Islamist Biographies: Religious Experiences of South African Muslim Activists

By

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DECLARATION

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Abstract

This thesis explores the biographies of Muslim activists who were involved in the South African Islamist movement from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s - tracking their trajectories up till the present. These Islamist biographies can be likened to journeys which include moments of fulfilment, doubt, ambivalence and a grappling to make sense of the self and society. A close examination of Islamist journeys reveal accounts of conversion, a deep commitment to religion and the reconstruction of both public and private identities. Conversion signalled both an arrival – at a new meaning system – and a departure – on a journey informed by this new meaning system. For Islamists, their renewed understanding of religion provided purpose, perseverance and direction. They turned to Islamism to reconstruct their public identities by becoming part of a chosen collective. Simultaneously, they also used religious ideology to reconstruct their identities within the private sphere. This study places emphasis on the everyday lives of Islamists. By suggesting that South African Islamism can best be viewed as the sum of a multitude of journeys of everyday political Islam, this study recognizes that such a life is located within a particular idealized world-view. However, interrogating this life trajectory necessitates an in-depth approach which takes heed of Islamists’ perfectionist ideals while remaining cognizant of personal realities. In doing so, this study reveals not only their firm resolve to be ‘good’ Islamists, but also their aspirations to be ‘good’ women within their personal domains. I thus contend that, included in an investigation on Islamist journeys, should be the ambiguities and personal challenges they encountered in private spaces. This study aligns itself with others who have challenged notions of a monolithic Islamism; rather Islamism has proven itself to continuously transform – even within local contexts like South Africa. Moreover, this thesis addresses a lacuna in scholarship on Islamism and highlights key perceptions that Islamists have about themselves, an idealized worldview and the challenges in everyday life. In this way, this study offers an alternate line of enquiry into religious activism as a lived experience. Doing so leads to a better understanding of not just individuals’ ideals and objectives, but also the everyday consequences this had.
Chapter 1

Introduction

While some scholars have been interested in the way that religious experience has been inflected by cultural assumptions or discourses of power, others have searched for models of virtue to emulate. But in either case, they have been attracted to biography as a way to ask larger questions about the meanings and functions of religion (Brekus, 2014: 9).

The period between the 1970s and 1990s is crucial in the political history of South Africa. It was a time during which political activism in opposition to the apartheid state intensified. A large number of Muslim activists participated in this struggle for liberation under the banner of what they called the South African Islamist Movement. Islamists resolved to challenge an unjust political system whilst having to negotiate their own personal challenges in their everyday lives.

This study examines the lives of some of these activists. Case studies focus on Islamists who were active in various anti-apartheid movements from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s - tracking the trajectory of their activism up till the present. Through a study of their personal narratives, this study reveals accounts of conversion and of personal struggles faced as a result of adopting an Islamist identity. It addresses a lacuna in studies on Islamism and highlights key perceptions that Islamists have about themselves, an idealized worldview and the challenges in everyday life. I suggest that in order to gain a deeper understanding of activist commitment, their motivations, their hopes and their dilemmas, it is imperative to look towards life trajectories. Islamists at times grappled to make sense of their lives and to find meaning and relevance through religion. Islamists needed to negotiate through the ruptures inherent in everyday life while aspiring to live a life which they considered pure and authentic. This thesis interrogates what it meant for Islamists to live an activist life within which religion was an integral part. It probes for transformative encounters and interrogates how commitment to the Islamist cause was weighed
up with moments of ambivalence. It explores ideological world-views and changing identities but remains cognizant of everyday realities. In doing so, this study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the lived reality of the Islamist.

**Problem Identification**

Islamism and Islamist activities have for the most part been reduced to a socio-political phenomenon. This study seeks to affirm the view that there is a need to go beyond viewing political activism in a purely linear fashion. Religious activism cannot only be explained away as solely political or economic pursuits. Nor can religious activism be explained in terms of perfectionist ideologies. The choice to embark on a path of activism may be rooted in religious beliefs and/or motivated by emotions, but cannot be separated from other realities in everyday life.

In a study focusing on the lives of three South African Islamists, Abdulkader Tayob suggests that political Islam is the sum of many “individual journeys of religious activism” and “is best represented as a journey writ large” (Tayob, 2014: 1). Extending this metaphor I suggest that Islamism can best be viewed as the sum of numerous journeys of everyday political Islam. I further suggest that individual Islamist journeys are the sum of conversions, commitment to ideological convictions and individual identities asserted through everyday religious engagement. Religious engagement was not confined to moments of activism, but encompassed a lived reality in its complexity. In this way, everyday obstacles and ambiguities which often stemmed from private spaces became part of the broader Islamist ideal.

In their quest to express their commitment to their beliefs, individuals consistently faced challenges within their daily lives. In order to address these concerns this study affirms the need to take into account not just what is historical and cultural, but also what is personal and distinctly individual within everyday life (Schielke, 2010: 13). This entails seeking responses to questions such as: How did individuals contend with such struggles and possible contradictions? Was there an acknowledgement at the time that these ambiguities existed? Did these challenges serve to weaken or strengthen commitment to the Islamist
cause? Was it ever possible to separate activism from dilemmas in everyday life? Studies show that it is crucial that ambivalences within activism be studied in the realm of everyday religiosities in order to make sense thereof (Ewing, 1990; Marsden, 2005; Schielke, 2009; Osella and Soares, 2009).

The personal dimension of Islamism places emphasis on the intersection of religion and politics within the private, rather than only the public sphere. This approach shows how activists grappled with private struggles and how they negotiated – sometimes compromised – in order to maintain unity between knowledge, conviction and behavior. Their narratives suggest that religion and politics intersected consistently in both their public and private lives. In line with Tayob, I suggest that religious experiences of this nature are best understood as journeys (Tayob, 2014). Hence this study explores the biographies of Islamists as told by them - represented as eight unique journeys of everyday political Islam.

Islamists profess their belief in Islamism as being the correct, and only way in which socio-political transformation can happen in South Africa. The narratives show that they typically experienced (often multiple) conversions which shaped and informed their everyday religious experiences. These conversions form part of broader Islamist journeys which entail negotiating through local politics, challenging mainstream understandings of Islam and their everyday lives. While their journeys were vastly different, it is to Islamism they turned to express their deep discontent with the apartheid state and with their cultural and religious backgrounds.

Islamists’ engagement in the public sphere manifested in different ways; with some groups advocating for militancy while others called for more subtle approaches. Nevertheless, all Islamists were confronted with moments wherein they found themselves conflicted about everyday issues which challenged their commitment. Individual biographies, tracing the journeys of South African Islamists over an extended period, reveal these complexities and ambiguities which many faced in their quest to attain what they believed to be the ideal.
Individual biographies can be likened to journeys which reveal moments of doubt, ambivalence and a grappling to make sense of the self and society. A close study of their life trajectories shows how ordinary lives were irrevocably changed after conversion. Conversion impelled them into a life of political activism which was rooted in religious principles. Their commitment to Islam drove them in their quest for a just society and sustained them through the difficulties they encountered. They turned to religion to reconstruct their identities within the public by becoming part of a chosen collective, namely the Muslim Students’ Association (MSA), Muslim Youth Movement (MYM), Qibla or Call of Islam (COI). Simultaneously, they also used religious ideology to reconstruct their identities within the private sphere.

This study places emphasis on the everyday lives of Islamists. It recognizes that while they were determined to live lives true to their beliefs, they were also wives and mothers and daughters and sisters. The narratives show that these roles were never separated from their activism. Consistently straddling different roles while remaining committed to a particular ideology was never easy, but they managed to traverse this journey through their commitment to a particular cause.

While I want to be cautious against being culturally deterministic and not positing the ‘Muslim’ experience to be unique, adherence to Islam, as an indispensable factor, is of utmost importance for the individuals interviewed in this research study. Those committed to the Islamist movement felt compelled to express their opposition to an unjust state while remaining true to their beliefs. Thus while some activists were in favor of joining mainstream liberation movements, others were adamant that the political issues in the country could be resolved only through participation in Islamist movements.

Implicit in activists attaching themselves to a particular group was their acceptance of the discourse therein; but where and how (if at all) did this ideology manifest within their private or their professional lives (where the everyday took place)? And what led them to Islamism initially? In order to explore these complex and occasionally contradictory journeys of Islamists, it is necessary to turn to the theoretical reflections which will be employed to guide this thesis.
Theoretical Framework: Journeys of everyday political Islam

The interviews reveal that religious experiences as journeys include accounts of conversion and a consistent engagement with religion within everyday life. Therefore, the framework of analysis is primarily informed by Abdulkader Tayob’s model of Islamist activism as a journey, characterized by a struggle to make sense of the self, the other and society (Tayob, 2014). In keeping with my suggestion that the biographies of Islamists reveal journeys of conversion and everyday political Islam, I supplement this framework by drawing from William James’ model of conversions (James, 1902) and scholarship which affirms the importance of everyday lived religion within the study of life trajectories.

Tayob’s metaphor of journeying provides a valuable lens through which to view the life trajectories of Islamists in South Africa. These journeys shape and are shaped around the life choices they make as Islamists. They reveal moments of deep peace and fulfilment, but also moments of despondence and personal dilemmas. Tayob argues for Islamism as part of a longer journey which includes a search for identity, authenticity and making sense of the self and the world (Tayob, 2014). Tayob shows that while many South African Islamists were driven by their vision for a non-racial South Africa, beyond the purely ideological, they shared similarities with activists internationally (Tayob, 2015). While undoubtedly other dimensions like race, class and gender influenced their diverse responses, what bound ordinary South African Islamists is their resoluteness to project Islam as a relevant socio-political ideology into the public domain. Being Muslim was central to their personhood, and their quest for a distinct identity expressed in the language of Islam was of absolute importance to these individuals (Tayob, 2014: 35). Ultimately, Islamists’ vision of a better society, which reflected Islamic values and tenets are what drove them to take action. While remaining cognizant of the relevance of identity construction, Tayob advances the metaphor of “journeying” to illustrate how South African Islamists were often confronted with difficult choices and faced intense personal trials:
Individual journeys emerged in their individuality and deep subjectivity, but with others with whom they share key characteristics. They are always journeys that include movement between poles, deliberation, debate and confusion over multiple goods, framing of the self in relation to the other, and sometimes ultimate satisfaction and resolution. They are sometimes forged together to make a deep impact in society and politics. But the individual journeys never lose their uniqueness and agency, and unravel from each other as we trace them over time (Tayob, 2015: 10).

Tayob’s four central features constitute a journeying perspective. These include the notion of moving between poles. Islamists often found themselves vacillating between intellectual or ideological options, but also look for commonalities within different discourses and religions: “Political Islam in South Africa was rooted in the ideas of liberation, but moved like a pendulum between a global vision of Islam and local politics” (Tayob, 2015: 4). Another central feature of journeying is the choices that are available to Islamists - not just between what is perceived as right and wrong, but between multiple goods.

Perhaps, the desire for Islam and democracy, for Islam and modernity, for Islam and revolutionary socialism, for Islam and gender equality, for Islam and outrage, suggests common goods that cannot be compromised. They are not without their deep contradictions and contests, and come alive in the journeys that activists undertake (Tayob, 2015: 6).

A third feature of journeying is Islamists’ tendency to frame themselves in relation to an “other” which often shaped and determined the course of action taken by them.

The other is the significant partner that shapes and determines a course of action, an attitude and relation. For many activists in South Africa, the ‘ulama were the significant others. Their understanding and practices were shaped in relation to the ‘ulama, who
were invariably seen to be too silent on apartheid, too traditional or incapable of keeping in touch with the times (Tayob, 2015: 7).

The ‘other’ had a local dimension, often in the form of the clergy, but also a global dimension in the form of the ‘the west’ which was frequently perceived as being the root of evil. Tayob suggests the fourth central feature of journeying to be the desired destination or even serial destinations of the Islamist (Tayob, 2015: 8). Destinations can be likened to resolutions which individuals made; resolutions which may be attained or which may change over the course of an activist life. Studying a life trajectory shows that often there is no single end-result or destination which is cast in stone. As Islamists are confronted with choices between competing goods, destinations are reassessed and reconsidered and even adjusted. In some cases, desired destinations are reached and new destinations sought: “I sometimes felt a deep sense of resolution and composure (ṣṭmiʾnān) when listening to my interviewees. At other times, I heard continuous struggle and confrontation” (Tayob, 2015: 9). This study pursues Tayob’s contention that the life trajectories of Islamists can be likened to journeys which include these features. These journeys include Islamists’ quest to advocate socio-political change in society, and the personal struggles they underwent with the self within their private spaces.

In keeping with my submission that South African Islamist journeys are the sum of numerous journeys of everyday political Islam, which include conversion, I draw upon William James’s model of conversion. The biographies suggest that a conversion experience indicated the start of their Islamist journeys. The work and theories of psychologist William James are useful to explore conversions which Islamists have experienced, and raises many questions related to the meaning of religion for individuals. James emphasized the uniqueness of a religious experience for each individual, noting that both scholars of psychology and religion are in agreement with regards to the transformative power of these experiences. Conversion according to James does not refer to a theological transition, but to a type of moral conversion. The term essentially refers to a transformative episode whereby a group of ideas become dominant and profoundly affects the life path of the individual (James, 1902: 196).
To say that a man (sic) is “converted” means, in these terms that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual center of his energy (James, 1902: 200-201)

James proposed that emotions are central to conversion. Furthermore, feelings and emotions determine the conduct of the individual. For James, religion is about the personal, and he made a clear distinction between “religious life” and “religious experience.” The former, which is derived from a church or a community, is considered to be second-hand since it is inherited from those who had original and profound experiences. This religious life eventually becomes simply a dull habit (James, 1902: 29). In the Jamesian perspective it is in individual conversion experiences that the hub of religion lies. The internal transformation is sensed; rather than rationally perceived or anticipated. In this way James placed emphasis on the conversion experience as being an individual event; intensely personal and real to those who directly experience it yet often misconstrued by those who don’t.

In his study of the born-again experiences of Christian evangelists, James contended that conversion leads to a harmonious and complete religious self – often after individuals professed to being confused, doubtful and often in turmoil. These intense conversion experiences lead to religiously healthy individuals who ultimately greatly benefit society. In short, conversion was advantageous to both the individual and society at large. What ultimately set religious conversion apart is the depth and the manner in which it resulted in a complete change in the life journey of the individual (James, 1902: 234, 244).

James suggested that the strongest evidence for the existence of God is found in such personal, inner experience. Conversion becomes a liberating experience and allows an individual to lose all sense of fearfulness; giving him or herself over to God and simultaneously providing the convert with an absolute sense of security and fulfillment (James, 1902: 214-215). According to James, this explained why converts changed outwardly in a manner which confounded others. It is this drastic change in outward behavior which led James to conclude that while a deeply religious experience was personal, it had to be
authentic. Put differently, the visible external transformation in the individual is the tangible “proof” that an internal change, namely conversion, took place.

For James, the value of exploring personal religious experiences laid in its subjectivity. From the perspective of a religious person, beliefs and spirituality can provide purpose, perseverance and direction. The point was not to question the validity of an individual’s belief system; it was about understanding that religious experiences are intensely personal, that they can be transformative and they can shed light on the meaning of religion for individuals (James, 1902).

Overlooking historical context and only focusing on the personal could lead to a universalization of religious experiences wherein past and present are collapsed. Moreover, differences in race, class and gender and how these categories impact and inform life trajectories are overlooked. In this regard Brekus notes that life histories are invaluable in aiding to understand historical changes, but only if they reveal how political, social and religious structures both constrained and enabled individuals to act upon their beliefs (Brekus, 2014: 10). It is exactly this aspect of James’ work that Charles Taylor finds problematic. The latter maintains that James’ work has much to offer insofar as understanding religion is concerned, but points out two crucial shortcomings within James’ argument. Firstly, Taylor questions the notion of personal experience being the primary source of religion, and argues for the possibility of strengthening religious life through certain collective actions and religious rituals. In fact, religious inspiration is often found through forms of worship which take place within a social setting. Secondly, James did not take into account that experience could not be imagined outside of its theoretical and societal environment. Taylor asserts that “just as the life can’t be separated from its collective expression, so it can’t be isolated from a minimum of express formulation. The faith, the hope is in something” (Taylor, 2003: 24-26). The religious experience had to have originated somewhere, and needs to be communicated. In other words, experience which is isolated from its socially mediated environment is not possible.
The ideas, the understanding with which we live our lives, shape directly what we could call religious experience; and these languages, these vocabularies, are never those simply of an individual (Taylor, 2003: 28).

Taylor’s critique of James is born from a social anthropological perspective premised on the reality of being part of a collective. He considers the clear distinction made between “personal” and “institutional” religion to be problematic insofar as the former is seen to be the only authentic experience. Spirituality and religious practice in this sense become separated. This begs the question as to where and how this intense spiritual experience finds its expression. As Taylor points out, “Many people are not satisfied with a momentary sense of wow! They want to take it further, and they’re looking for ways of doing so” (Taylor, 2003: 116).

James’ work was foundational in understanding religious experience from a psychological perspective and exploring trajectories over a longer period. Undergoing conversion and resolving inner conflicts, through an intensely personal and individualistic experience, ought to result in a better society according to James. This is because James’ model considers the conversion experience to be a positive one. Conversion experiences are both the consequence of and caused by particular personal trajectories rooted in religion. Taylor reminds us that religious experiences, however, cannot be restricted or reduced to a particular episode in the life of a believer. The conversion experience may be a defining moment, but it does not encapsulate the totality of a religious life. Rather, the conversion experience is indicative of a starting point in a religious journey.

Moreover, merely acknowledging a transformative religious experience does not take into account possible inner conflict or future deviations encountered on this journey. William James aided us in understanding experience within religious journeys, but his framework is not sufficient to explain possible doubts or other unresolved issues which individuals underwent; or relationships formed with similar minded activists.
The everyday religious journey is frequently marked by struggle and dilemmas. To explore religious experiences over a period of time, and to gain insight into the lives of individuals who pursue a perceived moral identity, I further supplement the model of journeying. This approach is located within the broader context of lived religion.

Religion approached this way is situated amid the ordinary concerns of life, at the junctures of self and culture, family and social world. Lived religion cannot be separated from other practices of everyday life, from the ways that humans do other necessary and important things, or from other cultural structures and discourses (legal, political, medical, and so on) (Orsi, 2003: 172).

The value in this approach lies in that the ‘everyday’ and everyday practices become a mode of action. This model explores the relationship between ideal worldviews and practice and questions how this is negotiated in every life. It draws attention to what the narrator says about his or her own life, experiences and relationships within his or her own historical circumstances, culture and ideology (Orsi, 2003: 174). Neither private nor public is privileged; in other words, a religious life cannot be confined to certain spaces and certain times only. For a religious adherent, it is all part of the religious experience. Schielke sums it up by emphasizing the issue of studying and understanding individuals’ lives without reducing the relevance of religion and ideologies and still paying attention to the complexities of everyday lives (Schielke, 2010: 3).

If, on the other hand, we ask people about their specific concerns, experiences and trajectories, and if we look at the way in which people live lives of which religious beliefs and practices constitute a part, we gain an image in which religion is a highly immediate practice of making sense of one’s life, coming to terms with fear and ambivalence, all-present at times and absent at other times, very sincere in some moments, and contradictory in other moments (Schielke and Debevec, 2012: 1).
They are drawing from the concept of everyday practice developed by Michel de Certeau, who suggested that “everyday practices; ways of operating or doing things, no longer appear as merely the obscure background or social activity” (De Certeau cited in Schielke et al. 2012: 3). Their central contention is that, in order to understand any type of religious engagement, it is imperative that the researcher gives precedence to an empirical approach, acknowledging the complexity of everyday practices and experiences in ordinary lives (Schielke et al, 2012: 3). ‘Everyday religion’ contributes invaluably to explaining how individuals negotiate commitment to particular religious ideologies while balancing the complexities of everyday life. The challenge for those who seek coherent worldviews through religion is to find a balance and a space within pre-existing norms of everyday matters. Religious beliefs and rituals are but a part of a religious experience – making sense of the latter entails negotiation between what is considered ideal and what is being lived.

This approach does not privilege institutions, or texts, or ritual – everyday religion considers all these as media which form part of the making and unmaking of worlds and identities. “Religion is always religion-in-action, religion-in-relationships between people, between the ways the world is and the way people imagine or want it to be” (Orsi, 2003: 172). The core questions relate to what individuals do with religious worldviews they convert to, how they construct and shape their worlds and identities while they are simultaneously shaped by the worlds and identities they create. Religion approached in this way acknowledges that religion exists amidst the daily affairs of life and living and cannot be separated from everyday practices. This approach also draws attention to the reality that the same belief system which offers hope and faith can simultaneously lead to frustration and marginalization (Orsi, 2005).

Studies which look at the everyday include exploring particular practices and rituals performed by Christians and Muslims in various locations around the world. These studies cover topics like divination, the afterworld and syncretism from the perspective of the everyday. All these pieces illustrate how religion is ‘done’, and how individuals often show a degree of creativity in balancing the performance of these acts with their everyday lives (Schielke and Debevec, 2012). These studies shed light on the role of
religion in society by looking at what constitutes a religious experience for individuals. Others purport to look at everyday religion with specific focus on the ways in which religious commitment permeates the daily lives of individuals. In these studies, the everyday is however distinctly regarded as activities which are not religious events and do not take place within religious institutions (Ammerman, 2007: 5). With specific focus on American and European cases, Ammerman shows in a collection of essays that the nature of everyday religion is diverse, at times inconsistent, and often filled with uncertainties as to what is the ‘right’ thing to do (Ammerman, 2007).

Toguslu’s collection of ethnographies centers on the lives of Muslims performing apparently banal acts relating to food, art and leisure time, exploring how individuals make sense of the religion and their everyday lives (Toguslu, 2015). In line with the works of De Certeau, these studies take a “bottoms-up” approach and provide “an insightful picture of the ambiguities and the dilemmas of Muslims with regard to their convictions and practices, but also of their flexibility, their adaptive qualities, inventiveness and innovative capacities” (Sunier, 2015: 10). Muslims are not one-dimensional, and identity reconstruction through these practices features prominently within these studies. As any other group, they traverse a multitude of allegiances and selves. Essentially, it is suggested that identities are reconfigured through the “ambiguous, non-linear, autonomous, controversial and complex meanings of everyday lives” (Toguslu, 2015: 218). However, the authors argue for “being Muslim” as being an ethical project rooted within mainstream interpretations of Islam. Rather than defining “Muslim” as being explicitly religious, the editors make clear that the term is used as a cultural category. For this reason, the broad framework used employs morality, ethics and normativity as guiding themes. Still, it is their commitment to doing what they perceive as being the ‘right’ thing which results in identity re-construction.

Based on fieldwork done on everyday lives in Muslim-majority Egypt, Schielke considers the “excessive privileging of religious identity and action in people’s lives” to be problematic, and argues for the notion of viewing ideologies like Islamism as a grand scheme (Schielke, 2010: 14). Grand schemes of this kind are characterized as being “external and superior to everyday experience, a higher and reliable measure
and guideline of life” (Schielke, 2010: 14). They represent an apparent perfection which individuals can invoke when needed, and contravene at other times – yet everyday contradictions and ambiguities never shake their credibility. In this regard Schielke argues for less emphasis on Islam, and more focus on what religion means to individuals within their everyday lives.

