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# Religion and Life Trajectories: Islamists Against Self and Other\*

**Abstract:** Life trajectories capture the dynamic nature of religious traditions and phenomena. They can complement and challenge what we know about religions based on rituals, myths and beliefs. Life trajectories bring out the individual experiences of the latter, in their embodiment over a period of time. This essay applies this insight to Islamists who joined and participated in religious activism in South Africa over several decades. It shows that Islamist journeys were prone to be challenging, given that Islamists often rejected established religious leaders and were confronted by political and religious challenges. The journeys were marked by the adoption of a distinctive choice made within the larger language of Islam. Islam was framed as an ideology, worldview or cause which the individual felt compelled to adopt. But the life of an individual was often confronted by subtle and not too subtle differences within this language. Islamists were forced to navigate a deep sectarianism, but the choice for Islamism was often not between good and evil, but between competing perceptions of good. Identity was a key feature of Islamist journeys, wherein what counted as the Other varied from group to group, and individual to individual. The journeys of many Islamists led to both expected and unexpected destinations. The essay concludes with an interpretive framework for these journeys derived from the history of exegesis of the Qur'an. It suggests that the journeys of Islamists are marked quite often by rebuke and admonishment (*lawwāma*), directed at self and others.

**Keywords:** Islamism, political Islam, biography, life trajectories, psychology of religion, religion in South Africa, African religions, method and theory

In a fascinating autobiography, Muntassar Zayyat shares some interesting personal experiences as a member of Islamic Communities (al-Jama'at Islamiyya) in Egypt, which planned and carried out the assassination of Anwar al-Sadat in 1981. Immediately after this fateful event, Zayyat tells us that he and his associates anguished over what to do next. They were confronted by a teacher

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who believed that the assassination was completely wrong and unjustified. Zayyat tells us that he and his associates took a vote and decided to suspend any further activity. This was one of many moments of doubt and bewilderment shared by Zayyat of his involvement in Islamism. Former British Islamist Ed Husain also wrote of his journey that began as a young boy reciting songs of praise for the Prophet Muhammad, followed by a five-year roller coaster ride among the recruiters and peddlers of Islamic radicalism in London. Abd al-Mun'im Abu Futūh, who was a candidate for the Egyptian Presidency against Morsi in 2011, wrote of his early life in the same communities as Zayyat in the 1970s; he later joined the moderate Muslim Brothers, but resigned after the Egyptian uprising. These and other recent autobiographies of Islamists provide a glimpse of the motivations, inspiration, challenges and sometimes frustrations of living a life of Islamic activism. These life trajectories deserve greater recognition and greater attention in the study of religious change and dynamism. They deserve greater attention in what they tell us about the complex and changing phenomenon of Islamism.

Studies on the life trajectories of Islamists of very different persuasions are not unknown. The most eminent leaders of Islamism, like Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Yusuf al-Qardawi, Osamah ben Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, have received extensive scholarly attention (Musallam 1990; Akhavi 1997; Stern 2003; Gerges 2006; Gräf, Skovgaard-Petersen 2009; Scheuer 2011). But most of this attention focuses on how they developed and adopted Islamist political and religious ideas, how much of a threat they represent to the world in general and the Western world in particular, and their socio-political impacts. Relatively few studies have been devoted to life trajectories that include what Aishima and Salvatore have called the 'trials and tribulations' of religious activism in a post-colonial context (Aishima, Salvatore 2009, 42). The complex journeys that constitute Islamism have not been carefully and systematically examined, even though they offer greater insight into this significant religious phenomenon.

In this essay, I examine biographies and life trajectories as key data for understanding Islamism. I am not necessarily interested in the biographies as windows to the self, something that has become prominent in the study of religions recently. The study of biographies and journeys of individuals in the study of religions have almost exclusively focused on processes of individualization and self-actualization (Buitelaar, Zock 2013; Fuchs, Rüpke 2014). Such studies have added to what William James earlier and more recently Paul Ricoeur and Charles Taylor have respectively said about the journey and location of the self. James closely examined the conversion narratives of evangelical Christians in the nineteenth century, and turned attention to the different stages towards individual religious maturity. He stressed the positive effects of sound religiosity – and

he was interested in showing these values in the lives and journeys of saints, mystics and converts. This teleological and normative framework has been adopted in the twentieth century by most psychologists of religion such as Allport, Capps, Fowler and Hutch (Fowler 1984; Hutch 1987; Capps 1994). In a different scholarly trajectory, Paul Ricoeur and Charles Taylor have stressed the narrative framework within which the self is located. Ricoeur's work on narrative identity has received widespread support and application (Ricoeur 1980; Joy 1997; Crowley 2003).

