentalists, who are active participants in Sufi *tariqa*s around the world" (Voll, 2007: 283). What this tells us is we need to pay more attention to the majority of Muslims, who are involved in drawing closer to God, either as a member of a group or an individual basis, than to "fundamentalists", who are not in the highest level of religious awareness. In the next section, I will describe where the religious experiences belong to fundamentalist and Sufism.

Now, let me turn to how anthropologists study Muslim society. Fred Inglis in his *Clifford Geertz* argues that " sociology busied itself with the study of humankind in the wealthy nations but …among their poorer members, while anthropology with ethnography as it core practice, populated its books with more remote peoples, at that time permissibly, even honorifically known as 'primitive' or 'savages (Inglis, 2000: 35). Thus, the main task of anthropology was to understand the way of life

people in remote areas. However, in recent decades anthropological studies have now turned to urban areas (Thompson, 2007). Anthropologists such as Asad (1979, 1983, 2003) have also contributed greatly to the study of religion and Muslim society (Asad, 1979, 1983, 2003).

However, in the context of understanding the way of life of Muslim society, there is still some debate over anthropology's contribution. In commenting on several approaches to studying Islam amongst social scientist, Fazlur Rahman a leading Islamic scholar from Chicago University, writes: "an intellectual understanding and appreciation of Islam is quite possible for a non-Muslim who is unprejudiced, sensitive, and knowledgeable" (Rahman, 1985: 197). However, Varisco argues that "the majority of anthropologists who have worked with Muslim probably have not read the entire Qur'an, certainly not in Arabic" (Varisco, 2005: 152). In contrast, when Muslim scholars started to study Islam, they would first understand and familiarise themselves with the Qur'an. That is why anthropologists, unlike Muslim scholars, are likely to understand "Islam as is it actually lived" without taking into account several primary texts in Islamic theology that are: the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Varisco mentions other crucial problems with anthropology on "how to apply what is said in texts [Qur'an] to the context of use or allusion" (Varisco, 2005: 152). Varisco is concerned that primary texts should be a starting point for anthropologists studying Islam. Joseph Schacht goes even further to argue that "Islamic law is the epitome of Islamic thought, the most typical manifestation of the Islamic way of life, the core and kernel of Islam itself" (Schacht, 1996: 1).

Thus, anthropologists need to understand the historical root of Islamic thought not only in primary resources (Qur'an and Sunnah), but also in Islamic law and Islamic theology. In this study, I find that I cannot step outside an "Islamic way of life," which means that I seek to understand the Islamic content and import of the many concepts and philosophies embedded in the social life of Jamā'ah Tablīgh. These concepts and philosophies, beliefs and values comprise a body of knowledge in Islam which support us to comprehend or understand Muslim society. When I read the works of anthropologists I am positioned not as an anthropologist, but as a Muslim student who desires to understand his own community of faith. My understanding of the background concepts is derived from my education in Islamic studies. Primarily, I draw on this body of knowledge not in an anthropological way but in order to increase my belief in Allah and to be closer to Him. When researchers who are not Muslim study Muslim community, some of the people of this community would engage

with the researcher in the hope that through learning about Islam, the researcher will become Muslim. Pnina Werbner makes this clear in her final analysis of a transnational Sufist group she studied: "the great disappointment of cult members was that they failed to convert me to Islam, despite my evident admiration for the saint and fascination with Sufism as a ritual and religious system" (Werbner, 2003: 302).

Werbner's position and my position as research are different. This difference of perspective is between that of learning in order to be "born again in Islam" (Jason, 2009) and that of "convert[ing] to Islam" (Werbner, 2003). During my field work, many *karkun* spent their time with me in order to attract me to become a member of Jamā'ah Tablīgh. As a Muslim student, I can understand the historical root and Islamic references behind these attempts. As a non-Muslim, it is likely that I could have the same experience as Werbner, where some of her respondent rejected the draft before it went to the publisher (Werbner, 2003: 293-4). When I was in the field, some of my Acehnese-Muslim fellows would "smile" when they met non-Muslim researcher, saying "they will write about us through their understanding, not through our understanding." This is parallel with the statement of Varisco:

> Anthropology can only explore what is means to be Muslim against a shared humanity revealed by the always tentative, but not easily ignored findings of modern science and challenging reflections of critical philosophy. Beyond that, in the realm where ideology and theology reign supreme, anthropology has little to contribute. Studying what Muslims believe or fail to believe may say something about human nature, but it offers no window into the truth of revelation. The anthropologists observes Muslim in order to represent their representation; only Muslim can observe Islam (Varisco, 2005: 162).

From a Sociology to a Phenomenology of Religious Experience

The main aim of my research is to enquire into the nature of religious experience among the members of a particular religious movement or organisation. By conducting ethnography among members of a single Islamic movement in different social settings (Kuala Lumpur and Aceh), the project examined the relationship between "what Muslims think and experience" and "what they do". I therefore chose to describe certain Islamic concepts and activities among *Jamā'ah Tablīgh* members (*markāż*, *mushāwarah, ijtimā', bayān,* and *khurūj*) and attempt to show how these form their religious experiences.