Ethnographies like that of Saba Mahmood which focus on women within the Egyptian mosque movement illustrates the importance of focusing on individual everyday experiences in a very different way (Mahmood, 2005). Mahmood shows how women shape their moral personhood and assert their religious selves in both the public and private realms (Mahmood, 2005). Through these studies, mainstream understandings of moral subjectivities in Muslim women are interrogated. Soares and Osella highlight the value in the works of Saba Mahmood (2005) and Charles Hirschkind (2006) and contend that works like these shift the focus from flawed “deterministic binaries of resistance and subordination” which frequently inform tools of analysis when studying Muslims in Islamist movements (Soares and Osella, 2009: 10). According to Soares and Osella, however, Mahmood’s focus on piety and ethical self-fashioning tacitly disregards the complexities of the everyday religious life which may also include struggle and ambivalence (Soares and Osella, 2009: 11).

Our own ethnographic research indicates how people move in and out of formal or informal religious groups, often shifting their allegiances, for example, according to the rising popularity of a particular mosque or preacher. They sometimes simply grow bored or lose interest, or domestic and work duties might take a toll on the time at their disposal; life crises, such as illness or a death, might lead some to reconsider religious commitments and orientations. People lead their everyday lives in complex cultural, religious, and political environments, evaluating and responding to different competing local and global media messages (Soares and Osella, 2009: 11).
Schielke adds another dimension to this discussion by contending that a Muslim may be a committed activist or an Islamist, but focusing only on piety and morality could essentially lead to the particular ideological paradigm subscribed to simply being replicated and reproduced (Schielke, 2010: 2). In other words, with too much emphasis placed on piety it is easy to lose sight of the lived realities of Islamists - daily lives which include work, domestic duties and families. This dearth is apparent in the literature on the lives and activities of Islamists who are often either idealized or condemned. Idealized as epitomizing piety, virtuousness and morality; or condemned for endorsing a belief system which is incompatible with modern, liberal ideals. The point should not be to reduce the importance of religion in the lives of Islamists; it is to draw attention to the fact that the everyday lives of Islamists take place in a complex web of cultural, social, political and religious influences. In this regard Marsden shows in a study on Muslims in Pakistan that their understanding of being virtuous “requires intense intellectual and emotional engagement, informed by multiple aesthetic and affective values, and is fraught with ambivalence” (Marsden, 2005 cited in Soares, 2009: 11).

Islamism as an ideology represents the ideal, the revered and the pure; while the everyday is about the mundane life of the religious adherent with all its ordinariness and complexities. Studies on life trajectories therefore need to include the everyday struggles and dilemmas which individuals faced in their quest to be ‘good’ and committed Muslims, whilst also wanting to be a devout parent or child, have a professional career and belonging to a community.

Tayob’s study focuses on MYM members only, and he furthermore confines himself to activist’s religious engagement within the movement. Activists interviewed for this study belonged to different Islamist movements. In addition, their journeys are viewed through the lens of everyday lived religion. In doing so, it recognizes that religious engagement cannot be confined to moments of activism only, but encompassed a lived reality in its complexity. While this study follows the view of Tayob that being Muslim in Islamist terms can best be understood through the metaphor of journeys, the narratives collected for this research study point towards two or more, parallel (and at times) competing journeys.
These simultaneous journeys led to the construction of two, or more distinct identities - which continually intersect and overlap. One journey took place within a group and through overt political activism, while others were happening within the everyday life of Islamists – often within their private domains.

The arguments by Schielke and others as outlined above opens up the space to include aspects of daily life within Islamist journeys. Religious activism, while rooted within a religious narrative, is interwoven with a myriad seemingly mundane, often ambiguous, but always significant everyday encounters. These journeys start with conversion to Islamism, but show themselves to be evolving and navigating through local and global politics and everyday life. Their journeys often include multiple conversions which then amend their destinations.

Exploring life trajectories as journeys of everyday political Islam shows that a religious life cannot be confined to certain spaces and certain times only. Nor is religious engagement limited to activities within a movement. In this way this study challenges Schielke’s view that ideology as a grand scheme can be regarded as being external to everyday life. The narratives in this research study show that Islamists embodied and internalized ideology and often viewed everyday challenges and ambiguities through the lens of Islamism. Ideological engagement extended into their personal spaces and informed the way they spoke, dressed, managed their families and in most cases, even their professional lives. They invoked Islamist ideology when faced with personal dilemmas; interpreting and adapting it according to what they perceived to be the ‘correct’ way.

This thesis further questions studies which delve into individual experiences yet only focus on ethical self-fashioning. The individual religious experience includes a lived reality in its entirety. A degree of intellectual grappling and a consistent questioning of available choices are clear in the narratives of the women interviewed for this project. Everyday Islamism, particularly in their private spaces, is an arduous and difficult exercise which requires constant self-reflection for the Islamists.
Journeys of everyday Islamism allows for critical questions to be raised about the meaning of religion for individuals and also the role of religion within society. It shows their commitment to an ideal and reveals how identities were constantly and consistently reconfigured. Their journeys clearly evidence the intersection of religion and their vision of the ideal with the categories of race, class and gender. Islamists may have undergone a transformative experience which prompted them to become active in the South African Islamist movement, but everyday religion shows how their daily lives were shaped by this worldview and by extension, how this impacted on society. Religious experience in this context can be understood as the search by a religious adherent for a sense of coherence in his or her own world, which included a collective, and a personal, individual identity. How ordinary people recall and re-assemble their religion-as-lived experiences and what they constitute as significant is what shapes this study.

**Methodology**

An attempt to explain or interpret individual behavior requires an approach whereby the individual becomes the unit of analysis. Interviews are helpful in revealing why individuals make particular life-choices at particular periods of their lives. A life-history interview in particular is defined as “any retrospective account by the individual of his [or her] life in whole or part, written or oral form, that has been elicited or prompted by another person” (Watson and Watson-Franke, 1985: 2). Interviewees were asked to reconstruct a particular period during his or her life; and/or recall particular thoughts and feelings which prompted particular actions at the time.

Understanding the emotions, motivations and the reasoning of any person necessitates the investigation of the perceptions and interpretations of the individual. This can only be achieved through methods which entail collecting data at an individual level; in other words through approaches such as face-to-face interviews and observation of individual behavior. Methodologically, social psychologists rely on data collected at the individual level to reveal insights relating to the behavior of individuals. These include inquiries on subjective variables such as motivations, beliefs and emotions. Psychologists emphasize the
fact that individuals live in a perceived world: thus face-to-face interviews and personal narratives are considered to be extremely helpful to find out how these variables are interpreted (Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2010: 4-5).

This study has been completed through interviews conducted with individuals who were active during the liberation struggle from the 1970s to 1994. Interviewees related situations they were faced with and explained to me how they navigated around personal challenges whilst staying firm in their resolve to be activists. These often seemingly insignificant incidents are noted in full in order to reveal their complexity and multi-layered nature. This is in line with the Geertzian anthropological “thick description” imperative which necessitates the incorporation of substantial portions of interview transcripts (Geertz, 2003: 143-168). This enables the reader to be fully acquainted with the contexts in which particular statements were made. Another aspect that requires mentioning is my decision to focus on women activists only. After careful contemplation, and having already conducted two interviews with men, I came to the conclusion that women, on the apparent, were more open to divulging the personal challenges they faced in everyday life. This could be due to any variety of reasons: The fact that I am close in age to many of the interviewees and the fact that I am a woman myself may be among these. Moreover, the literature review indicates that the narratives of women have for the most part been neglected. For these reasons I opted to interview only female activists. I am not using a feminist lens nor did I set out to highlight gender as a category. I probed for responses in line with the framework as outlined, and document what interviewees deemed as significant during the course of their lives.

Some individuals I contacted declined being interviewed. This was due to a variety of reasons. Though I explained the research question, one person expressed reluctance at speaking on behalf of a movement, whilst another felt that she would simply be uncomfortable speaking about her activist past. Some individuals were concerned about divulging personal issues they were confronted with and expressed apprehension as to what I may do with the information. One individual heard about my research from another and contacted me to offer her story.
Fieldwork was carried out in Johannesburg and Cape Town, South Africa. Of the two activists I intended interviewing in Durban, one had relocated to Cape Town and the second one was interviewed when she was in Johannesburg for work. I originally planned on speaking to many more activists, but confined it to three from Johannesburg, two from Durban and three from Cape Town. In order to contact individuals, I obtained telephone numbers from a variety of sources, also using social media where it was necessary.

All the interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews. All the interviewees were comfortable in the English language and having the conversation recorded. The ages of participants range from mid-fourties to mid-sixties. In terms of class, this was not considered at all, though certain similarities could be noted in those who came from similar social classes. The bibliography lists only the pseudonyms of participants, as well as the dates and places of the interviews. In the transcripts, I incorporated English transliteration of commonly used Arabic words as they were used by interviewees.

Participants were given an information sheet containing the details of the researcher,¹ as well as a consent form which they were asked to sign. While some of them requested anonymity, others did not object to having their names mentioned. I opted to use pseudonyms for all interviewees; the primary reason being that some individuals were known in the small Muslim community and I did not want preconceived assumptions about them to overshadow the context of the research. Certain details are deliberately kept vague as requested by some interviewees. This includes ages, occupations and exact dates. I opened the conversation with a brief outline of the research question, and then asked interviewees to narrate a brief sketch of their lives. I asked if they still consider themselves activists. All of them identified themselves as being activists in the past and present. Not all of them presently identify as Islamists, though they are clear that religion and ideology still guides them. I have only noted specific racial groupings, for example ‘Indian’ or ‘Malay’, if the respondent identified herself as such. Likewise, only if a respondent classified herself as being ‘middle or working class’ do I make mention of it.

¹ See Appendix A
Participants were asked to recollect whether there was any one incident in particular which they considered transformative. All of them recalled particular incidents or episodes which led them to an activist life. Questions relating to why and how they became involved in a particular Islamist movement were asked. I also asked them to recall moments or incidents in wherein they found themselves facing personal dilemmas, ambiguities, and possible conflicts, and how they navigated and negotiated around or through these moments. For the most part, I recognized that participants needed to delve deep and thus at times I found myself facilitating the interview, interjecting with questions when I required some clarity. Only one interview lasted for less than an hour, most of the others were in excess of two hours. The interviews reveal how each conversation differed, but individuals all highlight different aspects of their religious engagements and everyday experiences which they considered to be significant.

Limitations/ Challenges and possible directions for future research

One of the challenges is to not reduce the experiences of interviewees to micro politics only, but to take into account the macro political context within which they were situated. This is particularly relevant given that the interviewees for this study were engaged in various expressions of anti-apartheid politics. Living in a country where socio-political injustices were institutionalized and the intervention of the state in the everyday lives of citizens was explicit, meant that the broader historical circumstances of Islamist experiences were similar. However, on a micro-level, conditions varied immensely and in order for the everyday experiences to be foregrounded, a careful balance needed to be maintained between macro-politics, micro-politics and the everyday. This proved to be difficult as some individuals saw their anti-apartheid activism as being all-encompassing, and described every aspect of their lives through activism and ideology. Others recognized some of the personal challenges they experienced as a result of activism. Still some others were at first reluctant to divulge personal incidents which revealed contradictions in relation to activist ideals. Conversations often felt deeply personal and emotive, with more than one interviewee noting that they had for decades not given any thought to particular incidents yet understood retrospectively how some of them were life-changing.
Another challenge was to be sufficiently aware of the nuances within the interview wherein individuals described experiences as understood by themselves. In other words, as social actors, interviewees became both narrators and interpreters of their histories and experiences. My own interpretation and analysis needed to be placed alongside their narratives and care exercised to recognize the narrator as the primary social agent – thus steering the direction of this research while simultaneously exercising caution to keep the research questions in mind. As Orsi points out, any study focusing on everyday religion requires the researcher to pay careful attention to the conditions under which stories unfold, while recognizing that everyday practices, ideas and the individuals’ conceptions of past experiences are all mediums through which activists engaged with their world (Orsi, 2003: 174).

Given that the majority of the South African Muslim community, and in particular the Islamist movements, consists of those categorized as Malay or Indian, only participants from these groups were approached. While I made enquiries about individuals historically classified as ‘African’ and who were active in the Islamist movement, I did not have success. While this is a limitation of this study, it could also be regarded as a possible direction for further research. Other limitations included those of a practical nature; for example it was sometimes difficult to find mutually convenient times during which to conduct the interview. This often resulted in interviews being delayed, at times for weeks. In addition, electronic equipment breaking down at the most inopportune times meant having to source new interviewees.

While it could be argued that, given that interviewees are all women, a feminist lens may have been helpful to interrogate their everyday experiences, I maintain that doing so would have limited this particular study. By using more fluid theoretical concepts, I contend that the categories of race, class and gender surfaced in ways which the narrator chose, rather than being imposed by the researcher. However, the narratives contained in this study could potentially serve as research material for feminist interpretation. The latter may lead to a comparative study between the religious experiences of male and
female Islamists. Finally, there are many more voices out there which have not been heard, and further research is imperative to record the ‘struggle’ stories of South African Islamists.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter Two expounds on the value biographies, life-histories and narrative analysis bring to the study of Islamism in general and Muslim South African anti-apartheid activists in particular. The discussion centers on the value of biographical research within religious studies, with specific reference to the question of identity. Since consideration needs to be given to what was historically, both globally and locally, relevant to the lives of the Islamists interviewed, Chapter Three and Four create a platform from which to view the narratives. Chapter Three identifies Islamism. This includes a brief overview of Islamism, with the discussion centering on the personal dimension of Islamism. Chapter Four contextualizes the emergence of the South African Islamist movements within the broader context of global Islamism. This Chapter discusses the movements to which respondents belonged, namely Qibla, Muslim Youth Movement, Muslim Students’ Association and the Call of Islam. Chapter Five and Six form the core of this study. The former presents the biographies of the eight individuals interviewed. Based on the interviews, Chapter Six discusses the key findings of this thesis. Chapter Seven concludes this thesis.

Conclusion

The primary aim of this study is to interrogate the religious experiences of activists who at some point of their lives converted to Islamism. The theoretical framework draws from Abdulkader Tayob’s metaphor of Islamist activism as a journey, supplement with James on conversion, Taylor on the shared language of a religious life, and the framework of the everyday. Rather than approach religious experience as a purely theological event, this thesis focuses on the everyday life of the activist, while remaining cognizant of the significance of religious activist ideology. Through semi-structured interviews, I focus on moments of conversion and other significant events which caused them to adopt an activist identity. Religion was
pivotal to all these activists. The challenge was to resolve and/or negotiate through the intricacies of daily life while trying to remain true to the ideology of Islamism.

Unlike many of the studies identified in this chapter, South Africa’s Muslim population is a relatively small minority, yet the Islamist movement made a huge contribution to the South African landscape - to the liberation struggle in general and to the life courses of many individuals in particular. Studying the realm of everyday religiosity, while being mindful of historical circumstances and societal context, allows for individual narratives to be seen in all in their richness, vividness and intensity. In this way this thesis contributes to understanding the significance of Islamism in the lives of ordinary activists; it reveals how the religious imagination engages with everyday issues and remain committed even through frustrations and tribulations. Above all, it documents the biographies of eight ordinary South African Muslim women who had an ideal vision of what socio-political justice ought to be, who committed themselves to this cause, and whose personal everyday struggles didn’t deter them – rather it further incentivized them to become better Islamists.
Chapter 2

Biographies as a genre

The appeal of biographical research is that it is exploring, in diverse and interpretive ways, how individual accounts of life experience can be understood within the contemporary cultural and structural settings and is thereby helping to chart the major societal changes that are underway, but not merely at some broad social level. Biographical method has the important merit of aiding the task of understanding major social shifts, by including how new experiences are interpreted by individuals within families, small groups and institutions (Roberts, 2002: 5).

Introduction

Life histories, biographies and personal narratives are not an entirely new area of literature, and have been around for many years. However, what has become known as the ‘biographical method’ has enjoyed increasing significance within the social sciences since the 1980s. This could be attributed to many reasons; among them the fact that it became necessary to “pry open the different dimensions of lived totality” (Gottfried, 1998 cited in Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf; 2000: 1). Studying biographies sheds light and questions many assumptions regarding the personal and social being. These include, but are not limited to, issues of individual agency and identity construction. This chapter explores how and when biographical research emerged, including some discussion of the challenges and central debates within the field. Thereafter follows a discussion on the value of biographical research within religious studies. The final section centers on biographies, religion and identity.
Emergence of biographical research

Biographical research encompasses a broad range within the field of qualitative studies. In this regard, Denzin indicates that:

A family of terms combines to shape the biographical method…..method, life, self, experience, epiphany, case, autobiography, ethnography story, discourse, narrative, narrator, fiction, history, personal history, oral history, case history, case study, writing presence, difference, life history, life story, self-story and personal experience story (Denzin, 1989: 27).

The ‘biographical turn’ in particular refers to an overall shift in thinking that has led to widespread and transformative changes within a range of disciplines, establishing itself as contributing invaluably to various fields of study (Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf; 2000:1). This was also known as the ‘subjective’ turn, whereby personal meanings, rather than just the social, started enjoying privilege (Chamberlayne et al, 2000: 245; Denzin, 2009). Caine further points out that, within oral history in particular, biographies could very effectively be used to illustrate how differences in race, class, gender and religion could affect the historical experiences and the understanding thereof (Caine, 2010: 2).

Prior to this, functionalist perspectives, emphasizing the role of social structures, dominated. This approach was challenged by conflict perspectives which in turn highlighted social inequalities. Conflict analysis was underpinned by Marxian theory and attempted not only to understand society, but also to change it. The dominance of Marxist theory within the humanities started declining by the 1970s; becoming even more marked by the 1980s with the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Because Marxist thought concerned itself with a materialist conception of history, i.e. a focus on social and economic processes, attention was diverted away from individuals and individual biographies (Caine, 2010: 17-18).

While both functionalist and conflict approaches continue to inform sociological analysis, a fundamental critique levelled at both of these approaches relates to the manner in which society was envisaged in very
broad terms. In other words, ‘society’ itself became an entity in which individual lives were described as a mélange of ‘family’, ‘social class’ etc. In this sense, these two perspectives focused on macro-levels; i.e. the social structures by which societies are typified. Macro and micro levels were seemingly disconnected which led social scientists to re-assess the prominence given to the everyday and situational in the lives of individuals. By according more legitimacy to subjective experience(s), historians and sociologists were exploring common grounds, even though a myriad issues surrounding agency, memory and the meanings therein needed exploration. Within this context a burgeoning interest developed in biographical methods, which enabled scholars to explore the links between the personal and the social² (Roberts, 2002: 4-5; Caine: 2010, 2-3; Chamberlayne et al: 2000: 1-2).

Utilizing biographical methods essentially denotes the collecting and interpreting of the lives of others in order to contribute to scholarship in the social sciences. These methods, while acknowledging the dimension of agency, recognize that socio-political circumstances are indelibly linked to the objectives and experiences of individuals. The turn to biographical approaches not only responded to, but also raised many questions insofar as the individual experience and understandings of society are concerned. For this reason the method has been adopted in a range disciplines, including sociology, psychology and oral history. Within the differing disciplines different areas are focused on. Within psychology for example, researchers focus on issues of the self and use life history to assist in therapy and counselling. Sociologists place focus on the individual and his or her place within society - delving into meanings and relationships therein. Oral historians³ have made ample use of biographies since the 1970s, stressing how these were invaluable in revealing the multiple layers of historical developments while simultaneously locating the ‘subject’ within a particular context with regards to race, class, gender or religion. Lewis

² Roberts points out that the various disciplines each utilize personal narratives for their own ‘purpose’. Whereas in oral history life histories may be closely linked with historical occurrences and an individuals’ interpretation thereof; sociologists may place more emphasis on the significance of personal experiences, social relationships and individual as a part of a broader society (Roberts, 2002: 22).

³ Oral history is broadly defined as the collecting of “spoken memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews” (Ritchie cited in Roberts, 2002: 93). Oral historians concern themselves with the individual’s interpretation of past experience and reconstructing history (Roberts, 2002: 22). The domain of oral history is often said to have taken the lead in adopting life-history methods.
corroborates the notion that the use of biographical methods has contributed invaluably to many different areas of study:

These included the oral history movement that was interested in seeking new historical perspectives from the bottom-up; feminist researchers’ efforts to recover women’s hidden narratives, action researchers who wished to empower research subjects in education and social work, medical researchers concerned with obtaining better patient histories and finally, post-modernists who saw value in destabilizing grand narratives and celebrating diverse accounts of social life (Lewis, 2008: 560).

The notion of unravelling wider historical patterns and societal structures through biographies found wide appeal amongst feminist historians. Given the transformational agenda of the latter, they drew abundantly from both oral and biographical sources to show the oppression of women. Furthermore, using women as oral sources allowed feminist historians to challenge accepted assumptions insofar as gender inequalities were concerned⁴ (Chamberlayne et al, 2000: 5). In this regard Gluck contends that:

Even if the interviewee herself is not a feminist; it is the creation of a new type of material on women; it is the validation of women’s experiences; it is the communication among women of different generations; it is the discovery of our own roots and the development of a continuity which has been denied us in traditional historical accounts (Gluck, 2002: 17).

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⁴ Oral history, as well as microhistory, (which included black history, post-colonial history and women’s history) led to more focus being placed on marginalized groups. In this way there was acknowledgement of differences in individuals’ experiences based on their race, class and gender (Caine, 2010: 3).
Chamberlayne et al suggest that the acknowledgement given to the significance of individualism, identity and reflexivity\(^5\) undoubtedly contributed to the development of biographical methods. Caine points out that:

> As the pre-eminence of class division gave way to concerns about categories which often cut across class boundaries, including gender, ethnicity and sexual identity, so too the large-scale theories and analyses of historical and social change which had been widely accepted across the twentieth century were called into question and seen as ‘grand narratives’ which privileged the views and perspectives of particular dominant groups while silencing or suppressing those of subordinate one (Caine, 2010: 2).

From this perspective renewed attention was accorded to individual lives and experiences - thereby challenging theories advocating social determinism.

The area of biographies has not been without its share of challenges and many issues continue to be debated. While biographies have been accepted and used by many historians, the area is still regarded by some as an inadequate form of inquiry. This is largely due to the concern that too much emphasis on the individual will lead to a neglect of broader and more significant historical issues pertaining to socio-political and economic developments\(^6\) (Caine, 2010: 19). Brekus affirms this, contending that a common oversight made by biographers is to universalize the experiences of their ‘subjects’ - oftentimes neglecting to contextualize these within a particular time and specific space.

Another central debate relates to issues of social structure versus individual agency (Heinz and Kruger, 2001: 30). This is also referred to as the ‘realism’ versus ‘constructionism’ question (Roberts, 2002: 7).

\(^5\) See Anthony Giddens who characterized reflexivity as being a central feature of the post-modern state. He defines reflexivity as being the condition whereby individuals are for the most part responsible for the conditions wherein they find themselves, and conversely, how they need to manage and adapt to these (self-created conditions) (Giddens, 1990, 63-64).