In this essay, I want to show that biographical trajectories are indispensable for what they tell us about Islamism, and about the dynamism of religions and religious phenomena in themselves. In a special forum organized in 2014 by *Religion and American Culture, A Journal of Interpretation*, leading biographers of religious individuals were invited to share their thoughts on the value of biography for the religious history of America. The contributions highlighted the substantial place of biography in the study of religion. Most of the discussion focused on the value of biography for bringing out the historical significance of these figures. It dwelled on the long-standing debate on the value of movements and trends, against the experience of both extraordinary and ordinary individuals in the flow of history. One of the participants in this forum, Matthew Avery Sutton, referred to Jill Lepore's concept of microhistory, which is located between biography and history. While biography focuses on the unique life of an individual, usually someone who made a significant contribution to history, microhistory points to the significance of a life in the light of the general religious, social or political history in question. Lepore says that microhistory places the life of an individual within 'the culture as a whole' (Lepore 2001, 141). Moreover, she saw the individual life as an 'allegory' of the whole, indicating the close connection between the specific life of the individual, and the larger cultural canvass. The subjects of individual life trajectories are fascinating for the experience they share about themselves, *and* for their part in a larger movement and tradition in the culture. This attention to the experiences of an individual, taken allegorically, could be used more widely in the study of religion.

Life trajectories could be added to the rituals, narratives, beliefs, performances and artistic expressions that have become part of the stock data that scholars of religions use to understand and explain the meaning and significance of religions. They may complement or challenge what we know about religious phenomena and developments based on rituals, myths and beliefs. They deserve greater attention as data, as units of analysis, for the study of beliefs, rituals and narratives. Life trajectories and autobiographies contribute to our deeper understanding of religions, and how they are lived by men and women in a particular time.

This idea will be illustrated with a sample of trajectories and journeys that I have collected over the last few years of individuals who have been involved in Islamist activism in South Africa since the 1970s. I recorded interviews, lasting from one to two hours, and sometimes repeated, to gather information on life trajectories that included educational backgrounds and inspirations, career choices, moments of conversion and re-conversions, fatigue, frustration, new movements, new projects, and sometimes reflective thoughts on many years of engagement. After some hesitation, interviewees seemed eager to present their life of engagement as narratives. Being part of Islamism meant taking a position different from the one given at birth. This included journeys in space and time, from the rural to the urban, from the East to the West and back again, from the present to the past and back again. The life trajectories were often engaged with a significant Other. Islamists passed through a conscious construction and reconstruction of the self in relation to a significant Other. And they almost always included deliberation and intense debate over the merits of one Islamist organization over another. Islamists were comfortable with the metaphor of journeying, and I will use recurring motifs and topoi in my interview data to sketch Islamist journeying in South Africa.

Muslims constitute less than two percent of the population of South Africa, but Islamist trends, tensions and conflicts mirror global trends and developments (Jeppie 1991; Tayob 1995). Islamism in South Africa has been shaped by three organizations founded in the 1970s and 1980s. The oldest and most widespread is the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) that was established in 1970 and inspired by the Muslim Brothers of Egypt and the Jamaate Islami in South Asia. Students and youths at high schools and universities turned to Islam, and committed themselves to an Islamic worldview and identity. They read literature written by Islamists in Egypt and Pakistan, and formed study circles and projects to re-Islamize themselves and society. In 1980, another organization emerged in Cape Town under the leadership of Achmat Cassiem who had been involved in anti-apartheid protests for already a decade. Inspired by Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution of Iran, Qiblah pursued the dream of an Islamic Revolution for South Africa. In 1983, Farid Esack and a group of young students founded another organization in Cape Town. Under the banner of the Call of Islam, this new group was critical of the alleged lack of undivided commitment, shown by the MYM and Qiblah, to South African liberation (Esack 1988). From the 1980s onwards, the MYM and the Call of Islam pursued a path of critical engagement with global Islamist trends. They were engaged in what Asef Bayat referred to as a post-Islamist moment (Bayat 1996). Since 1994, other groups have emerged and added to the market place of Islamisms in South Africa. Some are clearly recognizable in mosques and associations, while others thrive in small study cir-

cles in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town. From some of these smaller groups, recruits for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have also emerged.

One of the features of South African Islamism is vacillation over global and local commitments, revealed in the journeys of three of my interviewees. Mandla (Interview, February 26, 2013) was a politically active young male in the Eastern Cape, already reciting poetry at anti-apartheid meetings at age 15. In 1986, a friend gave him a book that argued that Islam was an African religion. Mandla was overwhelmed: ‘... the book captured my imagination immediately; I said no! That this is the faith! I wanted to become a Muslim and this is the religion of my ancestors.’ Mandla’s enthusiasm was short-lived as he met Indian Muslims in the Eastern Cape who did not share his conviction that Islam was an African religion. But he kept his faith, and joined the Muslim Youth Movement when it committed itself to Africanization in post-apartheid South Africa. But this journey was not so smooth, and Mandla resigned in 2011 in frustration with the racism he perceived in the ranks of the organization.

In contrast, Faqir (Interview, April 4, 2012), from a wealthy middle-class family in Durban, was a founding member of the MYM in 1970. After completing school, his father sent him on a European tour during which he met Sa’id Ramadan, the son-in-law of Hassan al-Banna, in Geneva. Faqir was impressed with Ramadan’s vision of Islam as a dynamic and modern religion, and returned home to establish an Islamic movement in South Africa. He played a leading role in connecting South African Islamists with the leading figures in Europe and North America, connected in turn with the Muslim Brothers in Egypt and Jamaate Islami in India and Pakistan. In the 1980s, Faqir was challenged by activists like Mandla that the MYM had ignored apartheid oppression: their global vision had failed to reflect the peoples’ struggles against apartheid. Faqir held passionately to his global vision, but also insisted that Islamism in South Africa was not opposed to national liberation.

Faruq (Interview, April 21, 2015) was a young activist from an Indian racial background, but as committed as Mandla to anti-apartheid activism. His Islamist journey began in Cape Town when he was in high school. He joined study circles organized by the MYM at high schools, and was initiated into the language of Muslim politics when the student revolts of 1976 were taking off. When he attended a mass meeting of the United Democratic Front, formed to mobilize and organize countrywide protests against apartheid in 1983, he was told by his Muslim brothers that it was a sin to join such a non-Islamic group. He very quickly left the MYM and joined the Qiblah movement because of its clearer commitment to the anti-apartheid struggle. ‘I knew,’ he told me, ‘that the MYM was not going to join the struggle.’ In the process, of course, he also did not join the United Democratic Front, which was vigorously criticized by Qiblah.

The different journeys of Mandla, Faqir and Faruq capture one of the salient features of the journeys of Islamism in South Africa and elsewhere. Islamism in South Africa was rooted in the ideas of liberation, but moved like a pendulum between a global vision of Islam and local anti-apartheid politics. Even as leaders like Faqir insisted that there was no tension involved, individuals felt deeply the choices that they had to make. These two poles in Mandla, Faqir and Faruq's journeys recurred in the journeys of other leaders and followers in the various movements in South Africa.

This particular feature of Islamist journeying between poles also can be traced in the discourse of Islamists elsewhere. Early in the 1930s, Hasan al-Banna in Egypt identified Islam as a cause (*da'wa*) in comparison with many other causes (*da'awāt*): '...different causes (*da'awāt*) have harassed our time, divided hearts and confused thoughts, [but they] can be judged by our cause (*da'wa*)' (al-Banna n.d., 19). In another lecture, al-Banna spoke of the Islam of the Muslim Brothers, contrasted with the Islams of the Persians, the Mamluks and the Turks (al-Banna n.d., 118). Al-Banna and other intellectuals created a language for thinking about Islam in comparison with other religions, causes and nations. Islamists were expected to make these clear choices, wherein Islam was shaped and reshaped in relation to the new ideas of nations, ideologies and social movements. But in South Africa, as elsewhere, these choices have not been easy. And the life trajectories displayed how choices were navigated and negotiated in unique and sometimes irregular fashion.