\(^6\) Caine contends that many historians recognize the invaluable contributions biographies made to the field over time. This purported imbalance, though addressed, still plagues the field because experiences can be represented in a myriad of ways by the researcher. Thus it is not necessarily because an imbalance indeed exists, but differences in representations and writing (Caine: 2010: 19)
At the one extreme, for realists, the constructionists’ dependence on the text implies a withdrawal from any notion of reality, resulting in interpretation feeding upon interpretation “in a swirl of language and symbols” (Roberts, 2002: 7). This view, according to realists, disregards socio-political context and lacks any historical insight. On the other hand, constructionists consider realists to be over-simplistic in their view that the life stories can offer any empirical truth.

In the context of this study, I follow the argument that biographies, as a tool of analysis, allow for the interconnectedness of the macro and micro levels of individual lives. Similar to the way in which religious practices and rituals are employed as sources of evidence to shed light on the significance of religion, life trajectories and biographies can, as Tayob says, “illuminate religious experiences and phenomena in their own right. And they need not provide a map of universal religiosity, but a window to the nature of a religious phenomenon or tradition over time” (Tayob, 2015:3). Empirical studies which focus on biographies, allow researchers to explore the constant and consistent intersection of the everyday, the social and the historically contextual.

Remaining perceptive to the complexities contained within biographies of individuals while being mindful of their historical environment is certainly fraught with challenges. I suggest though, that in order to gain an understanding of a particular religious phenomenon, namely Islamism, it is necessary to delve into biographies and view these through the lens of everyday lived religion. In line with oral historians, a focus on everyday religion through biographies takes a ‘bottoms-up’ approach. Whereas the oral historian will place more emphasis on the individual’s interpretation, this study highlights the individual experience of religion.

**Biography and Religion**

Biography as a genre has also increased in popularity insofar as explaining individuals’ religious experiences and casts light on how “individuals have both made and been made by history” (Brekus, 2014: 8). The notion of using experience as a source of knowledge is a feature of the modern world
according to Brekus, who further argues that scholars of religion have also pursued this area with vigor. These personal narratives offer scholars the opportunity to interrogate concerns relating to the meanings and functions of religion; not only for individuals, but also for society. “At its best, biography not only introduces us to the varieties of human experience but also encourages us to reflect on how we create—and are created by—the times in which we live” (Brekus, 2014: 9, 12).

Many religious historians, like social scientists in other disciplines, probed the link between individual agency and societal structures. Exploring personal religious experiences offers some perspective into this relationship, by contesting the dominance of ‘great men’ biographies and the notion that societal change is only possible through the actions of significantly famous individuals.

Religious encounters can be expressed and experienced in various ways; either through conversion or some other spiritual event. While (religious) experiences may differ, it is the act of narrating these that may lead to a sense of completion. “Narrative is motivated by a search for meaning; when people tell stories, essentially they bring order and direction to their lives” (Roof, 1993: 298). Searching for coherence and deeper meaning in life is a shared objective for religious individuals. Through re-telling, seemingly disjointed fragments within the life of an individual intersect and connect to create a sense of order and reason. Life histories embedded within religion endow the individual with a sense of purpose, and affirms the identity of the narrator (Roof, 1993: 299). It is through narratives that subtle nuances and layers in individual interpretations of religious meanings are revealed.

Using biographies in this study enables me to show how not only the external, namely societal factors, nor only the internal, namely religious experiences, agency and identity can be privileged on its own. “Material social conditions, discourses and practices interweave with subjectively experienced desires and identities and people make choices, reconstruct pasts and imagine futures within the range of possibilities open to them” (Andrews, 2007: 1). Thus biographical approaches also address the dualism which exists between society and individuals or the public and the private.
In a world marked by post-modern realities such as less predictability and the end of the meta-narrative, greater emphasis has been placed on the individual and self-expression. These realities have in fact allowed for more scope within the realm of individual biographies. This opens new lines of enquiry towards exploring individual understandings of religion – as opposed to viewing religious experience as a homogenous and a linear process throughout the life-cycle. Employing this data could, in addition, lead to better understandings of broader religious developments. Biographies in this way allow for the accommodation of individuals’ different understandings and engagements with religion to be explored in detail.

With reference to “spiritual narratives”, Roof notes that:

What dictates human development throughout the life cycle is less one's "stage" in life than one's changing commitments to fundamental human values; life is experienced less as having met and resolved challenges once and for all, and more as repeatable challenges to be resolved in different ways at differing times (Roof, 1993: 305).

The religious human being turns to religion to re-script and re-construct his or her life in the face of particular encounters and occurrences confronted at a given time. In this view religious meanings and involvement adapts and evolves throughout the life-cycle of the individual. Commitment to different aspects of religion at different time frames may be materially manifested, while other aspects can only be revealed through narratives. In this way biographies become a window into the religious lives of individuals. This notion of re-writing a religious script and reconstructing a religious identity is of particular significance in this study wherein individuals relate how they contested mainstream understandings of Islam and adopted Islamist identities within a volatile political climate.

**Biographies, Religion and Identity**

Religious worldviews are not created within a void and religion is no more regarded as being a rigid, ‘ascribed for life’ identity. Practice thereof and commitment to it is considered to be voluntary, enabling a
more meaningful personal religious experience (Roof, 1993: 308). While Roof’s research on biographies refer particularly to American and European countries, some of his findings are relevant to the narratives of the South Africans I am interviewing.

The issue of marginality and constructed religious identities is particularly pertinent. In this regard Tayob emphasizes and expounds on the constructivist nature of modern Islamist identities (Tayob, 2009: 262). The more recent history of Islam resulted in a turning point in the formation of Muslim identities (Tayob, 2009: 261). By thematically exploring the construction of three broad ‘styles of action’ namely reformists, Islamists and traditionalists, more light can be shed on the meaning of modern Muslim identities (Tayob, 2009: 264-265; 276). Employing the work of Charles Taylor and Franz Fanon as a starting point, Tayob shows how present-day Muslim identities are constructed, though historically and culturally contextual:

Symbols of identity dominated developments in the economic and political spheres, but personal constructions of identities were also under way in the choice of dress codes, art, education and, of course, religious devotion. The political and economic events sometimes obscured the less dramatic turn towards identity on an individual, personal level (Tayob, 2009: 261).

Beyond public expressions of religion in for example dress code, religion, more than any identity foci, speaks to the private self and the commitment to the divine. It is this extremely private dimension which can only be revealed through exploring the biographies of individuals recounted in their own words. Focusing on the biographies of South African Islamists, Tayob affirms that the search for a clear religious identity, which gave emphasis to and reflected a religious ideology, was a consistent feature of both groups and individuals throughout the twenty-first century7 (Tayob, 2014: 2).

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7 This became particularly evident in the wake of globalization and the weakened nation-state. Robertson suggests four distinct dimensions of the global-human condition. These are humankind, the system of societies, societies and the individual. Globalization, particularly at the level of society and the individual, has led to the relativization of identities. This globally generalized conception of the individual (within) a state-run society, has to a large degree
By tapping into individual experiences through narratives or biographies, this study reveals uniquely nuanced understandings of the religious experience of individuals. While biographies offer Islamists’ distinct accounts of what prompted them to embark on what is perceived to be “true” Islam, their stories also reveal much about how Islam was interpreted during a particular period in a particular space. Biographies can offer insights into the noteworthy daily encounters experienced by individuals, as well as reveal the misgivings they may have had. Studying the life trajectories of South African Islamists reveal the multiple layers of socio-political developments while simultaneously locating the ‘subject’ within a particular context with regards to race, class, gender and religion. Overall, it is only through the personal accounts of Islamists that more understanding can be gained about their commitment to activism, their religious experiences and their search for an authentic identity.

**Conclusion**

This chapter showed how biographical research contributed to developments within the sphere of social sciences and specifically to the category of religion. While the area of biographical research is regarded by some as an ineffectual form of scholarship, others have shown it to be an invaluable window into the religious lives of individual. Biographies have in recent decades become an invaluable source of data for many social scientists who agree that personal narratives reveal not only the multilayered facets of religious engagement, it also reveals much about historical patterns and societal structures.

A study of biographies presents an ideal opportunity to gain personal perspectives on religious engagement as defined by activists. Personal biographies reveal the degree of religious commitment, and whether a turn to activism presented a conscious decision to reconstruct an authentic religious identity. Moreover, it asks if Islamism provided a means for inscribing identity within private spaces when individuals confronted personal challenges. Looking at life trajectories as told by individual’s show how their identities have been reconstructed in the face of changing socio-political climates.

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motivated the search for a particular and indigenous identity. The historical and sociological significance of religion as the “primal source of political legitimation” renders it as an ideal source of identity (Robertson, 1985).
Chapter 3

Islamism

It is thus a modern movement in the sense of belonging to the modern era of politics: the epoch of mass politics. It is nonetheless a much older trend in Muslim politics and in Islamic theological thinking that challenges established (‘traditional’) religious and political authorities in the name of a ‘return’ to the mode of religious and political governance inspired by the time of the Prophet and the so-called Golden Age of Islam (Volpi, 2011: 2).

Introduction

Religious revival or the public resurgence of religion from around the middle of the twentieth century resulted in a wealth of scholarship on this topic. In particular, the emergence of Islam into the political landscape forced scholars to grapple with the implications for the state, society as well as for individuals. Given the long history of Islamism and the fact that scholarship has evolved tremendously, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to encapsulate all the current debates within the sphere of Islamism. In line with the theme of this study, this chapter therefore focuses on the personal dimension of Islamism, paying particular attention to Islamist identity and the search for authenticity. I commence with the question of situating and defining Islamism, before proceeding with the personal perspective of Islamism. I then show some examples of how Islamist life trajectories have been approached in scholarship.

What is ‘Islamism’?

The term Islamism was coined during the 1970s and 80s in specific response to the Iranian Revolution and the ‘Mujahidin’ struggle against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Typically, the Islamist project challenged the existing socio-political order – adopting local characteristics in response to specific local
issues (while drawing from global ideas and ideologues). Islamists could essentially be identified by their critique of prevailing religious authorities as well as a condemnation of the west. Through the use of reinvented understandings of the Islamic tradition, Islamists aimed to not only challenge existing socio-political orders, but also to transform them.

Islamic revival in the last 20th century has seen various manifestations, and at least two distinct groups can be identified: movements who are apolitical and focus on personal reform and those who overtly agitate for political transformation. The former group is possibly best represented by the Tablighi-Jamaat (est. 1928) in India. This category could also include Sufi movements and certain strands of the Salafi movement which emerged in Saudi Arabia.\textsuperscript{8} It is however the explicitly political movements which have become the activist face of Islamism, and which has been dominant in terms of public religious engagement of individuals. The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is generally recognized as being the forerunner as far as Islamic religio-political movements in modern times are concerned, and is referred to as the first temporality of Islamism (Burgat, 2011: 30). The MB was established in 1928 by Hassan Al-Banna to counter both the secularist trend and western imperialist domination in Egypt (Bayat, 1998: 160; Humphreys, 1982: 76; Demant, 2006: xxviii). The Brotherhood’s teachings took on a more concrete dimension with the writings of Sayed Qutb; considered to be the movement’s principal ideologue. He shifted Islamist activism in a direction which was neither traditionalist nor modernist\textsuperscript{9} (Demant, 2006: 98; Bayat, 2005: 893). Sayed Qutb was influenced by the writings of Abu Al Ala al-Mawdudi, the Pakistani founder and leader of the Jamat-i-Islami, who was a critic of Western intellectual colonization (Demant, 2006: 87, 76).

\textsuperscript{8} Wictorowicz points to three possible reasons which eventually led to Saudi Salafis becoming radicalized. Firstly, among the Wahhabiyya existed a ‘radical wing’ since the 1920s, secondly through the teachings of Sayyid Qutb and thirdly as a consequence of the Soviet war against Afghanistan. The latter factor was compounded when the Saudi regime allowed American troops to be stationed in the kingdom during the Gulf war of 1990-1991 (Wictorowicz, 2011: 278). Broadly speaking though, Wictorowicz differentiates between two categories of Salafis. The jihadi faction is seen as being more extremist and anti-west in their rhetoric. They believe that the use of violence is justified in confrontation with the west and also in the establishment of an Islamic state. The second group, namely the non-violent Salafis, focuses on personal reform and emphatically opposes the idea of fighting a ruler or killing another Muslim (Wictorowicz, 2005: 87, 76).

\textsuperscript{9} For further reading on Islamist groups and a later split within the Muslim Brotherhood which resulted in the formation of both militant and reformist splinter groups, see Kepel (1996), Kepel (2002) Ansari (1984).
The latter two Sunni thinkers, along with the Shi’i leader of the Islamic revolution Ayatollah Khomeini, are considered to be the foremost ideologues of Islamism\(^\text{10}\) (Demant, 2006: 94). The terms ‘political Islam’, ‘Islamic fundamentalism’, ‘radical Islam’ and ‘Islamism’ are often used interchangeably.\(^\text{11}\) Broadly speaking, the terms refer to a particular interpretation of the religious and the political, where these two dimensions are seen as intertwined. Many scholars are in agreement as to the virtual impossibility of encapsulating all the nuances of Islamism within a singular definition. Notwithstanding this, I shall put forth some of the definitions offered by scholars in the field of Islamism.

By arguing for a multidisciplinary approach to studying Islamism, Volpi shows where fields like sociology of religion and globalization studies converge. While noting that different frameworks lead to alternate understandings of this phenomenon, he identifies the divergences which still plague this area of study. He suggests that “Islamism refers to the political dynamics generated by the activities of those people who believe that Islam as a body of faith has something crucial to say about how a society should be organized, and who seek to implement this idea as a matter of priority” (Volpi, 2011: 1). Using a social movement theory approach, Wiktorowicz argues that political Islam or Islamist activism as a movement is not unique and transcends Islam as a specific meaning system. He argues for a broad definition of Islamic activism to include all manifestations thereof. In this regard he considers Islamic activism to be “the mobilization of contention to support Muslim causes.” (Wiktorowicz, 2004: 2). This broad description is intended to accommodate all types of dissent which emerges in the name of Islam and which highlight

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\(^{10}\) Faisal Devji observes that possibly the most successful manifestations of Islamism came from Shi’i Islam; i.e. the Iranian Revolution and Hezbollah. Yet the majority of literature exploring political Islam genealogies remains focused on Sunni Islam and the Middle East (Devji, 2011: 315). It is significant to note a core difference with regards to Sunni and Shi’i Islamist expressions. The former grouping has for the most part been rather confrontational toward traditional clergy, condemning them “for practicing and preaching an ossified form of Islam incapable of responding to contemporary challenges” (Ayoob, 2011: 48). Shi’i ‘ulama, on the other hand, have been the primary medium for Islamism. Ayoob attributes this trend to a few reasons, one of which is the financial independence (from the state) which Iranian clergy enjoyed. This is in contrast to Sunni ‘ulama who are often dependent on financial support from the state. A second possible reason is that Shi’i clergy have shown themselves to be more capable to adapting to contemporary issues than their Sunni counterparts (Ayoob, 2011: 50).

\(^{11}\) For the purpose of this paper, the term Islamism will be used.
Muslim symbols and identities. This refers to and includes political groups which seek to establish an Islamic state, as well as those who promote only Islamic spirituality (Wiktorowicz, 2004: 3).

For Salwa Ismail the term Islamism refers to a political ideology which aims to establish an Islamic government which implements Islamic law. She extends the term to also include societal Islamization. The latter is a “process whereby various domains of social life are invested with signs and symbols associated with Islamic cultural traditions” (Ismail, 2011: 17). From a more critical perspective, Charles Hirschkind notes that the term political Islam is inadequate if one considers how state institutions encroach on almost every aspect of civilian life – this includes family life, education, worship etc. Therefore as a result of this pervasive state power, most actions by Muslims become political by default (Hirschkind, 2011:14).

Asef Bayat argues for Islamic activism as being “extra-ordinary, extra-usual practices which aim, collectively or individually, institutionally or informally, to cause social change.” (Bayat, 2007: 205). He differentiates between “passive piety” and “active religiosity.” The former includes ordinary religious observants, while the latter refers to those who practice and simultaneously preach to others to follow their way:

Islamic activism, therefore, is about this extra-ordinary religiosiy of the Muslim population in modern times. It may be involved explicitly in politics, which I would call ‘Islamism’, or restricted to ‘apolitical’ but active piety, as exemplified in trends and movements which center on individual self enhancement and identity” (Bayat, 2007: 205).

The various definitions outlined point to the variety of manifestations of Islamism, affirming that this phenomenon is not static and can reveal much about the meanings of religion and the repercussions for both communities and individual. The definitions also show that Islamism can be political, social or focus on the personal. This is particularly evident when looking at movements which dominated religious and
public spaces from the 1970s onwards. With the Islamic revolution in 1979, scholars of political Islam unraveled this event to find explanations for the Islamist trend. Later, attention was shifted to civil society and Islamism on the social level. Increasingly, scholars are now exploring representations of Islamism which focus on perfecting the moral self, for example Salafis and mosque movements.

The political, social and personal cannot be de-linked from each other. This becomes evident in the journeys of South African Islamists. Examining religious commitment and engagement at the individual level through biographies reveal how Islamists navigated rapidly changing global and local religious terrains. Reflecting on their involvement in Islamist movements which had both social and political significance, activists reveal their personal motivations and doubts. The inextricable link between the political, the social and the personal is further evident in how they adjust, sometimes also abandon, religious identities in the face of available choices.

With this in mind, this study will utilize the following succinct explanation of Salman Sayyid, namely that Islamists are individuals whose Muslim identity is at the centre of their political practice. Islamists “use the language of Islamic metaphors to think through their political destinies, those who see in Islam their political future” (Sayyid, 2003:17). Sayyid makes clear that the ‘political’ is not limited to seizing state power, but can also refer to the assertion of Muslim personhood (Sayyid, 2003:17).

**Islamism in personal perspective**

Two areas in particular, namely the articulation of a distinct moral universe derived from Islamic traditions, and secondly, the focus on identity construction and a search for the authentic, individualized Muslim self, represent the main strands of literature insofar as the personal dimension of Islamism is concerned.

With regards to Islamists, Daniel Brown suggests that “they represent a vision of renewed Islam which is not only authentic to the ideal Islamic past but also adapted to the modern situation of Muslims” (Brown, 1999: 141). Euben and Zaman acknowledge this trend within Islamism as an “interpretive” framework
that provides a “lens on the world rather than a mere reflection of material conditions or conduit for socioeconomic grievances” (Euben and Zaman 2009, 1). This notion of a unique moral universe demonstrates that Islamists of diverse views adopt a shared set of values and perceptions with which they act in the world. Essentially, all beliefs and actions need legitimacy rooted in the fundamental sources of Islam. According to these studies authenticity entails embracing this indigenous worldview. The emphasis is on the peculiarity and distinctiveness of Islamist language and worldview (Euben and Zaman, 2009).

In a study of European Muslim youths, Olivier Roy shows how they are turning towards Islam, not in search of an ideological home, but rather in pursuit of authenticity. Roy emphasizes the constructivist nature of identity and how Islam is used for this purpose. This new type of religiosity, while intensely personal, and highly individualistic, is also apolitical according to Roy, and signaled both the failure and the crisis of Islamism (Roy, 1994; 2003: 23-25, 230). This line of scholarship is often critiqued by others who challenge Roy’s contention that Islamist activities located within the realm of the moral are apolitical. Contrary to the pursuit of morality signaling the failure of Islamism, it enables Islamists to influence and determine what ought to be the standards of ethics and principles within society. Islamists in this way gain more power in the public domain, which give them more legitimacy to challenge state power (Ismail, 2007; Ismail, 2001: 36; Soares and Osella, 2010: 9-10). According to these views, actions are constituted as being political because they have reform as a desired objective; this reform can be couched in pietistic terms or overtly call for socio-political transformation in society. Instead of turning to Islam as an ideological or theological “resource”, religion is seen as an option to reconstruct engagement in the public realm. This trend became particularly relevant in post-independence nation-states; when concerted efforts were made by newly established states to bolster a national identity. These new ascribed identities often had a secular component, and were seen by Islamists as an intrusion of western values and behaviours. In this regard, Islam was conceived as being pure and authentic against a foreign intrusion.
Another feature of identity construction in Islamism is suggested in the encounter of modernization - with increased access to media and education. These processes resulted in ordinary Muslims becoming less dependent on traditional clergy and their interpretations of the text and tradition; allowing for the formation of a new group of actors (Eickelman and Piscator, 1996). This perspective suggests that certain processes of both modernity and post-modernism are at work in identity construction. This view is useful in explaining the collapse of “an assumed dichotomy between ‘ulama and the so-called 'popular Islam' of ordinary Muslims” and shows new ways through which to gain an understanding of Islam as a tradition subject to reinterpretation (Soares, 2009: 54). The issue of binaries between the clergy and ordinary Muslims is particularly pertinent to this study in explaining the emergence of a South African Islamism.

Ismail points out that the remaking of individual religious identities cannot however only be explained through broader processes of modernity and post-modernity. She contends that “becoming Muslim” and “becoming Islamist” entails drawing from a range of social processes and social and political contexts. Religion, as a term in identity formation, cannot be conceptualized as a fixed set of beliefs and principles. It has to be regarded as a lived tradition wherein individual’s identity construction is shaped by and dependent on their everyday life experiences (Ismail, 2011: 23-25).

The notion of turning to Islam as an opportunity to reconstruct engagement in public life is clearly evident in the biographies of South African Islamists. Tayob shows how in South Africa Islamism became the rhetoric which allowed Muslims to express their discontent in the public sphere. Global developments and local circumstances shaped their views. Muslims were racially discriminated against and religion provided a resource to reconstruct public lives. The quest for identity and socio-politically relevant interpretations of Islam were the key driving forces. While the local clergy were emphasizing theology and espousing very conservative and ‘narrow’ views on Islam, Islamists used religion as an ideological tool to re-construct public engagement within the Muslim community and the broader national sphere (Tayob, 2011). Concurrent with this public engagement, there was also a private dimension to their engagement with Islamist ideology. Islamism was not only a tool for reconstructing a public identity –
embracing this discourse resulted in the reconstruction of their private identities as well. Thus, beyond locating oneself at the intersection of religion and politics, being Islamist entailed contending with realities of everyday life within private spaces.

Islamists, whether they seek to seize state power or re-Islamize society, lead everyday lives in complex socio-political spaces whilst responding to personal, local and global impulses. Furthermore, Muslims cannot be seen as being distinctly different from any other religious adherent, with Islamism postulated within a dominant narrative whereby individuals’ actions are explained purely in broad religious terms. It is more helpful to look to the social context and everyday lives of Muslims – thereby gaining an understanding of the terms which impact on their behaviors and actions.

Soares and Osella suggest an approach whereby actual lived realities are privileged, rather than vague, sweeping categories like Islamist revival or resurgence and piety-mindedness. This approach opens up the possibility of identifying “multiple orientations and strands in Muslims' lives and stress complexities, contingencies, and contradictions in the political engagements of Muslims” (Soares and Osella, 2009: 515). While the intersection of religion and identity is undoubtedly complex and nuanced, other dimensions such as race, class and gender have to be considered. Thus while Islamists may search for authenticity, their conceptions of what is authentic differ – implying that Islamist identities are open to change. These conceptions are informed by a myriad of factors and can only be revealed through a study of the life trajectories of Islamists.