The choices confronted in the journeys of Islamism appeared to be clear and straightforward to intellectuals such as Hasan al-Banna. But among individual activists, choices were sometimes difficult to assess and make. This is another feature worth looking at more closely in the lives of Islamists. It can be illustrated in the life of Aziz (Interview, June 23, 2012), trained as an architect in Durban. Aziz told me that he was only initiated into Islamic activism in Houston (USA) where he met Ebrahim Yazdi, who later briefly became deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs in Iran until the hostage crisis. Back in South Africa, Aziz could not really decide between the MYM and the Tablighi Jamaat, a less political revival movement than the others that I have mentioned. Later, as a qualified architect, Aziz was given an opportunity to design a prayer room on the Howard campus of the University of Natal. He did not want to follow the example of the University of Durban-Westville, where the mosque stood apart from other religious groups, and from the faculty buildings. Aziz wanted a mosque that flowed into the campus – one that was not so clearly demarcated from education and from other spheres of life. The mosque was designed and built with this vision, but it has since become very similar to the model that Aziz had rejected. When I met him, Aziz was disappointed with such mosques –

the one he had designed, and the others that proliferated in the city. Mosques were a clearly recognizable value for Islamists, but their discordant and divergent relation to the world unsettled Aziz.

The journey of Musa (Interview, April 8, 2014), an activist from Johannesburg, also illustrates a struggle over multiple and competing notions of 'good'. Musa's father was a travelling salesperson, and he has himself founded a successful business in the city. In the early 1980s, he offered to manage the bookshop of the Muslim Youth Movement, primarily to show how it could be made financially viable. But he was also interested in other books, not only the books prescribed for its study groups. On one occasion, he was confronted and challenged by the leadership of the Muslim Youth Movement for stocking Murabitun books. The Murabitun was a competing Islamist group from the United Kingdom gathering recruits from within the ranks of the Muslim Youth Movement. It accused the latter of failing to live up to the model of Sunni revival groups, of being too modernist in its creed and its structure. Internal dissension among Islamists was not unknown to Musa, but he was disappointed with the heavy-handedness of his superiors in the MYM. Since then, he has embarked on his own journey, marked by the multiple books that lined the bookshop that he nurtured.

This confrontation and choice of good is a key feature of journeying in political Islam. It is well-known that a deep sectarianism dominates political Islam, but little is said about the struggle over multiple concepts of good that appear to Islamists to be equally right, equally grounded in Islam, or equally attractive. Islamists move among the various and diverse Islamist options on offer; sometimes intra-Islamist conflicts completely determine the course of a life trajectory. The great theologian al-Ghazali provides a representation of the struggle over multiple 'goods and evils' that are reflected in Islamist journeys:

It is as if the heart is an object attacked from every side. When influence[d] by one thing, it is immediately matched by its opposite and changes its quality. When a demon descends on it and calls it to respond to impulse, an angel comes and saves it from that. When one demon pulls him towards some evil, another one pulls him in another direction. When an angel directs him to a good, another directs it to something else. Sometimes, [the heart is] torn between two demons, and sometimes between two angels (al-Ghazālī 1356, 2:1419).

The heart not only faces a choice between good and evil, but also between several competing conceptions of good and evil. A deep and persistent conflict between good and evil, and between varieties of good and evil, seems to be the fate of humans. This representation resonates with the internal struggle that often constitutes Islamist journeys. Activists are confronted and caught between the

competing groups that claim to represent Islam, or they are confronted by a demand to make a choice between values and goals that are equally attractive.

A ‘meeting of the Other’ is another recognizable feature of journeying in Islamism. Most scholars suggest that identity constructions and conflicts lie at the heart of Islamism: Islamism was a desire for cultural uniqueness and authenticity (Burgat 2003; Ismail 1998; Roy; 2003). The trajectories of a number of my interviewees shed light on how this identity construction played out among Islamists in South Africa. Haroon (Interview, April 5, 2012) came to the Indian University in Durban to study pharmacy, and was soon drawn to Islamist recruitment on campus. But he told me that he was particularly enamored with the lectures and debates of Muslim ‘evangelist’ Ahmed Deedat. He followed Deedat everywhere, and modeled himself in Deedat’s image as a speaker and debater. When I asked him about a transformative memory in his life, he mentioned a few nights he spent in the Black township of KwaMashu near Durban. It seems that Deedat’s lectures shaped Haroon’s identity against Christianity and Hinduism; but his experience in KwaMashu confronted his identity as an Indian Muslim, unsettling him to think about his racial background in South Africa.

A veteran activist, Sumayya (Interview, June 21, 2012) came from a middle class background, but her identity took shape in her experiences as a woman. She grew up in a small town, and then moved around various cities as her husband pursued his financial dreams. I met her in the Kwazulu capital of Pietermaritzburg where she shared her journey with me. She was acutely conscious of her identity as a woman, reinforced by her experiences with the Tablighi Jamaat, with men in mosque committees, and with religious scholars who had consistently undermined her religious activism and commitment. She related numerous occasions when she had initiated projects to improve the quality of education in the town or city. Her projects were blocked or, if adopted, she would be kept at a distance. Her horizon, and her sense of self, expanded dramatically when civil strife in the midlands of Natal introduced her to a variety of religious and cultural groups. She joined them in a new social activism, and her vision of the Other expanded far beyond the inter-Islamic groups that she had grappled with until then.

Rahim was a religious scholar who had trained in India, and has recently migrated to ISIS in Syria with his family. I did not interview him, but he wrote a number of letters and recorded sound messages which he sent to his family and former associates. He said that he found a deep contentment and satisfaction with ISIS. But his messages were filled with accusations against his Indian and South African teachers who ‘mised’ him. His significant Other was the Islam of his youth and years of scholarship in India where he had imbibed what he called ‘Buzrug’ Islam – Islam of the gurus and spiritual leaders. I found a similar

attitude towards Indian Islam in young Salafi converts in Johannesburg – Indian Islam provided an anchor, a counter-point, for their journeys that led them to greater devotion and commitment to the life of the early successors of the Prophet.

The Other occupies an important part of the journeys of Islamism. The Other shapes and determines a course of action, an attitude and relation. For many activists in South Africa, religious scholars (*‘ulamā’*) were the significant Others. Their understanding and practices were shaped in relation to religious leaders, who were invariably seen to be too silent on apartheid, too traditional, or too Indian. Muslim religious scholars were the dominant Other, but they shared this distinction with Indian Muslims, Black Muslims, and other Muslim activists. The Other of South African Islamism could not be dissociated from the racial history of the country. The Other animated a life trajectory in unusual and unexpected ways. *Beyond South Africa*, the recent biography by Brynjar Lia of Abu Mus‘ab al-Sūrī, the key strategist of al-Qaeda, shows how he rejected the Muslim Brothers in Syria – which later shaped his political actions in relation to similar groups in Algeria, Europe and Afghanistan (Lia 2007).

Journeying in Islamism revealed an interesting play on destinations. I generally interviewed activists who had been involved in Islamism over decades. Rather than taking a snapshot of their lives as engaged in a ritual, a practice, a video message or a book, I focused on destinations and end-points that unfolded over decades. Imraan (Interview, April 5, 2012) was a working class office worker attracted to what he says were the ‘larnies’ (middle-class bosses) of the Muslim Youth Movement in the 1970s. More than four decades later, I interviewed him at his office in the working-class Indian township of Phoenix in Durban, from where he counseled streams of people on government grants, HIV AIDS and rental arrears. He told me of women who prostrated themselves at his feet for his useful services. He was also embarrassed that they promised to pray for him at the local Hindu temple. When I left him, I had no doubt that Imraan had found his destination in a place far removed from his life in the MYM in the 1970s.

Rahim, the man who joined ISIS, was waiting for the final battle of good versus evil in Raqqa where he believed Armageddon would unfold on the plains of Dabiq. Over a longer period of engagement, Musa and Faqir seemed to me more representative of Islamist life trajectories. Both were still meandering from one goal to another. Faqir was determined to prove to the world, and mostly to himself, that the MYM was committed to the eradication of apartheid in the 1970s. He seemed to find little time for self-reflection in his relentless path in the mobilization of Muslims. Musa also experienced life as a series of destinations but he was not as unsettled as Faqir. After withdrawing from the MYM, he became

active in the management of a mosque in Johannesburg, then immersed himself in the production of a Muslim world radio program, and then pledged allegiance (*bay'at*) to a Sufi *shaykh*. When I heard that he had become a Sufi *khalifa* (representative), I thought that he had finally reached his goal. In conversation, though, I realized that he was still moving: forever subject to the competing concepts of good that he first tasted in the MYM bookshop.