**Islamism and life trajectories**

A major trend in Islamist scholarship has been to focus on the lives of prominent and founding figures within the Islamist movement. Much of the literature seems to suggest that the biographies of leaders like Al-Banna and Khomeini and the movements they led are closely interwoven (Humphreys, 1982; Euben and Zaman, 2009; Al-Abdin, 1989: 220). Vali, in his study on the life of Abu’l-A’la Mawdudi for example, points out that the life histories and thought of men like Mawdudi, Khomeini, and Qutb are crucial to understanding modern Islamic thought (Vali, 1996: 3). Azzam Tamimi details the life of
prominent Tunisian Islamist Rachid Ghannouchi, but this biography is largely regarded as a political treatise which expounds on the political thought of Ghannouchi (Tamimi, 2001). As the leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Khomeini represents one of the rare cases where an Islamist movement managed to gain state power. Sayyid points out that Khomeini’s life and political thought best expresses the rationale of Islamism (Sayyid, 2003: 88-89). In general, Islamist biographies largely focus on the descriptive, the ideological and the ‘successes’ in conveying the message of political Islam. In these examples, ideology is over emphasized to the extent that the ‘personal’ is often disregarded and everyday lived religion subsumed in Islamist discourse.


Islamist personal narratives have received attention in scholarship, although the significance of religion is at times downplayed in favor of other factors. Aini Linjakumpu uses the example of Islamist activists in which emotions play an integral part of political discourses and practices. Through exploring the autobiographies of Islamists, Linjakumpu argues that collectively expressed anger, frustration or hope serves to induce political activity. In this sense, religious engagement can be explained through a politics of emotion (Linvjakumpu, 2010). Expressions of collective protest, particularly those rooted in religious principles draw much attention but often overlook the fact that such expressions emanate from individuals who felt that their self-perception and identities was affected in a very personal way (Linvjakumpu, 2010: 183-184). Political activism in this case is premised on an emotional connection with a global community.
Like Linjakumpu, de Koning’s study shifts the focus from those who are not in leadership positions and centers on the everyday lives of ordinary Salafis.\textsuperscript{12} Their commitment to a particular religious movement inspired individuals to develop a “dialectical rather than contradictory relationship” between everyday tensions and Salafi thought\textsuperscript{13} (De Koning, 2013: 72). De Koning shows how, in their commitment to a religious discourse, ordinary Salafis encounter tension between Salafi thought and their everyday lives. Conflicting loyalties within everyday life are resolved by developing practices in line with Salafi beliefs. Rather than deterring them, these tensions serve to strengthen their resolve and inspire them to assert their own authentic identity through a religious ideology (De Koning, 2013: 72). He shows evidence of how a seemingly trivial practice like establishing new friendships with fellow Salafis assisted them in coping with everyday challenges. These relationships, unlike previous friendships, were based on shared moral and religious ideals and provided for a social basis to religion.

Also focusing on Salafis is a study by Dumbe and Tayob which found that individuals adapted religious discourse to fit local religious contexts. They observe that South African Salafis often tailored their strategies in order to gain acceptance and establish communities (Dumbe and Tayob, 2011: 193). In the process, these individuals were also forging identities for themselves within the local religious institutions. Salafis found themselves navigating their personal commitment to Salafism with their public performances in an environment which was dominated by local patterns of Muslim life (Dumbe and Tayob, 2011).

These examples above suggest that, for Islamists, commitment to religion shaped and informed the way in which certain everyday practices and rituals were performed and executed. Furthermore, this was frequently driven by a desire to assert a particular identity – conditional on what individuals perceived to be the ‘right’ way of doing things. These studies also highlight the significance of religion in the daily

\textsuperscript{12} Globally Salafis are categorized as being Islamist. Post 9/11 and with attention focused on Al-Qaeda prompted interest in Salafism as a distinctive public discourse.

\textsuperscript{13} This is in contrast to other studies which have shown that Salafis, in their search for purity, rejected existing trends, institutions and scholars who accommodated other legal schools (see Adraoui, 2009; Hamid, 2009). This search for a ‘pure Islam’ inevitably led to exclusion and isolation.
lives of individual. It reveals the in-depth encounters individuals have with themselves, how meaning is found within religion and how identity is affirmed through particular interpretations thereof. Dumbe and Tayob (2011) and De Koning (2013) remind us that Islamists, in their daily interaction with others, determine the limitations and freedoms allowed within their religion. In this way, their level of commitment to their beliefs, their consistent adapting and the transformative nature of identities is illustrated. These studies however, do not explore life trajectories and places focus on particular practices and strategies employed to accommodate Salafism in their lives.

The life trajectories of South African Islamists are primarily descriptive and focus on leading anti-apartheid activists. Possibly the most renowned is the biography of Abdullah Haron by Marney and Desai (1978). Haron was killed in detention by security police in 1969 and was known as the only Muslim leader who was prepared to deal with the issue of oppression both from the pulpit and in the community (Marney and Desai, 1978). Fatima Seedat (2003) explores the activism of three prominent Muslim Indian women during the anti-apartheid struggle, both through individual and collective actions.14 Using a feminist lens, she seeks to understand the limitations and motivational factors of these activists. The interviews reveal that the resistance of Indian Muslim women took many forms, and that their activism demonstrated their agency.

Goolam Vahed compiled a collection of descriptive short biographies of South African Muslims who were active in the liberation struggle.15 The two primary aims of his publication were to convey the importance of Muslim participation within the public sphere, and to record the contributions made by Muslim activists (Vahed, 2012: 9, 11). While the book offers detailed profiles of some activists, the author makes clear that delving into discourse analysis and identity concerns is not his intention (Vahed, 2012).

14 This study dealt with Fatima Meer, Amina Cachalia and Zuleikha Mayat – three leading and well-known figures in the Indian community (Seedat, 2003).
15 Not all the individuals in this publication identify as Islamist.
The life trajectories of prominent Islamists largely focus on their activities within their respective movements, neglecting tension encountered within their private domains. The focus on the lives of the leading voices within the Islamist movement neglects the possible contributions made by ordinary Islamists within particular organizations. There is an implied denial of their agency as ordinary but active participants within the public space. Rather than being actors who can make choices and seek spiritual fulfilment, individual Islamists become subsumed within the movement, and seem to be constantly acted upon by leaders who define and prescribe a particular religious experience. Beyond perfecting their spiritual and moral selves, they overtly agitated for socio-political change while traversing imposed norms in their private spaces. This lacuna in scholarship means that not enough is known about the doubts, fears, elation, aspirations and experiences of both leading and ordinary Islamists.

Ordinary Islamists were not lacking in agency, they were in fact actors who sought to transform their own personhood, those close to them and society. Being Muslim was always central to their political practice, both in the private and public domains. Building on the studies cited in this chapter, this thesis illustrates how commitment to an ideal worldview shaped and transformed the life journeys of ordinary Islamists. In line with prevailing literature, this study acknowledges the search for an authentic identity and charting unique approaches to Islam as being primary objectives for a commitment to Islam. However, likening their life trajectories to journeys further allows for the emergence of dimensions which tend to be overlooked in most existing Islamist biographies. Beyond revealing the features of Islamist journeys as outlined in Chapter One, delving into the everyday lives of Islamists uncover moments of intellectual grappling and a questioning of available choices. ‘Living’ Islamism, particularly in their private spaces, is at times an arduous and difficult exercise which requires constant reflection with the ideology Islamists subscribe to.
Conclusion

Existing studies point to the fact that scholars have been endeavoring to make sense of the Islamist ‘phenomenon’. While some regard it as purely political in its focus, others argue for the contextualization of social and cultural dimensions or point towards the individual for answers. These studies can all offer varying degrees of clarity on the conditions under which Islamism emerged and developed, yet they do not adequately explain how individuals were personally motivated to become activists or the transformations which Islamists continually undergo. While much has been written about the renewed place of Islamism in the public sphere, very few studies have explored what was happening with religious engagement and commitment at the individual level, and within private spaces. This personal dimension of Islamism cannot be disassociated from the political or the social.

Existing studies on Islamists biographies tend to focus on leading voices within movements, while others downplay the significance of religion. Oftentimes the focus on piety obscures the realities of the everyday life of the Islamist. Studies on Islamism and the everyday tend to be limited to particular moments in the lives of Islamists, rather than exploring a life trajectory in its entirety. The motivations, difficulties, doubts and incoherencies which confront Islamists can only emerge through a study of individual biographies if their world-views, in both the local contexts they are physically acting in as well as the global connections, both imagined and enacted, are taken into account.
Chapter 4

Islamism in South Africa

Like Islamists elsewhere, they were never a unified group. These divisions were a product of the diversity of Islamic thought brought to South Africa on the one hand, and the different political trends within the country on the other hand (Tayob, 2011).

Introduction

Though a small minority, South African Muslims have in various ways agitated for political transformation since the inception of apartheid. The aim of this chapter is to explore the connection between South African Islamism and identity construction. The chapter starts by identifying the main factors which led to the emergence of a South African Islamism, showing how identities were created through these processes and how the local was inextricably linked to global occurrences. I then discuss the four relevant movements showing some of the manifestations of Islamist identities, how these were shaped and what informed them.

Islamic resurgence in South Africa

Modern Islamic resurgence was not confined to majority Muslim countries only, and has occurred in practically all societies where Muslims reside. Dekmejian suggests this pervasiveness of Islamism to be one of its core characteristics. The search for an authentic new identity seemed to be a driving force in most instances. This notion of harkening back to Islamic roots, while it may have been influenced by
larger global events, took on a local character contingent on regional contexts and underlines the polycentric nature of Islamism\(^\text{16}\) (Dekmejian, 1980: 2-3).

These attributes of Islamism were evident in South Africa - with the first signs appearing during the 1940s and 1950s. According to Tayob, two central factors contributed to the emergence of South African Islamism. The first was a response to modernity which witnessed the emergence of a modernism. In this regard, Tayob notes that the emergence of an educated middle-class was a crucial factor in enabling Muslim participation in the public domain - turning to religion as a discursive strategy to facilitate their engagement in public life (Tayob, 1995). There was a quest to modernize and fashion a socially relevant Islam – a trend which was more pronounced in Natal and Transvaal. The Arabic Study Circle (ASC), an organization established in 1950, is considered to be the forerunner\(^\text{18}\) (Tayob, 1995:95). The emphasis of this group was on the teaching of language and religion. It was not overtly political, rather focusing on constructing their understanding of a relevant Muslim self (Jeppie, 2007: 4). Still, the manner in which the state with its apartheid policies regulated the activities and lives of particularly those who were not classified as “white” made this movement a political one.\(^\text{19}\)

Pursuing a distinct identity was a core concern for the Circle, as it was commonly known, which also set out to nurture a particular feeling of community within a specific group (Jeppie, 2007: 4). Though located in Durban, the ASC connected on many levels with groups from South Asia, the Middle-east and the West (Jeppie, 2007: 9). This served to affirm the notion of a transnational ummah; that is, there are many different epicenters which attest to the Islamic revivalist movement – all of which are interconnected and serve to spiritually link Muslims globally. The members of the Arabic Study Circle, by considering Islam

\(^{16}\) A third attribute according to Dekmejian is the persistence of the Islamic revival during the past century and points to the significance of Islam as a social force (Dekmejian, 1980: 4).

\(^{17}\) Tayob suggests that the very first signs of a new approach to Islam were already evident in 1886 when Abdol Burns protested against the closing of Muslim burial sites (Tayob, 1995: 78).

\(^{18}\) See Jeppie (2007) for a detailed study of this organization. He notes that within the broader context of Islamic resurgence, which spans across a broad continuum from “radicalism” to modernism, the Arabic Study Circle can be categorized as being part of the “modernist” trend (Jeppie, 2007: 10).

\(^{19}\) This is in line with Ismail’s argument that “the political” cannot be limited to overtly “anti-state” activities only. Islamism includes mobilizing to generate moral or social change (Ismail, 2011: 17).
to be compatible with modernity, challenged dominant understandings of religion (Jeppie, 2007: 4). They framed themselves as not being part of the traditional clergy and contended that religious leaders should be “qualified in religion, modern technique and modern education” (Tayob, 2011). While they were educated professionals, they were also clear about not subscribing to a secularist worldview. Thus, in order to articulate a relevant Islamic identity, they drew from both modernist and Islamic approaches to frame their public engagement with religion.

The second factor which led to the rise of the Islamist movement was increased racial conflict and systematic racial oppression in South Africa. Anti-apartheid mobilization, particularly amongst younger people, became much clearer during the latter half of the 1960s and peaked during the 1980s. Geographically, these two trends played out in markedly different areas within South Africa. The modernist trend was more prevalent in the northern parts of South Africa, e.g. in Durban, Johannesburg and Pretoria, while political engagement was much clearer expressed in Cape Town (Tayob, 2011; Tayob, 1995).

The first movement which advanced a clear anti-state rhetoric was the Muslim Teachers’ Association (est. 1951). They were involved in wider political issues which the community was confronted with at the time and in many ways laid the foundation for two other youth organizations established shortly afterwards, namely the Cape Muslim Youth Movement (est. 1957) and the Claremont Muslim Youth Movement (est. 1958). The latter was founded by a vocal young religious scholar, Abdullah Haron, who was eventually arrested and killed in police custody in 1969.

Both groups, namely the Muslim modernists like the Arabic Study Circle, as well as those involved in overtly anti-apartheid activities, challenged traditional religious authorities and called for an Islam which was dynamic and socially and politically relevant.20 Youth organizations established particularly during

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20 Using the Foucauldian concept of power, Jhazbay shows how religious scholars representing dominant Muslim organizations, in a considered manner, exercised control over, and regulated a very particular type of knowledge and theology. In order to suppress alternate voices emerging from the Muslim community, mainstream religious bodies endeavored to control the mosques and what was preached from the pulpit (Jhazbay, 2002: 464-465). Lubna Nadvi
the latter half of the twentieth century located their ideas within the unjust socio-political context of apartheid. Competing political trends in the country, and varied global influences ensured that South African Islamists were not a homogenous group. Contact with Islamic movements like the Muslim Brotherhood and the *Jama’at-I Islami* was established which facilitated a global exchange of ideas and visions.

The different strands notwithstanding, Islamists in South Africa as in the rest of the world, were identified by what they were not: they were not part of the clergy, nor were they secularists. In this regard Tayob notes that “they neither looked for a theology, nor a pure political project of emancipation” (Tayob, 2011). They largely consisted of younger people who had access to a modern education system. As such they questioned the conservative thinking of the clergy with regards to overtly religious matters and the latter’s acceptance of the racialized construction of the Muslim subject by the state21 (Tayob, 2004: 262). South African Islamists, like their overseas counterparts, wanted to articulate a fresh approach to Islam in their quest to make religion more relevant in their daily lives.

The local Islamist movement drew inspiration from global movements, and endeavored to use Islam to frame their objections to the realities confronting them. Islamic values were upheld and exhibited in the public sphere. This is in line with Humphrey’s insight (1982) which emphasizes the role of ideology in the framing of Islamist ideas. Rather than turning to Islam in theological terms only, Islamists have proposed an alternative language/s to frame their respective causes. Islamism as an ideology has effectively become a “discourse of resistance”- a language through which to express discontent while simultaneously affirming an authentic identity (Humphreys, 1982: 78).

Local Islamists upheld different ideological positions, which was evident in the establishment of the different Islamist movements. Pursuing an authentic identity and socio-politically relevant interpretations

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21 See Moosa (1989) for a discussion on the conservative position taken by the clergy during the height of anti-apartheid uprisings.
of Islam were the key driving forces (Tayob, 2011). The Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979) further galvanized and strengthened the Islamist movement by affirming the view that Islam as an ideology was pertinent to the present day socio-political challenges in South Africa. Being Muslim was central to their personhood, and their quest for a distinct identity expressed in the language of Islam was of absolute importance to these individuals (Tayob, 2014: 35). While other dimensions like race, class and gender influenced their diverse responses, South African Islamists were bound by their resoluteness to project Islam as a relevant socio-political ideology into the public domain. Ultimately, Islamists’ vision of a better society, which reflected Islamic values and tenets, drove them to take action.

**South African Islamist Movements**

Four movements were particularly relevant in the South African Islamist movement from the 1970s onwards. They can be identified by their distinctly different ideological leanings which were inextricably linked to the identity ascription of its members. It is during this period that more young Muslims were attending tertiary institutions and eager to express their religious identities on campuses. The accessibility of international literature like that of Iranian scholar Ali Shariati\(^\text{22}\), Mawdudi and others were instrumental in influencing Islamists and keeping them abreast of global Islamist ideas and developments. Locally, socio-political injustices provoked a response from Muslims who were faced with apartheid realities in their daily lives: in their workplaces, schools and in their communities.

Apartheid legislation was in clear violation of Islamic tenets of justices and equality for all, yet it was only a small minority of Muslim who chose to align themselves with the Islamist movement and become involved in political activities. Many of those who did considered it imperative to frame their activism in religious terms. They were committed to a Muslim identity, and their search for an authentic Islamist identity – rooted within racial politics – impelled them to action in the face of condemnation from conservatives within their communities.

\(^{22}\) See Abrahamian (1982) for more on Ali Shariati.
As is shown below, competing narratives within the foremost movements all claimed to articulate an ‘authentic’ Islamist view and to advance the ‘correct’ interpretation of Islam and Islamic texts. These differing discourses are integral to understanding the everyday journeys of activists during the liberation struggle as well as in a post-democratic South Africa. The competing discourses situate their journeys among the different groups - to deliberate over multiple goods, to reconstruct themselves in relation to the ‘other’, and for some of them, to gain ultimate fulfilment. Through embracing a particular religious and ideological position, Islamists set out to change not only themselves and society, but also those close to them. Within these movements they were exposed to an enhanced understanding of prevailing socio-political circumstances and their contribution to transforming societal injustices.

Their public religious engagement and the adoption of a particular identity through a movement was however only one aspect of activism. Through their personal engagement with Islamist ideology, a different type of activism took place within the private realms of their everyday lives. In this space a simultaneous recreating of Islamist identities took place. Symbols, dress and language associated with Islamist discourse and with specific movements entered into their daily lives - adding to the complexity of Islamist identity reconstruction. Thus the connection and awareness of global developments, local socio-political realities and movement-specific narratives informed how activists engaged with religion in their private spaces.

**The Muslim Student’s Association (MSA)**

The Cape Muslim Student’s Association was established in 1968 in Cape Town and was launched at national level in 1974. The movement was established due to the marked influx of Muslims onto university campuses. It was a time when hitherto unprecedented numbers of Muslim students entered into tertiary institutions. Nevertheless, it was for the most part those who were in economically sound positions who could access a university education. Due to apartheid policies, race was, and still is, inextricably linked to class. Thus for example, while those historically classified as African were
welcomed into the movement, relatively few could afford tertiary studies, which meant that the MSA had only a small number of them as members. One ex-member alluded to class disparities within MSA structures, and noted that the movement was not sufficiently in touch with the socio-economic realities which were faced by the majority of South Africans (See Ahjum, 2013: 170). Tahir Sitoto adds another dimension to this issue, arguing that the identity of Black Africans have largely been represented as that of converts. In the South African Muslim community Black Muslims, even Islamists; have generally been relegated to the margins of the Muslim community and often characterized as being the ‘other’ (Sitoto, 2003).

Initially, the primary objective of the MSA was to create a sense of Islamic awareness amongst students and, through local chapters at respective tertiary institutions they campaigned, for example, for prayer facilities at campuses. For almost the entire first decade of their existence, MSA was not overtly political and focused on activities of a socio-religious nature. The MSA, both at national level and its local chapters at various campuses, was run by elected students. Camps where literature was disseminated and discussed were held regularly (Tayob, 2011: 7).

The MSA served as an introduction to Islamist ideas for those who entered tertiary institutions. For many of those who did, entering these university spaces signaled a beginning of their religious journeys – whether for those who advocated for a more modern approach to Islam or those who agitated for anti-apartheid mobilization.23

Modern educated students – some who came from very traditional and conservative families – asserted their Muslim identities on campuses. They sought out or created prayer facilities. In the process, they embarked on a quest for a more dynamic and modern Islam. They organized discussion forums and distributed literature in the form of pamphlets and short newsletters. These were largely derived from global influences like Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb. Many embraced other symbols of Islam, like the

23 The former group was more prevalent in the northern parts of South Africa, while the latter was more widespread in Cape Town.
donning of *hijab* for women. Affirming and proclaiming their Islamic identity in this way was also an act of resistance against Western modernity – modernization for these youth meant more relevant interpretations of Islam; not religious decline. What they perceived to be archaic and narrow views on Islam preached by the clergy were questioned, which led to many antagonisms between them and religious scholars.

As younger and more politically conscious students joined the MSA during the early 1980s, many of whom were inspired by the recent success of the Iranian Revolution and the Soweto uprising, the movement entered the terrain of anti-apartheid activism (Jeenah, 2015). A renewed fervor was awakened amongst the youth in the MSA to become involved in anti-apartheid mobilization. Furthermore, the success of the Iranian Revolution confirmed again the relevance of Islam as an ideology to counter the injustices in South Africa. Though some students were involved in anti-apartheid protests at school-level, joining the MSA meant they could now frame their activist identity within religious discourse. Islamist language was used to articulate their message – one that differed starkly from that of mainstream religious bodies.

The commitment to an Islamic identity ran parallel to the dominant Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in the country. Tayob notes that:

> There was an implicit connection between the growth of an Islamic “way of life” on university campuses and the strength of Black activism during the early 1970s in South Africa. The MYM rejection of the West, and its call for an Islamic “way of life” reflected the Black Consciousness Movement’s appeal to an authentic Black identity in South Africa (Tayob, 1995: 122).

This ideological common ground which emphasized an indigenous identity increased the expansion and recruitment of student to Islamist ideas. However, beyond this commitment to identity, the MSA’s ideology was not clear. This could be attributed to constant changing of members and leadership as
students graduated and new members joined. What was evident though is that public engagement was centered on their religious understandings of Islamic identity and Islamist influences from abroad.

**The Muslim Youth Movement (MYM)**

The MYM was established in Durban in 1970. The founding members of the MYM were predominantly younger professionals and businessman whose primary objective was to Islamize South African society. As was the case with many other organizations which originated in Durban and Johannesburg, the MYM did not seem explicitly political for the better half of their first ten years of existence. This was evident in the activities they initially embarked on and the causes the movement promoted. Tayob writes that:

> They promoted the visibility of Muslims in all spheres of life, thereby projecting a strong sense of Islamic identity in their public activities. They set up a newspaper in 1974 called *al-Qalam*; founded a missionary movement (*Islamic Da’wa Movement*); established a book and tape service which later became a chain of bookstores (International Book Services); set up a national *zakah* collection fund (1977); and formed professional bodies for Muslim medical doctors, accounts and lawyers (Tayob, 2011).