Scholars of Islamism in the last few decades have made a significant contribution to our understanding of the phenomenon. In one of the earliest studies on Islamism, Humphreys identified what he then called Islamic Revival as a shared language and ideology developed from earlier pre-modern revivalist movements in the history of Islam. Humphreys takes cognizance of this history, but points to significant changes in modern revival movements that are influenced by mass education, urbanization and modern politics (Humphreys 1982). He maintains a delicate balance in his analysis between earlier forms of revivalism and modern trends.

In most studies on Islamism, the adoption of what Humphreys has called a language of revivalism has been interpreted as a mark of social identity and even authenticity. The latter is generally interpreted as a desire for distinction, and a desire to assert some special presence in the public sphere. With the notable exception of scholars like Quitan Wiktorowicz and Gabrielle Marranci, few studies explored what this desire or motivation means for individuals. Wiktorowicz has focused, in his many works, on how Islamists, particularly Salafis, adopted a particular interpretation of Islam (Wiktorowicz 2004; Wiktorowicz, Kaltenthaler 2006). Marranci has focused on how identity formation has worked through emotions and feelings (Marranci 2009). But even in their work, one looks in vain for the path and process of identification of one individual over a period of time. Even in the best work, Islamists always seem arrested in a moment in time – just long enough for a representation to be captured for scholarly work.

Another dominant theme in the scholarship on Islamism has been an insistence that Islamism was not uniform. In spite of the Islamist claim that there is only one way to respond to God and the Prophet, Islamists have been incorrigibly sectarian. Voll, Kepel and Sheppard have offered fine distinctions of Islamists based on the various groups' relation with modernity and violence (Voll 1982a; Voll 1982b; Kepel 2002; Shepard 2004). Thus, we are introduced to Salafi modernists in the early twentieth century, differentiated from the Muslim Brothers who are relatively more modern. This group is further differentiated from radical groups that emerged first in Egypt in the 1970s. Since the 1970s, traditional Salafis have been included in the broad term used for Islamists, but then they are also divided according to their willingness to take up arms in pursuit of their goals. The various categorizations alert us to an important truth. Whatever the

lines of differentiation, Islamism tends to break up into sectarian and competing tendencies. In spite of their shared discourse, there is intense inner conflict, debate and eventually splintering among Islamists. Mostly, this diversity among Islamists has been used to correct a popular Western misconception about Islam and Muslims. A Western public apparently needs to be reminded repeatedly that not all Muslims are prone to violence, or reject modernity, or sympathize with those who carry out violent acts.

What is more important in my view is to appreciate how Islamists, even those who are committed to some particular language or ideology, have lived with sectarian distinctions over a period of time. The inner splintering of Islamism raises an important question for any study devoted to an appreciation of the individuals who enter this movement. The would-be Islamist lives and expresses his commitment in a highly fractious terrain. In almost every country, city or region, Islamists are confronted by competition with rival groups. A study of their individual journeys sheds light on how they navigate and contribute to this important part of Islamist experience.

Another line of inquiry has explained Islamism as a product of great social and political changes that took place in most countries of the world over the last few hundred years. Bruce Lawrence argued many years ago that religious fundamentalisms in general were a rejection of the modernity in which they were unwittingly implicated. Fundamentalists were deeply modern, even though they railed against modernity's deep malaise (Lawrence 1989). Other, more specific, explanations have been offered about the particular conditions that have given rise to various kinds of Islamist or other religious resurgent phenomena: for example, al-Qaeda was an unexpected outcome of the Cold War conflict where religion was mobilized against communism (Mamdani 2002; Burgat 2008). Life trajectories do not render these explanations irrelevant, but they open a window on how these changes were negotiated and mediated through a life of activism.

Existing analyses focusing on the language, identity and social context of Islamism cannot be ignored, but they disembodiment movements and organizations in modern societies, particularly from the religious meanings and motivations that shape them over time. Recalling the insight of Lepore, life trajectories may be mined for what they tell us about religious traditions as lived by individuals over time. Their stories resonate deeply in the traditions, as allegories to the greater whole. They illuminate experiences of a religious tradition over the life of an individual in a particular era.