The progress of the MYM could be apportioned into three clear and distinct phases. During the first phase the MYM set out to reinterpret the way in which Islam was practiced – rather than being a set of rituals, Islam was promoted as a complete way of life. Knowledge of Islam should be made accessible to all and not just a select few within the ranks of the clergy. Muslims were encouraged to involve themselves in all spheres of public life, thereby bringing a distinct and visible Muslim identity in public spaces. The second phase of the MYM was marked by Islamic ‘fundamentalist’ tendencies. “The new direction was a much more purist approach; with the immediate goal of training a vanguard for the eventual Islamization of the Muslim community in particular and the wider South African society in general” (Tayob, 1992: 113). A change of leadership from Cape Town guided the movement to a more overtly political period which adopted the conviction that the apartheid laws were evil personified. Abdul Rashied Omar and Ebrahim
Moosa directed the movement away from pure Islamist ideology, advancing ideas that the MYM needed to become actively involved in South Africa political debates and issues. These included anti-apartheid activism, and the rights of women and workers (Tayob, 1992: 115-117; Tayob, 2011). The different phases of the MYM, as outlined by Tayob, are mirrored in the journeys of MYM members who experienced these changes.

Through established study circles, known as *halaqat*, the MYM advanced a vision for an Islamized society; as well as circulating information about global Islamic movements (including the Iranian Revolution). These *halaqat* were one of the most effective forums through which ideas about a ‘new and relevant’ Islam were disseminated. It provided members with a space in which to affirm and communicate the worldview they had converted to. It seems evident that for those who partook in it, the *halaqat* was intimately linked to personal Islamist identity construction.

Significantly though, the MYM as an organization was at its weakest during 1985 when resistance from Muslims in Cape Town was at a peak (Tayob, 1992: 117). Esack contends that the failure of the MYM to sustain itself throughout this period can be attributed, amongst other factors, to their initial uncritical acceptance of global Islamist ideas. The MYM leadership was out of touch with the political realities as experienced by the “masses” in South Africa (Esack, 1988: 480-481). Despite this criticism by Esack, Jeenah contends that until the mid-1980s the MYM was undoubtedly the most progressive organization in South Africa with regards to its position on Islam and women’s rights (Jeenah, 2006: 32).

In essence, being an MYM member meant being influenced by global Islamist ideas, including that of the Muslim Brotherhood and *Jamat-i-Islami*. It also meant framing a religious identity which was in direct opposition to that of local clergy, who were seen to be primarily focused on the ritualistic aspects of Islam. Notwithstanding the fact that a particular group identity was nurtured, current literature does not include a discussion on the individual capacities and personal lives of Islamists. This study begins to fill this space.
Another organization called Qibla was founded in 1979\textsuperscript{24} by a group of individuals who felt that no other movement at the time fully exemplified the values and principles of Islam. Its founder Achmad Cassiem was amongst those who considered the MYM’s neutrality on issues of injustices to be problematic. The three primary aims of this movement were “to seek and disseminate the Truth, to strive for the eradication of oppression of man by man, and to propagate, implement and defend justice” (Cassiem, 1994). In practice this meant emphasizing a revolutionary approach in which armed struggle was obligatory against the oppressor. According to Qur’anic injunctions emphasized by Qibla, the oppressed had a responsibility to fight against the political injustices perpetuated in the country. In this regard, becoming an Islamist was not a choice, but rather a religious commandment. In Cassiem’s words:

> What we are emphasizing is that ideology, and especially the ideology of Islam, encourages and creates social consciousness, identity, solidarity and inspires positive action on a scale no other ideology has done or can do (Cassiem, 1992: 4).

The notion of fulfilling a religious injunction by being an Islamist, and more specifically, being a ‘Qibla Islamist’ is contained in the words of a Qibla member who implies that a divinely ordained role is fulfilled by being a member of this movement. “Qibla does not just give direction, it is direction” (cited in Ahjum, 2013: 178). More than the MSA and MYM, Qibla rejected its identity as a purely religious movement. Many members claimed that Qibla became the entity which shaped not only their religious identities, but also their everyday Islamist journeys.

In its rhetoric there were consistent references to the first Muslims who arrived in South Africa as slaves – in this way Qibla positioned itself as continuing this legacy of resistance. The activism of the prominent South African Islamist Abdullah Haron, a member of the clergy, was hugely respected by Qibla, who saw themselves as continuing his example of facing the scourge of racism. In addition to the first Muslims in

\textsuperscript{24} Some members I spoke to noted that the movement was founded in 1977.
South Africa, a myth\textsuperscript{25} connected Qibla to the Prophetic community – implying that by resisting socio-political injustices, they were directly obeying Prophetic injunctions. Qibla members reconstructed and affirmed identities rooted in a local vision, and within the larger vision of the Muslim \textit{ummah} (Ahjum, 2013: 179).

Ursula Gunther argues that the perception of Imam Haron as being a Muslim martyr rather than a political activist has been an “invention of tradition” rather than an “experienced reality” (Gunther, 2004). Gunther further contends that in re-inventing his memory as a role model to mobilize and inspire Muslims in the anti-apartheid struggle, he was essentially disconnected from his socio-political context. Furthermore, other influences (beyond religion) which inspired him to become politically active were either erased or downplayed (Gunther, 2004). This study takes the view that, since being Muslim was a central aspect of his identity, and many of his political expressions took place through Islamist movements like the CMYM and from the pulpit, he can be categorized as an Islamist.

Cassiem expressed admiration for the fact that Khomeini remained true to his Islamic principles while simultaneously showing strong political leadership (Cassiem, 2002). One of the most ubiquitous slogans of Qibla was ‘One solution Islamic Revolution’. This commitment of Qibla to the Iranian Revolution ushered in the \textit{Shi’a-Sunni} polemic within local Muslim communities. Many in conservative Islamic organizations were troubled by what they deemed to be the spread of \textit{Shi’ism} through Qibla. In this way, the movement’s support of Iran and the Islamic revolution led to them being accused of having converted to the \textit{Shi’ism}. As Moosa points out, “Heightened militancy and pro-Iranian fervor among local activists were interpreted as acts of theological deviancy or heresy in the eyes of the conservatives” (Moosa, 1989: 77).

\textsuperscript{25} According to Mircea Eliade religious and social identities are constructed through sacred narrations or myths. These preserve the purity of an event, transcending time and space and enabling the believer to be transported to the beginning of this myth (Eliade, 1959: 95).
Being marginalized in this way seemed to make most Qibla members more resolute in propagating their understanding of an ‘authentic’ Islamist discourse. Previous research done on Qibla members suggest that belonging to this movement made them feel spiritually anchored – to the extent that the movement was inextricably linked to the reconstruction of their religious identities (Ahjum, 2013). This identity was shaped and informed not only by local political realities, but also by global Islamist events like the Islamic Revolution.

Qibla members declared and believed that theirs was the only authentic one which could offer practicable solutions to socio-political injustices in South Africa. Members framed their identities around an uncompromising stance on ideological issues. According to them, maintaining a clear Islamist identity was a religious duty. They were therefore critical of the MYM and MSA for their reluctance to embark on armed struggle, and the Call of Islam (discussed below) for aligning themselves with the United Democratic Front. In spite of this strong Islamic ideology, Qibla aligned itself with the Black Consciousness Movement and forged a strong alliance with the Pan African Congress (PAC). Qibla members who were trained in armed struggle often received such training within PAC military camps outside of South Africa (Jeenah, 2015: 206).

The members of this movement articulated an Islamist identity which was in opposition to an unjust state, challenged the insular views of mainstream clergy and resisted repeated condemnation from community leaders. For Qibla and its members, the flawed rationale of these three groupings framed a general identity dominated by “discourse of resistance.”

**The Call of Islam (COI)**

The Call of Islam (COI) was established in 1984 by members of the MYM who disagreed on its political position and commitment. While the MYM adopted a position of “positive neutrality” that Tayob

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26 See also Le Roux and Jhazbhay (1992).
27 See Jacobs (2014) for an in-depth account of the history of the Call of Islam. Also see Kelly (2009); Jhazbhay (2002).
explains was “positively against the apartheid state, but neutral with respect to the competing liberation movements” (Tayob, 1995: 169), the COI was more explicit by aligning itself with the ANC under the banner of the United Democratic Front (UDF). Their political identity was shaped within the ANC while simultaneously maintaining their link with traditional Muslim organizations like the Muslim Judicial Council. Tayob points out that:

The Call of Islam maintained a strong sense of Muslim identity in the struggle, but insisted that the apartheid state did not particularly oppress or marginalize Muslims for being Muslims. The root cause of the South African condition was racism and capitalism, which called for an alliance of the oppressed peoples (Tayob, 2011).

Esack contends that the COI presented itself as being more accessible, both in language and expression, to the mainstream South African community, while outlining its ideas about justice from an Islamic perspective (Esack, 1988: 488). Unlike the MYM and Qibla, both movements which drew from global influences and scholars, the COI described itself as a “South Africanist Muslim grouping” (Esack, 1988: 488). For the COI, writings by international scholars could be useful in terms of self-edification, but developing an effective framework for a relevant Islam was only possible if it was shaped alongside mainstream local liberation movements. COI articulated an authentic South African Islamism by emphasizing the ‘human-ness’ rather than the ‘Muslim-ness’ of South African Muslims (Esack, 1988: 490-491).

The Call of Islam essentially purported to challenge the notion that Muslims should set themselves apart from other South Africans, given that Black South Africans at the time faced a common experience of being marginalized and oppressed. To this end, the COI claimed to fill a gap within the broad spectrum of political movements, in particular Islamist movements, during the 1980s. This was, according to Esack, the primary reason for the COI’s decision to align itself with the UDF (Esack, 1988).
The COI committed itself to the “creation of a non-racial, non-sexist, democratic and just South Africa” (Esack, 1988: 492). It promoted an emphasis on certain principles within religious discourse, for example justice, fairness and opposing the oppressor – thus framing their religious identity within universal values which transcended Islam. These values bound South African Muslims to all other oppressed South Africans and affirmed a common identity with all the oppressed and marginalized. Notably though, while the COI emphasized the notion of a non-sexist society, gender equality was significantly toned down in the 1980s. Jeenah explains that the reason for this was twofold: The COI needed to please conservative clergy who were not in favor of gender equity. Secondly, the “woman agenda” was relegated to the sideline while the COI focused on activities of a ‘purely’ political nature (Jeenah, 2006: 33). COI leadership was of the view that, in confronting a common enemy, it was strategic to be pragmatic and bury ideological diversities in order to gather more supporters. This apparent pragmatism seemed to be expressed also in Esack remaining a member of the MJC, while the latter group was known to be at best complacent, and at worst known to have become physically violent against South African Islamists (Moosa, 1989:77).

Its continued alliance with the Muslim Judicial Council, coupled with their involvement with the ANC, tarnished the relationship between the COI and other Islamist movements. And yet, their alliance with the MJC as well as the UDF caused them to extend their reach to more South Africans. Many Muslims who were critical of the COI’s association with the UDF suggested that the COI was compromising the unity of the ummah. Esack responded by saying that this criticism was couched in largely emotional terms. It included many elements, “from a dislike of non-Muslims to a governmental fear of the proverbial communist behind every bush to the immoral behavior of some areligious political activists to the fear of losing their identity as Muslims” (Esack, 1988: 494). The polemic between Islamists was an essential part of the terrain.

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28 Moosa notes that the conservative discourse of the clergy extended beyond that of the purely political resulting in some activists being the target of violent attacks by the clergy and the state. Sadly, “with the exception of a few politically aware individuals, the ‘official’ ‘ulama were silent about the brutality metered out to the Qibla activists” (Moosa, 1989:77).
Much remains to be said about these four movements; but from the above it is clear that South African Islamism was not homogenous. Movements had clearly distinct ideological learnings which were influenced by global developments with distinct regional specifics. Political alliances differed; as did expressions of political participation.

A dominant question for all Islamist movements at the time was whether or not they should enter into alliances with ‘non—Muslim’ groups like the United Democratic Front; and it is this question more than any other which determined the political course of action taken by movements. The answer was largely framed within the specific discourse and resultant identity implications associated with the different movements.

In general, Islamism in South Africa became the expression through which to articulate modernization and anti-apartheid politics. In this regard South African Islamism had a unique character and was distinctly different to Islamist manifestations in other contexts. Islamists were drawn to movements for various reasons, but what they all shared was a desire to publicly engage with religion and in the process articulate distinctive religious identities. These identities were not static, but constantly evolved as Islamists grappled with ideological choices. In this regard it is evident that an Islamist identity in South Africa, like everywhere else, is a multidimensional and dynamic construct that develops over time.

**Conclusion**

Islamism in South Africa was societal in terms of efforts to Islamize society, and political in terms of anti-racial politics. While modernity was a significant contributing factor in Islamic resurgence, the racial policies implemented in South Africa shaped and informed how Islam was used to engage publicly. Racial categories extended into the Muslim community. There was always a personal element – in terms of the everyday lives of Islamists – which is the focus of this study.
Despite their minority status in South Africa, certain Muslims felt compelled to change the status quo in this country. The four movements discussed played a vital role in shaping the public engagement of Islamist activists. All four have been clearly faith-based, challenged mainstream interpretations of Islam and in differing ways opposed apartheid, but it is the COI which located itself within the broader South African liberation movements – creating what it believed to be the only authentic South Africanist Islamist identity. Qibla had as its ultimate aim the establishment of an Islamic state, believing that the answer to being liberated from apartheid could only be found within Islamic ideology. Identities within this movement were shaped in opposition to the state, traditional clergy and members of the community who ‘branded’ them as being Shi’a. The MYM, which started out as a socio-religious movement, evolved into one that was politically conscious without being aligned to any one specific secular organization. Identity in this movement was underpinned by global Islamist ideas which were adapted to South African needs.

Identity construction is significant in studies on Islamism and the ideological position of respective movements was inextricably linked to this process. By explicitly associating themselves with a specific group, Islamists effectively subscribed to the attributes or distinct characteristics of said collective. They adopted a particular dress and language in line with Islamist ideology.

Muslim and Islamist identity construction in South Africa have been explored extensively (Tayob, 2004; Sitoto, 2002; Jeppie, 1987; Esack, 1988). However, an area that has been neglected is an exploration of how these identities are constructed and expressed within the everyday lives of Islamists. This study poses the questions: What was happening with Islamist identities in their private spaces and in their workplaces? Did ‘movement’ ideology enter into these spaces? If so, how did Islamists navigate their way in particular contexts and re-construct identities? This study adds to scholarship on South African Islamism by exploring identity in the everyday life of the Islamist.
Chapter 5

Islamist Biographies: Religious experiences of eight Islamist women

The Islamist emerges in religious consciousness with the conviction that both the self and society have gone astray. She rejects her parents, her religious teachers and her friends. She demands 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 (Tayob, 2014: 13).

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the biographies of eight South African Muslim women who were active in the anti-apartheid struggle. Lengthy narratives enable the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the background, frame of mind and most significantly, why their journeys can be likened to an extended religious experience. Because religion is so central to their identities, all the Islamists interviewed continually aspire to be ‘good’ Muslims as they understand this to be. More than one interviewee became emotional during the conversation; and noted that they had never before spoken about their activist experiences. Some indicated that it was difficult to recount these experiences after decades; while others expressed a keen desire to tell their stories. Some of them chose to place less emphasis on literal daily experiences, while others related detailed information of particular days which involved very specific incidents.

Most of them come from families with no history of political activism, suggesting that a particular event or encounter led to them becoming involved. For this reason I enquired whether they could recall any one specific incident which impelled them to activism. The answers varied but most of them identified a clear
moment or moments which altered their way of perceiving Islam and activism. Given that after these encounters, their outward behavior markedly changed, I suggest these to be a conversion experience as defined by William James (1902). A conversion experience, while intensely personal and offering the convert clear direction in religious terms, is outwardly visible through the transformed behavior of the individual (James, 1902). The biographies reveal that some of them experienced multiple conversions. For some, conversion meant feeling fulfilled and at peace, while others, in the course of their journeys, grappled with ambiguities and contradictions.

Using Tayob’s metaphor of journeying opens up the prospect of probing for the four central features he argues for. Many Islamists for example point to the prevalence of patriarchy, leadership issues and other contradictions encountered within Islamist movements. The ambiguities they faced necessitated a re-assessment of the choices available to them. Always these journeys took shape and were shaped around their aspirations as Islamists.

My submission that Islamism in South Africa comprises many journeys of everyday political Islam further opens up a space for everyday realities to emerge. Islamists frequently faced difficult choices and experienced ambivalences, they grappled with personal issues and they had moments of doubt. They were wives and daughters and mothers and sisters who were determined to make a difference in society, but who also had to balance familial demands with activism. They wanted to be devout parents, and sisters and daughters and wives and, like many others, they also had professional aspirations. In this regard their biographies indicate that religious engagement was not confined to the ritualistic or to moments of activism, but encompassed the personal as well.

Delving into everyday political Islam sheds light on how activists dealt with challenges in their private spaces while remaining true to the Islamist cause as they understood it. It explores the relationship between ideal worldviews and practices and questions how this was negotiated in their everyday lives.
The biographies suggest that at times two simultaneous, but consistently overlapping journeys, took place analogous to each other – one in the public realm, and one in the private. It is the various moments during which these two realms intersect that compelled them to further reflect and navigate. In effect the dilemmas and doubts they experienced in their private spaces seemed to make them more resolute in their cause. While in public spaces they drew strength from and were bound by a collective, it is in their private spaces that they continued their solitary struggle for equality and justice as they understood it.

What follows are deeply personal journeys which were life-changing; and while they encountered conflicts and doubts and dilemmas along the way, their life-paths were irrevocably altered by their conversion to Islamism.

Soraya

“You cannot change the world” was what her personal assistant said to her as recently as the week before I spoke to her. She was apparently often reminded of this throughout a lifetime which was dedicated to activism. Soraya believes in the concept of ‘hope’, and after only a few hours of her recalling brief snatches of her life, it is clear that the theme of ‘hope’ shows itself quite frequently.

Soraya was born into a working-class home in Cape Town during the 1960s. She is the youngest of seven siblings, and from a young age she was known to be strong-willed, vocal and opinionated. According to her this may have been due to the fact that she was the youngest child; but she also attributed it to other factors which she became aware of when still quite young. “I had a different mind-set to them, I think in part because they were all much older than me.” Her father, a tailor, was well-read, and she recalled listening to some of the conversations between himself and his friends from the time he was still young.
Her father and others were labeled as belonging to the Ahmadi sect.\textsuperscript{29} In a community as close-knit and conservative as the one she grew up in, this was considered hugely problematic. She recalled how her family was ostracized at the time because they associated with others who identified as Ahmadi. She estimated that she was only about six or seven years old at the time, but this affected her deeply. Having seen what her parents went through encouraged her to educate herself. She noted that: “Looking back now I realize that it must have been very difficult for them.”

No-one in her immediate family was overtly active in the liberation struggle but she noted that it was her father who taught her the value of being well-read, of being open-minded, and of always questioning. Retrospectively, her becoming aware of the Ahmadi issue and the manner in which it shaped her father’s outlook on life were the first of two episodes in her life which essentially transformed her into a politically conscious and outspoken human being.

Our parents’ Islam seemed conservative – and they were very strict, so it is strange for me to sit here and link my political involvement to them. But, you know, you think about these things a lot more when you grow older, and they had their own reasons for doing what they did.

She was confident that her parents were completely aware of the social injustices of the time through the removal of friends and family from District six and into townships. At that time though, life was about survival and the main priority for her parents was to make ends meet.

The second episode was during the 1976 uprisings. Though she was still at primary school, they were told that they had to join up with the nearby high school to show their solidarity. As a young learner, she was nervous and even fearful: “You knew things were brewing, but you were young and you didn’t understand it all.” She recalled how her sister, who was two years her senior, suffered an asthma attack

\textsuperscript{29} A sect which is an offshoot of Sunni Islam founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmed (b. 1839) in Punjab, India. Mirza Ghulam claimed that he was a Prophet and the promised Messiah. Ahmadis are also known as Qadianis. They do not accept the finality of Prophethood to be with Muhammad (as all Muslims believe).
when the police shot teargas amongst the marchers. For the police to break up marches through the use of teargas was a usual occurrence, but looking back, the sight of her sister struggling to breathe and strangers lending a hand to assist was an extremely traumatic, yet transformative episode in her life. This incident alerted her to the injustices committed against people like herself and her family and prompted her to become more active in the anti-apartheid struggle.

By the late 1970s, as a high school student, she recalled how having the school surrounded by riot police had become the norm. It was during this period that she joined the Muslim Students Association (MSA) at her school. Meetings were often held during school breaks, and attended by teachers and students who were politically active. She recalled how the first issue was related to Friday prayers.

We wanted to attend Jumu‘ah…because that time we weren’t allowed to go. And there was a Muslim teacher who actually tried to close us down. You know how some people’s thinking was; we were at school to learn – not to worry with politics. And this wasn’t even about that. It was to go to mosque. And he went to the principle to complain about us at the MSA. But we kept on. And eventually we were allowed to go to mosque.

While the MSA may have been where she cut her teeth as an activist, she joined the Trade Union movement after school; considering it essential to become part of the broader struggle movement to show solidarity with all oppressed South Africans. The MSA perhaps had a transformative agenda, but according to her and others the organization did not do enough to challenge the political situation in the country. In addition, Soraya felt that the trade unions placed emphasis on the invaluable contributions made by factory workers and other working class individuals within society. She was keen to make a contribution to the liberation struggle but wary of isolating herself as “a Muslim belonging to a Muslim-only organization.”

It was this aspect which drew her to the rhetoric of the Call of Islam. She was exposed to this movement through a friend and the ethos of the COI immediately resonated with her. According to her, they stood
for humanity and not just for Muslims. She noted that the COI was realistic in their approach; they understood that Muslims were a part of South African society.

Also, being Muslim taught us to care about humanity and not just Muslims. The Call gave people hope that things will get better.

According to Soraya, all South Africans – factory workers, professionals, housewives, and business people - should feel valued and should care about the struggles of the other. By the time Soraya got married she was extremely involved in the trade union movement. She admitted that activism had at this point already permeated all facets of her life. While her parents had been vociferous about their disapproval of her involvement in politics, she felt strongly that this was something she needed to do. Retrospectively, she noted that they were just doing what they instinctively considered to be the right thing – they wanted to protect her. They understood the potential dangers of being involved in anti-apartheid politics. Still, much as she loved and respected them, she was determined to make her contribution to a society riddled with social and political injustices.

While her determination never wavered, being involved in the trade union movement became even more challenging once she became a wife and mother. Attending long meetings – often late at night – was not considered “ideal wife and mother behavior.” She acknowledged that it was extremely difficult to work full-time and be an activist while being a wife and a mother. She smilingly recalled that there were occasions when she sat in meetings with a child on her lap.

Devoting so much of her time to activism again evoked disapproving remarks from her older siblings and her parents. This time however, her husband joined in. He was extremely unhappy about her persistent involvement in the union. As difficult as this was, she knew that she should reach some type of compromise without having to forfeit activism. Being rebuked made her feel extremely guilty at times, and question whether she was neglecting her domestic ‘duties’. “But at that point I was too involved already – I had seen too much and I knew there was much work to be done.” She remembered that her
husband used to get angry at her for being so involved, and for constantly being busy. This caused a fair amount of disagreements in her household. He often fetched her from meetings late at night, not understanding why she insisted on being part of the transformation process.

You must remember in those days we still had to wash nappies, there were no disposable nappies, and we had two small children one year and eight months apart. So after a day’s work and then union meetings there was still cooking and washing nappies. I usually made the babies’ bottles before I left. It was a challenge to say the least!

In addition to that there were always “trust issues” – she remarked that it’s not easy for Muslim men to comprehend how and why Muslim women could sit for hours on end in meetings in confined spaces.

The truth is we were all so passionate about what we were doing that we were happy to meet at these hours! But you see, men have much bigger egos you know. That is why when you are on Hajj [pilgrimage] men can only wear those two pieces of loose cloth. They can’t even sit properly! But it’s really to make them humble. To make them realize how we are all the same.

So even though they had their fair share of arguments about her activism, eventually they came to some agreements. She understood that he wanted some time to himself. As for herself, she freely admitted that there was no way in which you can have what is perceived as a ‘normal life’ once you are an activist – “it consumes you.” On the other hand, her husband eventually understood that she also wanted what was ‘best’ for her children. In her view, the ‘best’ was also being part of the liberation struggle.

Probably the biggest challenge was balancing being an activist and being a wife and a parent. In her view there was always space for women within the trade unions and within the Islamist movement. On the other hand it was not always that way in the private spaces. I asked whether this aspect was ever acknowledged with the movements. She noted that in her experience this was not really the case. These seemingly personal issues, though political in themselves, were not always seen as such. She noted that
there were probably many relationships that could not withstand the pressures of being in the liberation struggle.

Not just husbands and wives, but also parents and children. That’s something I will teach my kids – to fully understand what’s important to your partner before you commit. You see what always kept me going was my hope that things will get better. I had hope, and I had to spread hope. Through activism.

Becoming a parent meant that she reflected much on what her parents taught her – and the reasons why they responded to her activities in the way they did. They were always trying to protect her.

Instinctively that’s what parents do you know – we want to protect our kids. So it’s funny because sometimes now I find myself acting in ways which they probably would have!

She acknowledged her parents’ approach to life and parenting impacted indelibly on her life as an activist and as a mother. Her husband and herself provide support to their children, but try to not be prescriptive; offering guidance without pushing. In the same way as she had to take responsibility for choices she made, she wants them to have clear direction.

One must have a cause – you must be passionate about something. It gives your daily life direction and purpose. It gives you a reason to exist. Beyond just the normal. Yet it is in a way the most important things in life that become the mundane. You know – washing nappies and cooking and working for a living to sustain your family. But as much as we love our family, we must always think of what lies beyond; outside you know.

For her, it was a brutal apartheid system which oppressed all Blacks, including her family. She observed that it is often said that activists are selfless and sacrificed their lives for others; but it is often done exactly because there was so much concern for those near and dear to you.
My hope was that my kids won’t experience this oppression. And though my daily life was filled with many challenges, being in the struggle and in the activist movement gave it meaning. It helped me make sense of life and more determined to voice my opinion.

She maintained that it was through the daily struggles and challenges that one becomes stronger and more focused. These everyday seemingly insignificant struggles faced at home in actual fact became “training ground” for the real struggles which took place in South African society. She noted that she acquired her negotiating skills through her firm resolve to keep her marriage and family together. Working for an NGO, these same negotiating and people skills remains an essential and invaluable asset in her daily professional life. It was through her daily everyday struggles in both her private and public religious life that she became stronger, more determined and more resilient. Again referring to the fragility of the male ego, she averred that these were all lifelong learning experiences and lessons which she utilizes in her private and professional life.

These were the most important people in my life - my family, my husband and my children. But being an activist was and is such a central part of my life. I had to make it work and I had to find a balance. Now my husband is so supportive - we learnt to support each other.

It was during turbulent years of the 1980s when her involvement in both the trade unionist as well as the Call of Islam was at its peak. Exhausting mentally and physically as being an activist was (and still is), she noted that being apathetic was never an option or her. She is a strong believer in the power of prayer, and has always found solace in religion during the trying times she experienced.

Though being in a trade union movement it was always a bit of a challenge. They did not consider waktu [prayer] times and sometimes there would even be drinking (of alcohol).

But you just had to remember what connected all of you.
She presently finds much fulfillment in her work which involves social development, and she plays a leading role in civil society. She is adamant that there is still much work to be done in South Africa, and committed herself to contributing to improving the status quo. However, her religious life has taken on a new dimension since joining a Sufi group about five years ago. In a sense she feels like she has now come full circle. Islamism for her entailed an emphasis on outward expressions of activism. Joining anti-apartheid movements meant marching and vociferously opposing injustices within society. Joining a Sufi group necessitates working on her own spiritual enrichment – something she gains deep fulfillment from at this stage of her life. A large part of her religious engagement now entailed calling others to Islam.

I cannot separate what I do in my work from my religious self. I find that the physical work is one aspect of what I need to do, but I find deep spiritual satisfaction in having a spiritual leader who can guide me. Becoming Sufi has opened up a new world for me. It compels you to do introspection, you know, to look into yourself. And we do a lot of *da'wah* [missionary] work. And it is there, when you go into the rural areas, that you see how people are still struggling, how little people have. But many of them are content. So by calling them to *shahada* [proclamation of faith] you also see Allah’s Bounty and the blessings you have.

She declared her, at times, disillusionment with the ruling political party and the direction that they have led the country in. Religion has always been the guiding value in her life, and she continually drew hope from her belief.

You know that struggle and challenges always feel as if they are personal, as if they are directed at you. But you can’t take it personally. You need to transform it into something useful. You need to neutralize it. To make it workable.
Thurea grew up in a working-class suburb of Johannesburg with a solid religious grounding. Her parents were devoted Muslims, and imparted this to her and her siblings. She spoke with particular awe and admiration of her father who taught her a love for reading; in particular religious texts. If she could encapsulate his core philosophy of life, which she has since implemented in her own life, it was that one should equip oneself with knowledge and never compromise on your principles.

She is the eldest of four children, and from a young age she expressed a keen interest in the study of Islam. She mentioned that her wish was to pursue religious studies at one of the Islamic institutions abroad. Unfortunately this was not possible, and after finishing high school she went on to study towards a teaching degree at Wits.

That was not my first choice you know. There were women’s universities in the Muslim world, and I wanted to study Islam. But my father refused. He said to me no you are the eldest daughter and I can’t send you away. He promised to do whatever he could to support me, but that I should go to Wits.\(^{30}\)

It was at university that she got involved in the Muslim Students Association. While she had always been a devoted Muslim, attending university and involving herself in the MSA was a turning point in her life. It was during this time that she left the “comfort zone” of her own community, and was exposed to issues faced by her peers from different backgrounds. It was a time that her awareness of religion grew beyond the ritualistic and she became an active participant in a movement.

Not long after her initial participation, she was asked to stand for elections in the MSA. She recalled the day she came home and told her parents that she was going to forward her name as a candidate. Her father was quite taken aback, telling her: “You know these Indians just use you; they are never going to accept you!” She responded by saying that being a Muslim ought to be enough to hold office in the MSA. Her

\(^{30}\) The University of Witwatersrand located in Johannesburg.
mother, on the other hand, encouraged her to contend; saying: “You don’t stand down you go for it, whatever you want to do, you go and do it!” She acknowledged that her father’s response stemmed from his own experiences with those of Indian origin, which shaped and informed his response to her announcement at the time.

She gained a position as a religious advisor - presenting classes, responding to questions posed by female members and pursuing the right for women on campus to be given a space to attend Friday prayers. She was also the elected to the position of regional treasurer of the MSA.

With some degree of exasperation, she explained to me how apparently “modern” women at the university suffered from what she terms “self-oppression”. They were so used to succumbing to “chauvinistic ideas”, they seemed to forget that they were actually entitled to attend Friday prayers.

You had the right. Why were you denying yourself? Because these chauvinists say so?
That is not Islam! The Prophet (saw) showed and taught us the example. Why would you want to deny yourself these basic rights? Because of some cultural norms or because of the traditions of your parents? You end up with a situation where women were prepared to take a backseat; to not take the lead ever. Why would you want to do that if you profess to be a Muslim? Yet you put culture and tradition before what the Qur’an says!

She drew attention to the apparent paradox which existed in many of these students’ lives – they seemed to eagerly accept ‘western’ and ‘progressive’ ways when it came to their style of dress, and how they conducted themselves in their daily lives. Yet they were prepared to accept “backward” ideas when it came to issues of religion. For her the ‘mosque issue’ was particularly perplexing because the mosques in areas like “Bosmont, Newclare and Riverlea were always open to women.” She noted that too much time and effort was expended on making space for women in mosques. “I mean, we didn’t need a revolution to get women to attend mosque. This issue became the focus of everything; and there was so much else to do in our society.”
Often during our conversation, she reaffirmed her contention that: “You cannot compromise if you are a Muslim; if Islam doesn’t permeate you daily life in every aspect, you need to question yourself. Islam is about the everyday; both the big issues and the smaller issues.” This notion of “no compromise” seemed to be what shaped and informed most of the decisions Thurea took throughout her life. She battled to understand why Muslim leaders at the time spoke of religion and politics as two separate domains.

They would say that we must keep ourselves out of politics. They would never speak about apartheid and address those kinds of issues. And did they not realize that apartheid affected our everyday existence? That Islam wasn’t just about making salah [daily prayer] and fasting?

It was also during this time that she started feeling alienated from her community – a community within which she grew up.

You move beyond your community….your community is but a microcosm of society. You don’t let your community hold you back; or individuals within your community. They either move with you or you move beyond them. You leave them behind if you must. Even if it’s people you have known for years. You don’t compromise and you move on. This is how you develop. And grow ideologically.

Thurea described herself as the sort of person who does not back down or away from challenges or obstacles. She insisted that the Qur’an was a “living book” and that all Muslims were entitled to read it. She felt justified in directly questioning the clergy as to their silence on the issue of apartheid when the Qur’an was quite clear about fighting against oppression.

Still, being an activist became an essential part of her personhood – according to her she found herself having to adapt other aspects of her life around activism, rather than the converse. To her it wasn’t just about politics and religion; it was a complete way of life. She was deeply immersed in this lifestyle, and very determined to live the ideology she had chosen. This meant making certain adjustments in her
everyday life. While she stayed true to her “no compromise” position, she acknowledged that her outspokenness was often frowned upon. Being a woman meant that she was often sidelined, even within a movement which purported to be a mouthpiece for gender equality. She referred to “big personalities” like Ebrahim Moosa, Abdurrashied Omar, Shamil Jeppie and Farid Esack who were all in leadership positions in the MYM; and recalled how, as a woman, she had difficulty finding a space within the movement.

It’s not exactly well looked at to be too outspoken a woman – and that’s always been my problem. Though I’m not moaning about it because at the end of the day it has made me that much stronger. It also made me see the flaws in their ideas, and how they executed it. You know how people say one thing yet in their actions you see something else. Sometimes you just had to take a step back - well I had to take a step back. It was all about balance.

By the early 1980s, she decided to leave the MYM to join Qibla. She recalled feeling as if she had reached a plateau in terms of her own development within the MYM. She felt that the movement didn’t seem to have clear direction, and that the clashes between the aforementioned “big personalities” made the movement even weaker.

You see Islam is a religion of non-compromisation. Look at the Islamic Revolution and why it succeeded. I felt that why should I compromise my values and my principles for a western culture or a South African culture or an ANC culture. And this was one thing about Qibla in that they didn’t believe in compromising. You know I learnt a lot while I was in the MYM, but I had to leave. They were not even clear about where they were going which meant their ideas were always adaptable. And this wasn’t a good thing. And I asked myself, do I adjust my ideas and grow old with this movement, or do I move on?
In her daily life, she continuously questioned herself as to how successful one can be if you are willing to compromise on any aspect of your life. She conceded that adopting a firm and clear position does not win popularity; while those who were willing to compromise were often the ones who drew larger numbers. As an individual who had chosen to be an activist, she considered herself committed to what she deemed to be the correct and true path - and she was not willing to yield to anyone. The path she had chosen was rooted in religious injunctions as she understood it. She expressed her enormous frustration at the “self-oppression” that so many women indulged in. Citing the example of the fight for mosque space by activists in the MYM, she noted that paradoxically many women still did not attend communal prayers even after space was granted. According to her, her resoluteness in not compromising meant that she generally detached herself from people who were trying to discourage her or hold her back.

In this regard, while her immediate family always supported her, there were some in the Islamic movement who considered her too opinionated and vocal. As a student at a university where Muslims were a small minority, she initially never even realized that many girls chose to remove their hijab because they did not “blend in.” She found it even more shocking that some husbands requested that their young wives remove their scarves because it seemed “old-fashioned and you know, not in keeping with their modern mind-set, the western lifestyles they adopted and their more superficial approach to life.” On this aspect she noted that:

You see what I mean when I say that women tend to self-oppress? Some people will say it’s a personal choice but it’s compulsory for you to wear hijab; that is Qur’anic law! You can’t negotiate your way in and out of religious laws!!

Your growth takes place in ways you didn’t expect, in ways you didn’t really plan for when you enter a tertiary institution. And I must say, that was a wonderful experience for me. I didn’t allow these challenges to stunt my growth, or deter me. It was wonderful that I was threatened in so many ways; that my thinking was threatened in so many ways. It
made me so much stronger. As a person and as an activist. And as a woman. Going to university was life-changing in so many ways for me. I didn’t just go to lectures. And you will have friends who wear their jeans and short t-shirts and their short dresses ask me ‘but what’s wrong with you’. They would say things like ‘our Iman [faith] is in our hearts’. Because some feel they are now educated and with that should be a more modern outlook on life. But having your Iman in your heart was not enough! It needed to be expressed on the outside as well! And if it’s not outwardly expressed how do you convey it? Like should we say we are unhappy about how women are treated and keep that unhappiness in our hearts? Or we are unhappy about apartheid but keep it to ourselves? How will we ever make progress in society if we all keep things in our hearts? A movement - like individuals - cannot be stagnant. You need to speak up, and speak out, so that people know what you stand for.

Having seen how many women were denied basic rights by husbands who dictated to them, she felt well equipped and informed when she eventually got married after graduating. She noted the unlikeliness of being drawn to someone who wanted to prescribe to her how to express her religion. Her husband, though not an activist like herself, always supported her:

I was very fortunate he loved me for who I was. And being an activist was part of who I was. Our relationship was successful because religion was important to both of us.

She acknowledged that there were challenges with her in-laws who did not approve of her outspokenness and her activist life and ascribed this to entrenched Indian and Malay cultural patterns within the Muslim community.

It was so entrenched in society! But because I was brought up by parents who were very open-minded, and also in a Malay community, we were allowed to be who we wanted to be. We were allowed to voice our opinions and so on. So my in-laws on the other hand
had a lot of the Indian culture in them. And many people would disagree with me, but you cannot bring the Indian culture or the Malay culture or the Zulu culture into your marriage. You need to bring Islamic culture. That is what we want. That is what makes relationships successful. Not just between husband and wife, but between parents and children.

According to her, people often confused culture with religious injunctions; while the former was man-made, the latter was ordained by God. She and her husband committed to raising their kids with this principle. She recalled how her kids were sometimes mocked for wearing hijab, while their cousins dressed in what was considered fashionable at the time.

And I didn’t need that for my children you know; that they be scorned for practicing their religion. It saddened me at the time. And for dressing properly - Islamically you know. And if friends or in-laws had a problem with that, so be it. Then I will keep them away. And if it’s only us as a family, then that’s how it will be. The children must never feel that their Islam is threatened. They learnt to not respond when people asked things like ‘are you Indian or are you Malay’. It’s not that you want to exist in a bubble, but you learn to be with people who were of the same thinking as you.

She recalled how her familial home was often a sanctuary for those who were on the run from the Security Police - specifically activists from the Islamist movement. Though this was a security risk, it was a reality they as a family were prepared to face. Th urea again noted that activism was not a “part-time occupation”. She found it enormously frustrating that some people chose to immerse themselves in matters relating to accessibility to mosques while the anti-apartheid struggle should have enjoyed precedence. During this period it was necessary for ordinary people to show their commitment to this cause by offering assistance where possible. For some this took the form of providing a meal and or shelter, while for others it meant assisting Islamists who needed to leave the country.
She remembered that there were times when her husband insisted that she be more discreet and less involved in anti-apartheid activities – due to the security risk that was a reality at the time. She admitted that since activism was so central to her identity, she may have been overzealous at times without realizing that the well-being of her family was at risk. In this regard, she appreciated that he reminded her. She stressed that as his wife she always valued and respected his opinion. She reasoned that the few times she retreated from a particular activity it was a pragmatic choice rather than compromising. According to her, if you are in a partnership, you made choices at times. However, these choices were always within the paradigm of Islam. Her husband would never have expected her to relinquish her activism; he understood her ideological position and her need to be involved in transforming society.

Thurea underwent a second conversion to Shi’ism during the mid-1980s. She explained that this was primarily because, unlike the dominant Islam being practiced in South Africa, Shi’ism placed emphasis on the centrality of politics within Islam. To her this seemed particularly relevant to the South African context and she admits to having made a ‘mental shift’ when the revolution took place. She however understood that at the time it would have been hugely problematic to openly declare being Shi’a.

You accepted the ideology, you taught the ideology if you had a platform, you lived the ideology, but you did not publicly mention the word Shi’a or attach the label to yourself.

Becoming Shi’a infused her with a renewed vigor and commitment to activism. Initially her husband, who came from a very traditional family, had difficulty accepting this school of thought. For this reason she opted to not “label” herself publicly – knowing that this could potentially cause problems within her marriage and in her relationship with her in-laws.

What I loved though about him, was his openness and his receptiveness to these new ideas I had. That was the beautiful part of him. It took him time to understand but he was always receptive. And in a relationship you also have to be intelligent enough to understand how to speak, to not be domineering and to know when it is his say and when
it is your say. It’s not easy having to re-examine all that you were brought up to believe, so the receptiveness is all that you look for initially.

They eventually became part of a Shi’a mosque community which meant that she and her family could interact with likeminded individuals. It was in this space where a sense of belonging was cultivated and she could affirm her commitment to this school of thought. She reflected back and noted that in most aspects of her life she chose the path less travelled. This was often a lonely road.

When my husband became a follower of the Ahlul Bayt [Shi’a] we were ostracized by my in-laws. We were completely side-lined and for months we didn’t see them. Being Shi’a was just completely unacceptable to them. But we made our decision and we were not going to compromise on what we believed to be the correct way. You see you have to break the mold at some point. Especially with your children. Many of their friends considered their upbringing to be abnormal. But you need to teach them to not be afraid to be stand by what they believe in.

When others questioned her children’s perception of ‘normality’, she always felt that she was successful as a parent. Teaching them to not simply accept mainstream beliefs was of utmost importance to her, and she admitted to feeling a sense of joy if they came to her with questions pertaining to societal, cultural or religious norms. According to her, questioning should not be regarded as being audacious; questioning ought to be encouraged in order to develop a critical mind.

We don’t exist in a vacuum, in a bubble. If we want change in society, we must do it from within. But we must start with ourselves, with our families, our children.

Thurea considered herself to be an activist to the core. She involved herself in the South African National Zakaah Fund (SANZAF), at the local Muslim Radio station, conducts talks and lectures at various venues and recalled how her husband always encouraged her to further her education.
When my time is up my time is up. Then I want to know that I did the best I could do. As a wife, as a mother, as an activist, but most of all, live my life according to the principles Islam, and the example set by the family of the Prophet.

She concluded by telling me that she had different influences and incentives at different periods of her life. Overriding everything though, is her belief that God set both guidelines and parameters for her. These are what kept her going throughout her life. If she could impart to her children the understanding that religion will always trump all else, and the ability to speak up for themselves and speak out against injustices, then she considers her life to be a successful one.

**Fayruz**

Fayruz, who identified as being of Indian origin and hails from Johannesburg, experienced a turning point in her life when she was still in her teens. She is the eldest of four siblings, and was raised in a very traditional Deobandi home and family. From her high school days she questioned issues pertaining to gender injustices; an issue which she still holds close to her heart. She recalled the first time she read the opening chapter of the *Qur’an* aloud in the presence of an audience. Ironically, this happened in a Church - she had at this point in her life never been inside a mosque. At the time, she was about 13 years old, and the recital formed part of an event hosted by the Catholic school she attended.

She noted that her father was happy sending her to this school, since the ethos of the school was in line with basic principles of Islam. She mentioned that the school had a very clear anti-apartheid policy, and teachers spoke very openly about the socio-political injustices in South Africa. Fayruz jokingly added that her father was not as impressed with the gender egalitarianism that formed part of the school’s ethos and was implemented in all aspects of the curriculum. It was during this period of her life that she already started questioning various aspects of Islam as she experienced it in her daily life. In particular, issues relating to the clear biases and constraints imposed on Muslim women became something she interrogated.
With a chuckle she attributed the fact that her younger brothers eventually learnt to do chores traditionally assigned to women, to her constant questioning and challenging of assigned gendered roles. An incident which seemed to actively impel her towards activism involved her brother wearing a t-shirt imprinted with the face of a well-known rock star. Coming from a very traditional Deobandi upbringing, she urged him to take it off before praying. He refused, after which they had a heated argument; with him explaining why it was not religiously obligatory for him to remove the garment before praying. She found his response to be plausible, and was intrigued by some of the sources he quoted. He invited her to attend the *halqah* which was held at Wits under the auspices of the MSA. Fayruz was a university student at the time and found these study groups to be hugely beneficial and inspirational - offering alternate understandings of religious text.

She was always an avid reader of religious texts, but found these gatherings particularly helpful in furthering her understanding of herself and her role within the South African context. She believed that the school she attended gave her an invaluable grounding and equipped her with the relevant tools with which to read and analyze critically. The issues of social injustices and particularly the gender injustices which permeated South African societies (and was often the subject of discussion in the *halqah*) deeply resonated with her. Furthermore, the majority of South African clergy and ordinary Muslims seemed quiet about these issues.

She became very involved with various MYM initiatives. Ideologically she felt at home within the movement and relished the discussions held around some of the seminal works within progressive thought. Meeting like-minded youth like herself provided her with an outlet in which to interrogate the injustices which pervaded society and which she had thus far only confronted in her own home. Being part of a movement afforded an avenue through which to publicly voice her objections and to be proactive in addressing the matters at hand.
Access to mosque space was at this time still a huge point of contention among certain Muslims in Johannesburg. While flouting convention was not her ultimate objective, she felt strongly that change could only happen if individuals were willing to action their ideas. The opportunity for Fayruz came in the form of a challenge by an MYM friend who alerted her to the sayings of the Prophet (PBUH) compelling women to attend the Eid salah. She recalled that the only mass Eid prayer held outdoors (known as an Eidgha) was at the time performed at a traditional Deobandi mosque. She admitted to going with some trepidation, and being the only woman among hundreds of men was hugely intimidating. Determined to assert her right to pray the Eid salah, she proceeded to open her prayer mat behind the entirely male congregation and amidst the stares and the whisperings, completed her first Eid salah. Admittedly, she could not recall a word of the lecture, but noted that she was not asked to leave, nor was she openly confronted. She felt tremendously encouraged after this incident and recognized that transformation in any society could only happen through activism.