Al-Ghazali's insights on the demons and angels that compete for the soul of the individual may be developed as a framework for understanding and appreciating the journey of Islamism that I have presented in this essay. Like other

Muslim intellectuals, al-Ghazali pointed to key milestones in a journey to God. The seeker begins with a self marked by evil (*ammāra bi 'l-sū'*), travelling then to a stage of incessant blame and admonition (*lawwāma*), and then finally reaching a stage of complete contentment and inner peace (*iṭmi'nān*). Like William James' stages of religious maturity, Muslim intellectuals outlined a journey that had a clearly desired goal and focus. For our purposes, no such teleology needs to be assumed. However, it seems to me that the second milestone mentioned above suggests a cluster of ideas and meanings that resonate with the life trajectories of Islamists. The word *lawwāma* denotes blame, censure, rebuke and admonition. The word appears in the Qur'an as an oath taken by God on the self: 'I swear by the Day of Resurrection, and I swear by the rebuking Self' (Qur'an 75:1–2). A brief review of Muslim exegesis provides a glimpse on how this verse has been interpreted for its relevance for religious life. The great historian and exegete of the ninth/tenth century, al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), says that the use of the phrase refers to a person 'who blames his friend for doing good and evil, and he regrets at what has passed.' Another exegete, Zamakhshari (d. 1143/44), says that it refers to 'the pious self who rebukes (blames) others on the Day of Judgment; who lack God-consciousness, or who rebukes himself even though he has done good.' Al-Qurtubī (d. 1273), the Andalusian exegete, applies the term to life in general, and not only to the Day of Judgment. The phrase refers, he says, to 'the believer who continuously blames himself.... What do I want with my words? What about my food? And what about what is inside me?' And the authors of one of the most popular Qur'anic exegesis, al-Jalālayn, say that it refers to 'the one who rebukes himself even though he strives to do good.' Sufi interpretations place the questioning and doubt within the life of a seeker in the spiritual path. And they include some subtleties that point to the state of restlessness of the typical novitiate at this stage of a religious journey: he is aware of the shortcomings of self and Other, but cannot find solace in good or God. He has moved away from a life of temptation, but remains deeply conflicted.<sup>1</sup>

This state of *lawwāma*, blaming and admonishing self and Other, speaks to the life trajectory of many Islamists. This is true of the South Africans that I have interviewed, and it also emerges in the autobiographies that have begun to be published by Islamists elsewhere in the last decade. The Islamist emerges in religious consciousness with a conviction that both the self and society have gone astray. She rejects her parents, her religious teachers and her friends. She de-

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<sup>1</sup> All the commentaries have been obtained from this useful site: <http://www.altafsir.com/Tafsir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=75&tAyahNo=1&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>, accessed December 28, 2015.

mands greater devotion to the texts, rejects the established norms of the society, but also anguishes about her own commitment. Sometimes, she finds solace in a small community, but she is soon assailed by doubts and continuing recrimination, and then moves on. She often finds another movement, one that has a better form of critique and admonishment. Or she is confronted by a companion who admonishes her with greater vehemence. Or she meets a religious leader who turns her away from the state of admonishment, or a secular vision that leads her out of religion entirely. Islamists, by definition I would propose, are restless: rebuking self and Other in their life journeys.

The life trajectories of Islamists need not point to a high point of religious commitment or maturity in the sense suggested by William James or Muslim scholars in the past. As I have said earlier, this model of greater maturity in religious development has dominated twentieth century psychology of religion. From James to Allport to Capps, the focus of the study of religious journeys has been on individuals like Augustine, Teresa da Avila, Gandhi and the Dalai Lama. Scholarly attention has pointed to paths that have led to sainthood. I have found some unrecognized saints in my research, but mostly I have found a great degree of unease, periods of commitment followed by self-questioning, a tendency to change commitment, extreme doubt about established authorities, and varying degrees of restlessness. Such life trajectories deserve attention and analysis in the study of religions. A life of religious commitment should not only be important for its supreme fulfillment – desirable and admirable though this may be. We should appreciate the meandering and frustrated journeys of more mortal individuals in the history of religions as well.

Taking a life trajectory as a basic unit of analysis calls for closer attention to our study of religions. This is a journey of religious commitment, but it is not as stable as we have come to expect of religious traditions, practices and emotions. The narratives, myths, identification, and beliefs within one life trajectory are constantly moving and changing. Generally, the study of religious practices, beliefs and commitments seems to focus on a degree of stability. We have studied such elements as they change over time, but what does one do with a subject that experiences these elements in this unstable manner? How can one study phenomena through a life in which belief is by definition ill-defined, holding on to a myth that changes every few months or years, or which relates to the sacred with only occasional bouts and waves of earnestness? If the Islamist is still considered a religious subject, then the self-rebuking unstable self on a tumultuous journey needs another framework.

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