My whole family was hugely upset…my mom, my dad, my uncles! They were so upset at my brazenness to enter this space which was supposed to be reserved for men. And you know according to the Hanafi school of thought women are not allowed to go to the Kaberstan [cemetery]. So that same day of the Eidgha I went to the Kaberstan to visit some of the graves of family members. In my reading of the text I did not see what the big issue was. The fact that this had become normative Islam did not make it right. At that point I had already decided that I did not want to belong to any one school of thought in particular. I had my own ideas about what kind of Islam I wanted to practice. An Islam that was freer, more open to different approaches, an Islam that made it easier for me to be Muslim. An Islam that did not overlook gender injustices and political contexts. You know, a relevant Islam.

It was in the MYM that she formed close relationships with others who were part of AZAPO and the Black Consciousness Movement.
Up to this point there was a constant almost displacement, almost like a tension for me. What I mean is there wasn’t a cohesion before this; in terms of how I experienced Islam, in terms of how I understood Islam and in terms of what I saw my community expressing. So I loved being in an environment where it felt that all forms of justice was being discussed and programs were in place to address these issues.

Her involvement in local matters made her develop an interest and awareness of international affairs as well. In particular, she developed an interest in conflicts where Muslims were involved. Being surrounded by the many Jewish students on campus meant that inevitably the question of the Middle-East arose.

And there was a whole Islamophobic thing brewing. And you would hear all kinds of comments about Muslims this, Muslims that. So one day there was an anti-Muslim protest that these students organized. And before that I never wore a scarf.....And that day I made a decision to wear hijab. That was when I started wearing it. But my hijab was a form of protest initially. I didn’t wear it because I was Muslim and Muslim girls are supposed to wear it. No! For me it was about a political statement, a form of political protest. And oh it so totally changed everything! People related to me so differently. Everyone treated me differently, people who were non-Muslim but especially those who were Islamophobic. I was no longer just an ordinary student; I was no longer one of them. Really what I was saying through wearing my scarf was that this is my identity and if you don’t like it or can’t accept it then I’m happy for you not to be part of my circle.

Her family was taken aback when she started wearing hijab, a mode of dress which no-one else in her close circle had adopted.

I suppose one could say that they were culturally Muslim with a lot of focus on conservative and entrenched sort of religious norms. So when I started wearing the hijab my family was shocked. My father was like ‘oh you are never going to find a husband;
you’ve got such beautiful hair why do you want to cover it’ and so on. Gradually they accepted it and funny enough gradually even some of my cousins started wearing *hijab*.

Being Black, being a woman and now being (overtly) Muslim in apartheid South Africa meant that Fayruz constantly felt discriminated against. Not only was she questioned about her race when she applied to university, she noted that it was very difficult to find work in her chosen field, in the health sector, after graduating. This was compounded by the fact that she was now wearing *hijab*. At this point though, she had already realized that it is only through activism and letting her voice be heard that change was going to come about.

The field that I was qualified in was mostly white. So initially the only places I could find work in were Lenasia or Joburg city centre where the clientele was mostly Black African.

In my working life I have never really worked in areas where the clientele was white. I was never really given opportunities. Not that I wanted to anyway! I was quite happy offering my services to those in poorer communities. But it’s just interesting that though my name clearly sounded Indian, when I went for interviews I also sensed that it was my *hijab* that made me unsuccessful. Because I was qualified to do the job. And even when I was experienced. You know there are all these perceptions around women who wear *hijab*. So the choices available are much more limited.

Fayruz’s activism did not stop after getting married. She noted that her husband, who she met through the *halqah*, had always been very supportive of any endeavor she embarked on. Working full-time meant that her free time was limited; however Fayruz could not disengage herself from being an activist. On the personal front she found that archaic ideas with regards to gender stereotyping were still firmly entrenched. Her husband’s family stayed about three hours’ drive from Johannesburg, and they would often spend weekends with her in-laws.
None of the women in my in-laws’ family worked when we got married. I was seen as a bit of an anomaly! That was difficult at first. So both me and my husband worked full-time, and I would often still work on Saturdays. Then in the afternoon we would drive through and when we got there he would go lie on the couch and I was expected to go to the kitchen and help. And I just refused. And we had a couple of bad moments. And I had to sit him down and tell him nicely that it was unacceptable. And I really felt strongly about equality an all aspects. Because that’s really what I felt it meant to be Muslim.

Her idea of being Muslim did not correlate with her in-laws’ ideas of being Muslim. This led to some friction initially, but Fayruz was emphatic that she was not going to be complicit in perpetuating any type of inequality. While she was told that compromising when they spent the weekend at her husbands’ family’s place may be best for all concerned, she became even more adamant to challenge gendered norms.

I became almost mule-ish\footnote{She explained this to mean extremely obstinate and resistant.} about this, and refused to make endless cups of tea or do dishes. It’s almost as if I moved away from being a nice person to actually trying to prove to people that I believed very strongly in what I considered to be the right thing.

Eventually they realized that she was not going to budge, and gradually accepted her position. She recalled one particular incident, though; when she deemed it best to concede.

It was the when we spent Eid at their house, which we don’t do anymore because now they come to Joburg. At that point still I was integrally involved in the *Eidgha* campaign. You know, for women to attend. So since that first *Eid* salah, I never missed one again. Because I really believed strongly that this is what the Prophet (PBUH) ordered women to do. So it was the morning of *Eid* and my father-in-law called everyone to *Eid* salah. And I said ok I’m coming with. I remember him turning to me and saying ‘well I am not
responsible for what may or may not happen at the Eidgha.’ He said there are no facilities for women and somehow in that moment I sort of felt that it would be very embarrassing for my father-in-law if I went. If it was my father I would have gone, because I’ve become so used to embarrassing my father!! I’ve been doing it my whole life!! But for my father-in-law it felt different. He didn’t want to rock the boat, this was his community and he wanted to be accepted. So by me going to the Eid salah and flouting convention, it would be seriously problematic for him and his standing within the community. My husband on the other hand said I should come if wanted to. He was quite supportive. But then I decided against going. Just because my father-in-law would have been placed in a very difficult position. So I stayed behind, but I downed tools. In protest, and because I compromised my belief, I refused to go into the kitchen and prepare Eid breakfast along with the other women! And only after I checked the time and estimated that Eid salah was done did I get up and enter the kitchen!

Reflecting back onto this she commented that it may have been a combination of her strong-mindedness and her own interrogation of Islamic texts which led to her taking the lead in the religious teaching of their kids. Not happy with the approaches adopted and the content taught in Madrassahs, she started her own religious school at home, devising a syllabus whereby students were given alternate readings of classical Islamic texts. She encourages students to participate in open discussions where they can ask questions relating to practical situations wherein they find themselves on a daily basis. Fayruz maintains that, as a woman who considers Islam to be central to her daily life, it was imperative that her kids grow up understanding that religion was not a constraint. Rather, religion is a lived experience. They are taught how to navigate through real-life situations they face within the framework of Islam.

Through this Madrassah, Fayruz aims to make Islam more relevant to youngsters, and to show them the beauty of their religion (as opposed to seeing religion as a burden). She linked the establishment of a
Madrassah directly to her own experiences as a young girl attending institutions which never addressed any of the questions she had about social and political injustices.

Because Fayruz had consistently challenged mainstream understandings of Islam, she understood the difficulties her own children, along with other like-minded individuals, would face. In this regard, she resolved to address some of these issues at a young age, hence the establishment of a Madrassah.

You know when my kids go to these traditional mosques they question why there aren’t women for example. For them the mainstream has become the other. Because in their experiences women lead salah and are involved in activist work and so they interrogate mainstream understandings. You see their experiences in the home were and still are very different from what mine was. They don’t consider themselves different, in their world they are ‘normal’ and traditional and restrictive interpretations are not. That was not the version of Islam that they were exposed to.

She expressed her despondence that many Muslims, who were silent during the liberation struggle, were now raising kids who lacked any understanding of South Africa’s political history. Beyond what they are taught in schools, there seemed to be a complete detachment from the harsh injustices faced by (and still facing) the majority of South Africans. Her own political involvement prompted her to include this in the Madrassah curriculum.

Because it’s relevant and important that our children understand these things. In our Madrassah syllabus we included apartheid history and some of the very real experiences of Muslims in our community.

Fayruz understood that changing traditional entrenched understandings of Islam will take many more years, but felt a sense fulfilment knowing that she played a small part. Ironically, it was often more challenging confronting stereotypical norms in her private space, than it was doing so within the broader
community. Fayruz contended that the notion of living a life which reflected her beliefs is essentially how activism became internalized for her.

**Farah**

Farah’s journey differed from the above three in that, though she found herself ideologically aligned with both the MYM and Qibla at different times of her life, she chose to not become a signed member of any one movement in particular. She explained that it was a personal choice she made; she generally preferred “viewing from the margins”. I asked her whether she considers herself an Islamist; to which she responded that her activism has taken various forms over the years. There were times when she considered herself an Islamist, though at other times religion was less attached to activism.

Farah hails from Durban, grew up in a middle-class family and is the second eldest of four children. While she was raised in apartheid South Africa, she acknowledged that her own involvement in the liberation struggle was limited to a few brief incidents and the involvement of distant relatives.

You know you’ve heard of all this stuff that was happening during apartheid, but I was raised in a very sort of sheltered and cocooned kind of home, and yes you had family that was involved but you weren’t going to be involved. Because my mother was just never going to allow that her children not complete their education because of getting involved in activism.

Looking back, she recalled that it was during her time at Wits University during the 1980s that she became politically conscientised. She remembered attending every anti-apartheid rally that took place on campus. She recalled one particular protest during the 1980s:

There was an anti-apartheid rally on campus, and the cops came in to disperse us. They gave a five minute warning for us to disperse and of course nobody moved. So after five
minutes they start chasing us and we started running. Some of us ran into the gym. What were we thinking? Of course we were trapped and we were going to get caught!

They were all arrested and taken to the holding cells at John Vorster square. She recalled how parents came in frantically looking for their children among the mass arrestees. Her family was notified in Durban, and her mother’s first response was, “We are leaving the country!” Given the political uncertainties in the country, Farah noted that her mom had already started the process of possibly emigrating. Her being arrested essentially acted as a catalyst for them to leave South Africa for a few years.

While being arrested occurred through Farah’s “own doing”, another event took place when she was much younger and which was entirely out of her hands. Her parents got divorced when she was 12 years old. Looking back, she observed that it was this event more than any other which shaped her thinking, albeit in a wholly subliminal manner. At this young age, she observed, and possibly internalized, the manner in which her mother was unfairly judged and categorized as a divorced, middle-class Indian Muslim woman.

It’s funny because my parents were prominent in our community. And we were well-off. Yet after the divorce she wasn’t invited to social functions anymore. Because she was single, and she had four kids. And seeing her struggle shaped me I think. And I think from there I already developed a gender consciousness.

Much of the difficulties her mother encountered as a divorcée were purely because of prejudices directed at women. In this regard Farah has spent most of her professional life interrogating issues related to gender injustices.

The new university she attended abroad did not allow her to register for the same degree she was studying towards at Wits, and she was thus compelled to enroll in an alternate program. It was in doing this that she ‘discovered’ the field of Religious Studies. “I take this course and I’m blown away.” While she had
always been clear about being Muslim and her Muslim identity, studying religion had never before occurred to her. She proceeded to enroll for courses in Islamic Studies as well as some courses in Arabic.

Staying abroad in many ways re-affirmed her South African identity and she was acutely aware of the political upheaval happening in her own country. She was at this point desperately looking for ways in which to further express and assert this. With this in mind she joined a branch of the Muslim Students Association on campus. She reflected that, beyond seeking connections as a young Muslim woman, she also came with her background of student activism, and she sought to play a more active role on campus.

I suppose I was looking for a connection, I was trying to settle into a new country, and I was looking to affirm who I was and where I came from. And it’s funny, because my brother gave me this jacket before I left, one those thick sort of army jackets with the fleece inside. And that’s what I used to wear on campus. So somehow people identified me as being militant. Just through this green army coat. Or maybe I identified myself as militant. Maybe it was just my way of connecting to myself and where I came from.

Her connection and involvement with the MSA became a very personal one. She recalled that a core objective was to spread a “very positive understanding of Islam within the university community.” She considered her association with the MSA to be a significant one. It allowed her to connect with like-minded students, albeit non-South Africans for the most part. Most of the Muslim students were either Pakistani or Indian. While she may be of Indian origin she understood that there was a clear disjuncture between herself and many of the other MSA members. Being in a foreign country, she identified as a South African first, not as an ‘Indian’.

She noted that she did not don a scarf at the time, unlike some of the other Muslim students who often wore their traditional dress. She made the point that even those who covered their hair did so for non-political reasons. She recalled her own “encounter with hijab.”
I had this little cubicle, where I studied. I had a scarf there and my prayer mat. So I would read my prayers there as well. And one day after I prayed, I left my scarf on. And I went home like that. And that is how I started wearing hijab. And I wore hijab for seven or eight years after that. My mom actually didn’t say anything. But the first time I had it on in front of my family, her sister found out and hit the ceiling! How are you ever going to get married? She’s losing all her market value! So I said ‘ok, if that’s the position then I’m keeping it on, I’m wearing it’.

Wearing hijab was also a political statement she made against the anti-Muslim sentiment that was pervasive at the time in light of happenings in the Middle East. She recalled that it wasn’t easy; you were immediately identified as being Muslim through your mode of dress. It was however hugely important to her to express her discontent with anti-Muslim responses at the university. Also, her acute awareness of the political situation in South Africa and her oftentimes frustration at not being part of an anti-apartheid movement while abroad, made her increasingly determined to express her “Muslim-ness” and her sense of social justice.

When, after a few years Farah returned to South Africa with her family she registered for post-grad studies at the University of Durban Westville. She was clear that she wanted to base her research on the concept of womanhood in the Qur’an; though the religious studies department clearly disapproved of her ideas. Eager to impart what she had learnt abroad, and wanting to settle back into South African campus life as quickly as possible, she decided to join the MSA. She found herself elected as the vice-president of the organization. She explained that the Islamic societies on campus have historically never involved themselves in political matters and she was keen to change this. Being out of the country and thus unable to participate actively in the Islamist Movement, Farah was now determined to make her contribution. Under her management previously unheard of alliances were formed with other bodies on campus - including with the SRC. Various political awareness campaigns were embarked on. Beyond the notion of halqah and the Islamization of a society, Farah was more interested in the realities of being Muslim. This
included political and social realities experienced and faced by Muslims and others. She was critical of Muslims who considered their Muslim-ness to set them apart from others and, within the MSA, encouraged members to challenge tangible issues related to politics and gender. At this point in her life she felt very strongly about asserting her Muslim identity.

Sometime during this period she met up with some of the Durban based Qibla members.

And then I get a whole new take on the anti-apartheid struggle and the revolutionary nature thereof. And I remember asking ‘so what is your constitution, what direction are you taking’, and I was told that it’s the Qur’an. ‘The Qur’an is our constitution.’ I suppose I may have been interested in Qibla before, but there was no way of finding out. You know the best way would have been to find out about Qibla through Qibla, but you know their members were not very open or forthcoming! In Durban Qibla was never really big. And it was all about secrecy and under cover. So trying to learn about them was difficult. But somehow I found out about them. And I was drawn to this way of thinking. And I became friends with Qibla members. And then another very important thing happened: I fell in love with someone who was a Qibla member. And it was in one sense weird. We would speak for hours and hours. And we would speak about issues of social justice, issues of right and wrong, the anti-apartheid struggle and all of that. And it was really intense you know. And I think at that point it all got mixed. You know religion, politics and the personal. And I was part of it because I was drawn to it but because he’s part of it. And I was with him. And we were doing this together. And I know that I had a sense of what was just already. And then to find someone you deeply cared for and you share all this; it’s unusual. And very very powerful. Incredibly powerful.
She does add that though he was a central part of association with Qibla, it was not the sole factor. Her involvement in Qibla deepened and she found herself involved in feeding schemes as well as part of regular programs spreading political awareness.

It was a time when she was grappling to make sense of religion and politics and part of that was challenging gender stereotypes. In the meantime, she was also wrestled with herself in terms of expressing what she believed in, in her own personal life. While her family had always been supportive, her challenges were deeply personal ones. She was during this period studying Islamic Law and found significant incongruities between what the texts were saying and the lives that Muslim women led.

We spoke about the fact that many Qibla members converted to Shi’ism. She noted that this school of thought gave expression to the ideals of justice in a way that the mainstream Sunni schools never did.

Again, I didn’t want to label myself either or, it was just my nature. But I had enough knowledge of both schools and if did a talk in a public space I would always speak about five schools, not four. So I never wanted to convert, but I was always interested in the Shi’a perspective, and what that madhab said. So I wouldn’t say there was ever a conversion, but there was certainly an association, an awareness and an understanding. And I never wanted to be exclusively associated with either side. So I would deliberately leave ambiguity.

She reflected that it was after relocating to Cape Town to start working that “I really felt everything was coming together. Religion, politics, gender issues in both my professional and personal life.”

It was also during this period she related to me, that another very significant moment occurred.

I decided to remove my hijab. It was hard at the beginning. People get to know you and identify you with the scarf. People have difficulty understanding you, knowing you without this. So taking it off was a big deal to others as well. Hijab had just evolved and
became something else over the years. And it was said that as women of course we must wear hijab. And maybe it was just me rebelling against that. And I said no we don’t have to. Plus hijab had become very much associated with piety, with being a good Muslim woman. Most women were wearing it to signify that they were good Muslim women. When I started wearing it I saw it as part of political expression. I didn’t think of ‘being a good Muslim woman’. I used a religious symbol to make a political statement. So when it became about being a pious Muslim woman I took it off.

She has done extensive work on Muslim Personal Law, and of her involvement in the drafting of the Bill, Farah contended that:

Any hope that we had that the traditional clergy would reform is lost now. There is no hope even that they will ever change. They are very clear. And we cannot formalize a system of family law that affords women their rights, that is entirely one-sided. So my position with regards to the Bill has changed drastically. And from a faith perspective I’ve shifted a lot. I have a very different understanding of my own religiosity, but trying to bring it into the public domain, into the everyday lives of women, has been hugely frustrating. Given that you are always up against the traditionalists.

Upon interrogating this aspect, she revealed that:

Many of the choices I made have been obvious. If there’s dissonance, for me, it’s that I can perform nikah [marriage ceremony], which I did, and to do that you do need a bit of authority. So the dissonance is that I can sometimes act as an authority on Islam and Islamic Law and yet I have zero authority in the community. In that same community who do nikahs, I’m a nobody. So that’s really where there’s clear discord for; I mean how do you pull that together?
Fahmida

Fahmida hails from a working-class suburb in Cape Town, and is the second eldest of five children. She schooled in the Athlone area on the Cape Flats and recalled that activism essentially started for her in her matric year at school. She could not with absolute certainty recall any one particular event which prompted her into becoming active in the student protest movement. She noted that it was rather the fact that, schooling on the Cape Flats meant that it was inevitable to not have an awareness of the anti-apartheid struggle. It was after a year of intense protesting, being teargassed and *sjambokked* (beaten) that Fahmida and many other matriculants decided not to write the year-end exams.

This was during 1984 and 1985 which was really the height of the student protests. And we were mobilized by all the student organizations in and around Cape Town. And I was at one of the schools that were very active in the anti-apartheid struggle. So the end of my matric year I decided that I wasn’t going to write exams.

I asked her whether she came from an activist family. She laughingly responded by saying:

Not at all! No-one in my family was involved in the struggle or in any of the movements at all! There’s no-one with an activist background. But you must remember there was a whole lot of uprisings at school level at the time, there was the Trojan Horse killings\(^{32}\) and all the other protests where students were teargassed and shot at in Cape Town. And for me as a student it was inevitable that I became involved. You see all these things happening and you develop an awareness of the apartheid policies and how terrible it was. And even at school level we were very organized as student bodies.

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\(^{32}\) A deadly attack executed by apartheid police which took place in 1985 in Athlone and Crossroads in which five people were killed.
She had the year before already joined the Muslim Students Association, but acknowledged that she wasn’t really interested in, nor did she fully understand the ideological basis of the movement. Strictly speaking, she noted that her very first form of activism was probably through the MSA.

I remember going to this MSA camp, and it was already difficult to convince my parents to let me go because they didn’t like this idea of girls sleeping away from home. And I remember going and finding this whole camp so strange. Because for me camping is supposed to be fun and here I get there and there’s all this other heavy stuff. Separation of sexes and all this heavy ideological stuff that is being talked about that I could never understand because the language and the terms they used was way too high for me at the time. They were distributing books of Mawdudi and Hassan Al-Banna and I remember feeling like the only one who had no clue and who didn’t understand any of this ideological stuff.

She recalled thinking at the time that there was an almost ‘militant’ feel about this camp which was held in Durban. There were guards patrolling the area at night and a structured program was followed during the day; which included discussions on Qur’an and the sayings of the Prophet.

Looking back she realized that it was essentially the first time that she was exposed to Muslims who expressed their Islam in a manner different from what she was accustomed to. She mentioned another dimension to this camp:

It was really the first time I realized how many black Muslims there were in South Africa. You know where I came from we were never really exposed to black Muslims, in Cape Town at the time there weren’t really a lot of black Muslims that I knew of. Certainly not the numbers that I saw at this camp. So that was quite an eye opener for me personally.

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33 Fahmida explained that in this context she referred to those who were historically classified as African.
Although the camp didn’t meet her initial expectations of fun and enjoyment, with hindsight she considered this to be the actual starting point of her activism.

So I started attending this halqah group and it was organized by one of the students who belonged to the MYM who stayed opposite our house. Eventually I started changing my worldview and I became more critical of stuff. You know, of society. But we were also reading Qur’an and discussing a lot of the text. And I also became more critical of things I saw in my family and how we were taught to express Islam. And my family thought I was a bit cuckoo! They thought I was just being ‘way out’ again. Because then I also started wearing hijab and I used to even get up for fajr [pre-dawn prayer] salah! But also remember that when we are young we are often like ‘into’ things. And I was really like ‘into’ this whole thing of becoming aware of other aspects of Islam.

While she noted that she doesn’t don full hijab at this point in her life, she considered the scarf to be a clear marker of her Muslim identity. At various points in her life she wore a scarf differently, and at times may not even have worn it, but she maintained that is an imperative part of being a Muslim woman.

So when I was really into the MYM and this progressive Islam, I covered myself in like proper hijab. Then, I think it was around the time I graduated [from university], I decided to ‘liberate’ myself from the scarf pin we all used to wear. So one day I decided that I really hated this pin and I just decided to take it off. Then I just wore my scarf loosely. So it went over the years. Different ways I wore a scarf. Now I’m not that strict with it, but I will always have a scarf with me. I feel like it’s part of my identity as a Muslim woman. It is a reflection of what you believe. It’s not that you are defined by it, but you are saying something, you know, expressing something about who you believe you are. So for me it’s an important part of my identity. Of being Muslim. And in Cape Town, it is the accepted norm, so I also feel that being part of this community I want to reflect that.
She drew my attention to the fact that she had always been a very private person; though not an introvert, she had always been the sort of person who considered herself to be “individualistic and I always just did my own thing”.

I wasn’t really out to influence anyone, I just discovered new things that I wanted to explore so I just went ahead and did what I thought was the right thing to do. And so my parents gave me that space. But when matric exams came and I made this decision they were quite shocked when I refused to write. And even though I was involved at school level there was also a group of us within the MYM who made this decision. And I suppose they worried about the risk with me being that involved, because the security police were picking up students.

She completed matric the following year, and went on to the study at the University of the Western Cape. She recalled that her father was in the building industry and the sole breadwinner. University fees were extremely high but her father was determined that his children attained a tertiary qualification. She admitted though that this was during the height of student uprisings, and UWC was the hub of student politics. For this reason she hardly attended classes but regularly attended the gatherings held by the MYM branch on campus.

I remember Ebrahim Moosa was one of the people who would speak to us about ideology and stuff. And I didn’t understand half of what he was saying! They used all these big words which I’m still not quite sure what they mean! I could never understand, never! So I really just went into it knowing that I wanted something and I wanted to learn but not always entirely sure what I was learning. So essentially a lot of the critical thinking and this notion of being a progressive Muslim through the MYM happened through a lot of my own reflections and my own reading and being surrounded by what I think were very good role models. And it was through a variety of forums; whether it was a protest or a
halqah or even just the discussions we had. And upon reflection – why I ended up with the MYM – I think it was just because that was what I exposed to at the time. Who knows, maybe if I was exposed to any of the other groups I would’ve joined them. But it was 1986 and anti-apartheid protests were at its height. And I just knew that I wanted to be involved.

It was also through the Muslim Youth Movement that she became aware of issues pertaining to gender justice. She reflected that at the time, though she struggled to understand the ideology, gender issues resonated with her.

It was as if these issues were just always there you know. Even in the movement. This whole thing of women in public and private spaces and access to mosques and how women were treated generally you know. So those issues were always raised, but I sometimes used to think they weren’t really serious about these things. It’s like they didn’t really internalize what they were saying in terms of what they practiced. Even in the movement you know. Like in the leadership and so on.

This awareness inspired her to get involved in community organizations where she dealt with women who had gone through divorces and encountered difficulties within the legal system or who were unjustly treated in religious organizations.

I really enjoyed doing this and felt a real sense of fulfillment but it was also extremely difficult doing this kind of work. You see I had never really had any exposure to this and had no idea growing up that women were experiencing such huge difficulties, and the worse part was that it happened within the Muslim organizations. It’s like women just had no rights within the laws of Islam. And women experienced violence and oppression in their marriages and this was really hard for me to get my mind around and work with. On the one hand we had discussed all the theoretical stuff around this, but this was real,
real issues. This was what women were experiencing. It really opened my eyes. So I really battled to make sense of this. And I tried to understand why it was that women seemed to have no rights when Islam really gave women so many. So I’m always mindful of the challenges women experience, even in my own workspace now.

She observed that this was a time that she really felt that she could contribute to the objectives of the MYM in a constructive way. She had gained a better understanding of the struggles women experienced; particularly those Muslim women who were reliant on the inefficient and inadequate systems and structures of Islamic judicial bodies.

So though I’m at present not actively involved on that particular level anymore, because of my own professional life, you know following my own career path. But I do other things which I feel was shaped by that particular period in my life. So I believe that activism doesn’t have to be confined to one specific way of doing things. That you realize as you grow and you mature. That there are many other terrains of struggle.

Her view is that Muslim women have some degree of access to the judiciary and other equity institutions; thus she opines that in the public sphere women are for the most part protected. It is in the private space that women are still experiencing tremendous struggles. While she did not want to expound, she reflected that it was her own personal experiences which affirmed this. Being professionally accomplished, and marrying someone ideologically likeminded did not result in being empowered as a woman. She confessed her inability to capitulate and meet the unrealistic and often inequitable expectations within the private sphere. In her opinion, this is the most noteworthy paradox within the Muslim community. Women are developing and achieving professionally, yet in their private spaces they are still facing tremendous challenges and even oppressive expectations set by a society. Even those who purported to be “progressive” with regards to gender policies seemed to be selective about the spaces within which they declared and performed these “progressive” beliefs. It is this paradox, beyond anything else, which has
impelled her to live a life true to her own position regarding gender discourse within Islam. She confessed to having become extremely outspoken about these issues, which she further observed are not confined to any one economic class.

Sitting in a *halqah* or being part of a movement is not real life; that’s maybe where the transformation takes place and where your worldview is altered and where I developed the ability to think critically. But it’s not real life. It’s when you go back to the work space and back to your family and back to the private spaces where these beliefs are tested. And it’s there where people are often dishonest about religion and their ideological positions. This was happening then all those years ago and it’s still happening now. So there is always lots of conflict in terms of what people say they believe and what they practice in their real day to day lives. And as women, we often just fall into the trap of separating the one space from the other.

This can become, according to her, disillusioning and disheartening. She however opted to inculcate this as a life lesson in every aspect of her daily life. As a mother she taught her children to make choices based on ethical and moral principles rather than those imposed by societal gender constraints. In her workspace, she encourages and supports women who encounter gender based discrimination. In her social circle, she makes her views regarding injustices clear.

It has become for me a normal and natural way of thinking and living my life.

She has extended her voluntary activism to focusing on empowering women through environmental projects. She observed that women should support each other in all possible ways and through different programs.

So at this point of my life I feel that everything I’m doing – at work, with my children and my volunteer work – is very much aligned with what I learnt back then; and being conscientised then. The way in which I approach life, how I think about Islam and just
our lives as South Africans – our politics. And it is important that those of us who have been exposed to that type of education must use it to empower and educate others. You know like we said “Liberation through education.” So we lived during a time of oppression and that was our lived reality and we were taught what being liberated was. And that is how we understood what we were facing and what needed to change. So if a woman is in an oppressive relationship and you are not even aware that you are being oppressed, then that is your norm; it is what you accept as your lot in life. So someone should at least tell you what your rights are. And you should always have a choice.

She expressed reluctance at mentioning specific situations in her personal space wherein she encountered conflict due to her ideological position. She confessed though that her strong views and her refusal to live a life contradictory to her beliefs often resulted in disagreements with those close to her. Defending her position wasn’t always easy as she dislikes confrontation. In this regard she noted that she was strategic about choosing her battles.

She reiterated that her “Muslim-ness” had always been an integral part of her identity; and though her parents were shocked at her involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle, they understood that she was simply practicing a different understanding of Islam. Their attitude strengthened her beliefs in the values of justice and freedom and the firm religious grounding she received at home formed the basis of activist endeavors. While, as a youngster, she may have considered her parents to be unaware of the political aspect of religion, she now realized that for them the situation was much more complex.

She repeatedly confessed her passion for working towards empowering women. She felt that scholars and even activists tend to get bogged down with interpreting the texts and having internal debates while the daily lives and struggles of women are often neglected. It is for this reason that she decided to move beyond organized activism within an Islamist movement.
It’s come a long way since then. When I was so different in my family and everyone just thought I was being strange. But I do believe it’s because my parents gave me the firm base they did. And when I think about it now, my father was actually very progressive at the time, you know, the fact that he wanted all his girls to study and become professionals. So implicitly he was doing what he could towards empowering women. And that is what I will, and do, impart to my own children. I give them the space to make their own choices, while as a parent I always try to guide and advise.

She observed that it is oftentimes only later in life, after having undergone many personal struggles that she realized the importance of the values and principles taught at home. There is a tendency, and more pronounced among activists who were part of the Islamist movements during the 1970s and 1980s, to overlook this. She explained that it was to be expected, given that the ideological shift at the time was so pronounced. It was the solid religious grounding many of them received on the home front which enabled them to become activists. In this regard she noted that the most valuable lesson she gained from this is to be strategic in challenging norms which affect your daily life; while always remaining true to what you believe in.

**Shahida**

Shahida facetiously identified herself as a “troublemaker of note” before she proceeded to relate to me a recent conversation between herself and an activist friend.

We were standing outside and she pointed to a lady opposite the road sweeping her **stoep** [patio]. And she said to me ‘I sometimes wish I can be her; her house is clean, she sent her kids off to school and now is going to cook. Don’t you sometimes wish to be like her Shahida? Just to have an ordinary life and busy ourselves with simple things like that?’ And I understood what she meant. She wasn’t trying to make us important and that woman’s day sound trivial. I had also asked myself this question many times. You know
a life that we spent with our children, with our families, and live a - what would you say? An ordinary life? But it’s the life we chose. It’s a path we chose. And it didn’t come easy. It was never an easy choice to make. And it came at a great cost to our relationships with our children and with our families. But it’s a path we chose.

She proceeded to tell me how she grew up in Sophiatown not knowing anything about politics, and came from a family who had no involvement in the liberation struggle.

I’m a thoroughbred half-caste mixed breed. I say that when people ask me what tribe and what group I come from. People don’t really like it when I say this, but that’s what I am. Because people get so caught up with labels. I identify as a human being. Yes I’m a woman and yes I am Muslim and yes according to the laws of the land at the time I am Indian. But I identify as a human being. That’s all.

Her father was a wealthy businessman who lost most of what he owned when the Group Areas Act was implemented. Her first memories of school were being in a classroom with all ‘races’; however forced relocations due to the Group Areas Act resulted in her being moved to a school for children of Indian origin only. At the time though, she had no inkling as to what was happening within the political sphere.

She got married at the age of sixteen; to a man who had seen her at a social event and then asked her father for her hand in marriage. Though some members of her family expressed their dissatisfaction at her getting married at such a tender age, she reflected that she has no regrets about this.

You know, maybe it’s because we went to Madrassa from a young age and religion was always present in our lives, I always feel that everything has a reason. And I don’t regret anything or any of the decisions I made or anything that has happened. I believe even the challenges we face happen for a reason. And I have no regrets.
Life became a lot more serious after she got married; she was now faced with “realities of married life and all its stresses.” In the meantime they were, under apartheid legislation, forced to relocate to Lenasia. Due to financial constraints, she was also compelled to seek employment. It was during this time that she developed an awareness and understanding of the political situation in the country.

Maybe it was a combination of wanting to be involved in something outside the home – you know being a wife and mother – that led me to become involved. But also wanting a better life for my children. And I also really wanted to be able to face God one day and say that I did what I could to make a difference.

At this time she started attending public political meetings and then joined the United Democratic Front. One aspect she admitted, always confounded her.

I know I was new at all this – attending meetings and becoming aware of politics – but I didn’t understand why there always seemed to be conflict between the various groupings. Here was AZAPO and the ANC and all these other community organizations, and everyone wanted to be active, but yet there was always in-fighting and other issues which divided people. And here was I, simply thinking that everyone wanted to work towards eradicating apartheid. But there were always other kinds of conflict too. And I often wondered was it just about power or what. And you know it’s funny, because just this morning as I woke up I thought again how I reasoned at the time. It came to me that this divide and rule idea was everywhere; even in the religious teachings of Christians. Now you know I am very clear about being a human being first. But I thought that this idea of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit promotes the idea of division even in who you pray to. And with Muslims, there is only one God. There is only one Creator. And because people have been conditioned into having faith in three, not in one, the division comes even from religious teachings! And then we also have the idea of one ummah.
Humankind. It’s one body of people. So these are things I always used to, and still, think about a lot.

During this time she became progressively more involved in various organizations, including the Federation of Transvaal Women. Inevitably she also needed to avail herself to partake in issues which posed a security risk. At this point she already had two children, whom she often had to leave in either her husband or her sister’s care. She recalled one incident which involved the convening of a number of women representing countrywide movements at a particular hotel.

So sometimes because of security issues we were told beforehand that we wouldn’t be able to go home when we want to. There were issues like debriefing and that sort of thing. And then I was told that I must go down to the receptionist. My husband had phoned. My sister couldn’t handle the way he was nagging anymore so she gave him the number where I was at and he phoned. He told me ‘your sister is here at home now where are you? Why are you not home?’ And one of the leaders told me ‘We can’t take any more women getting divorced; go home and see what your husband wants.’ First I said ‘I’m not going until we finish our work here.’ But then I went home. It must have been half past two in the morning. And there was my husband sitting up and complaining about my activities. And my children were home but I would see to everything and then leave for meetings. So he was like ‘why am I not home like other women; what was I busy with?’ He had a very suspicious mind. And I first told him that I haven’t got time for crap like that. And I explained to him that everyone knew I was married. It wasn’t a secret. And everyone knew that there was a line you didn’t cross with married women. Besides, I wasn’t going to meetings to play or mess around with other men, I was there because there was work to be done. But then eventually he explained to me that because he wasn’t born South African, he was worried that if I was a target for the security police, he would be deported back to India. So I understood and I said that won’t happen. And
maybe he felt bad about his nagging and then he told me to go back if I wanted to. And you know, it was just as well. When I got back to the hotel the next day, I heard that the Special Branch was there asking questions. And asking for names. But you see Allah protected me. No-one else. Through my husband’s nagging. There was a reason for what happened. There is always a reason for what happens.

She professed that she was always fiercely protective about her home space, her family and her children. After the above incident in particular, she realized how differently things could have turned out. She was determined to never compromise on what she considered to be the best environment for her children, without giving up on her activist work. As far as she was concerned, she had made a personal choice to become involved in activism – unlike her husband and children. In this regard she felt it would have been unfair to compromise their privacy and safety.

After this incident though, she realized that it was important to set boundaries and make clear her objectives to her husband.

I understood where he was coming from. I’ve been to India and I saw how they were conditioned to think differently. Especially as far as women are concerned. You know that patriarchal way of thinking. The Indian man is very different. But I had to make my position clear. I had to make my position clear when I started working. When I needed to start working. And when I got involved in the struggle against apartheid. He has had to learn, and he found it difficult. But that was his business. There was work to be done. And I kept my family together. Now we live apart but we are still married according to Islamic rites. With my children, I have always tried to be supportive, but as they grew I realized that they have their own lives. I always taught them that you are not better than others. Nothing makes you better; not being Muslim – nothing. My son also joined the UDF at one point. And he was picked up and taken into detention one day. And that day I
was looking after some other youngsters because their mothers didn’t know they were involved. And then I first had to go to this other school where some youth were protesting and then when I finally got to the police station and I saw the state he was in! He was quite badly beaten because he was resisting and he was trying to protect his cousin and some of the others with him. But that day I realized he had a temper, and that he shouldn’t be in the struggle. Because his temper was going to make him do things he shouldn’t. And I took him out, out of the struggle; and I think there are times he still resents me for it. But that was what I needed to do at the time.

She considered herself to be a devoted mother; but admitted it wasn’t always easy balancing motherhood with activism. On the other hand, she noted the importance of prioritizing and understanding that God did not place women on earth to be only wives and mothers – women also have a duty towards society. In this way she made clear that, while being a mother was a core identity, she could not live her life defined by it.

She got involved with the Call of Islam through her involvement with the UDF.

But I can tell you that I was never drawn to ideology as such. I understood my Islam as humanity. I understood the Nabie’s (SAW) message as being for humanity. I only got involved with the COI because they didn’t seem to separate themselves from other activists. They were involved on all levels. But I feel that all Islamic movements had this ‘women’s issues’. Either women were put on some kind of pedestal because it suited the trend at the time, or women were just simply in the background. I couldn’t be bogged down with all that.

She constantly referred to the valuable lessons she learnt from reading about the life of the Prophet. She maintained that she had always tried to live her convictions. She does not consider herself to be
courageous or brave; she in fact expressed her embarrassment at receiving the Order of the Baobab award from the Office of the Presidency in 2014 for her tireless contribution to uplifting communities.

You know this is not what our Prophet taught us; he taught us to be humble and to care about others. Not like a lot of this clergy you find who speak things from the mimbar [pulpit] but they are afraid to get their hands dirty. People get caught up with issues about money and power and the limelight. That’s not for me you know. I’m a simple person. And let me tell you another thing, we were never victims. We never played the victim card. We were survivors. That’s how we got through those apartheid years.

She reminded me that activism doesn’t have limitations. Once you are conditioned to believe in the notion of one ummah you understand that there is always work to be done.

Today people are so much more educated and there is the modern approach to Islam. But they forget the simple things and lessons in life, you know, those things my mother used to teach me. We were conditioned by the simple logic of the older people. And we listened! My mother taught us to be good, to be caring. If you don’t have anything good to say, be quiet. We need to be mindful of what is the essence of our society. That’s why I can’t say to you now what came from the Call of Islam or what came from the UDF. I think it’s the simple lessons that my parents taught me, that carried me through my life, through my marriage and it’s the things I taught my children.

She has developed an innate sense of justice, and expressed reluctance at attaching a label to it. While she is deeply religious, she noted that even during the liberation struggle, she steered clear of any group who wanted to set themselves apart. She recalled going to Baghdad in 2003 to show solidarity with the Iraqi people.

I’ve seen the worst, and I’ve seen the best. But I’m so honored, and so grateful to have been granted the opportunity to be with those people. I saw, in the midst of bombings,
women sweeping their yards. Food cooking. Children playing. And I saw people who knew how to turn to God for help. People prayed and they made du’a. And they believed that HE will listen.

She reiterated what she said at the start of the interview – that she is a troublemaker or civil society activist or any alternate label people want to use. “Because people are obsessed with labels you know.”

Towards the end of our conversation, she observed that her experiences as an ordinary person who made the choice to become involved in civil society, has led her to always implore God to guide her tongue and her thoughts so as not to cause harm or offense to any person. She emphasized the importance of always being truthful to yourself and to God and noted that justice and peace is impossible to attain if activists do not apply this core value.

It does not matter whether you fight in the anti-apartheid struggle; show your support for Palestine, show solidarity with the Iraqis or fight crime in South Africa, you always have to speak the truth. Only truth can give us proper justice. It’s something that applies to all humanity. My father used to say to tell me ‘tell the truth, and don’t live with lies.’ I don’t know how people live with lies. Just speak the truth. I’ve seen court cases where people lie. You can’t blame governments for that. For being dishonest. That’s about individuals. And our own integrity.

It became clear throughout our interview that she does not ‘privilege’ any one space of activism over another. Her experiences in the liberation struggle formed the basis of her activism, but it became a springboard for further struggles. She maintained that global injustices are as much of concern to her as the local fight against crime and corruption. Core values which her parents inculcated in her, values like caring, generosity, truthfulness and being non-judgmental, is what has permeated all the various facets of her life. She noted that the everyday realities are easier to face if these core values and priorities are in place.
Because you know why you do what you do. And your children see this. So you are not just teaching them about life, you are also showing them. Teaching your children about right and wrong is not enough to bring about changes in a society.

Rabia

Rabia grew up in Cape Town, in a suburb populated predominantly by those of Indian origin. She remarked that she came from “a very conservative family, 200% Indian!” She schooled at Belgravia High, and after matriculating, she recalled her mom saying to her: “That’s enough education now!” As the only daughter, she grew up being overprotected and cocooned. She however proceeded to go to college and qualified as a teacher.

She was too young to remember the actual incident which ostensibly led to her becoming a political activist, but she recalled how her mother related the story to her every single year.

As a baby I got very very sick. And my mother had lost two children already, so she thought this was it, I was also going to die. And it was the month of Muharram34; and now back then they didn’t first go to doctors, it was first home remedies. When that didn’t help she took me to the Imam [religious scholar]. He recited over me and gave me some things to drink. Now it’s going to the tenth of Muharram already. So after three days she took me back and I was apparently much better. Then the Imam said to her that I had been very sick, and now I am better. Allah had accepted their du’as and I was saved. So my mom should make the intention that every year on the ninth or tenth of Muharram, my parents should make a sacrifice; because it was a life for a life. Now in those years my parents couldn’t afford to sacrifice a sheep, so they were told that they could offer a chicken as a sacrifice. The Imam also said that, when I grew up, she must tell me that I was given a second chance – and that it happened in the noble month of Muharram.

34 Muharram is the first month on the Islamic/ lunar calendar.
therefore I must give my services in the path of Allah. So every year, at the beginning of Muharram, this story was told to me. And she would tell me that she made a promise that I would work in the path of Islam, and that I shouldn’t disappoint Allah.

Admittedly, as a child, and even throughout her high school career, this oft-repeated story became merely a refrain to her. It was only in her later years that the she grasped how it may have impacted on the activist life she had chosen.

Attending college in many ways exposed her to a whole new world. She then joined the Muslim Students Association and attended the halqah groups on Friday evenings. Having been raised in a very conservatively religious home, she was quite taken aback when she was exposed to some prominent anti-apartheid ideologues.

And I was young and you know, we think we are clever. My mother would still be speaking about Muharram and me being given a second chance but my mind was now on other things and other influences. Many of my teachers had Muslim names but were now agnostic or Marxist and used to say things like religion being the opium of the masses. Obviously they were trying to influence us to their way of thinking. They would ask why we are making salah and doing all these religious rituals when people are being oppressed. And they would ask why God was allowing that to happen. Now you are confused, you know. And while you still are religious you do rebel in your own way. And at home I used to ask even my parents why we are doing all these things and people were suffering not just in South Africa, but throughout the world.

Rabia was going through a process of introspection, and grappled to understand how religion could offer solutions to the socio-political injustices in South Africa. A partial response to this complex question came in the form of a talk she attended one Sunday morning.
I heard from someone that there was this person who was under banning orders and couldn’t just go out anytime. He was not allowed to be out after six at night. So this person was Achmad Cassiem. And he gave us a lecture on education, not politics. I will never forget that morning. He chose Surah AR-Rahman [a chapter from Qur’an] as his theme, and he gave us an Islamic perspective on the purpose of life. You know, what Allah wants us to do. And then he quoted many other verses and he showed us all the places in the Qur’an where Allah commands us to stand up for justice, and to speak out against oppression. And he linked this all to education. And he expounded on how politics and education and religion are all linked. Because back then all the Imams were saying that politics was haram. We were told about obeying the authority who ruled the land. And that morning you know, my whole perspective changed. And I thought to myself – this is it.

While this may not have been how her mother had expected her to serve God, she knew that she had found an avenue through which to express her religiosity. Besides, deep down she felt that she could not ignore the lessons learnt on that particular Sunday morning. She explained that her mom had at this point passed on, but her father repeatedly warned her to think carefully about getting involved in political discussions.

After graduating as a teacher, she was offered a position at a school close to her family home. Her father expressed his disappointment when she declined this post in favor of a position at a school in Bonteheuwel – a so-called working-class colored township located much further from her home.

It’s the first time I defied my father, but I just took that post. It was where I could make a difference. And I believe now that it was Allah’s plan that I do that. Everything is divinely planned, and I know now that it was linked to my mindset which had changed. There is no such thing as coincidence. HE plans.
She started teaching in the early 70s, and found herself in the midst of uprisings in Bonteheuwel. This was a time when she was exposed to the dire social and political injustices perpetrated by the apartheid government.

She left the family home in 1975 when she got married. Ideologically, she aligned herself with Qibla - joining the movement when it was established in 1977. “Alhamdullillah my husband eventually became an even more committed Qibla member than I!” With the onset of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, she noted that Qibla supported the position of Imam Khomeini insofar as finding political solutions through Islam.

And we were branded as being Shi’as at the time. Some of us still had physical scars from being physically attacked and thrown out of the mosques in Primrose Park, Hanover Park and Masjidus-Salam. And already there was a constant onslaught from the MJC about politics being haram [forbidden]. But after the Iranian revolution, we as Qibla had the government on one side, who we were fighting, but then we also had Muslims attacking us! I tell you it was hard having to face that. But we stood firm, because we believed what we were doing was right. So yes, then we had the apartheid regime against us and the ’ulama against us. And being branded like that really turned us into outcasts in the community.

Her first child was born in the late 1970s, and the second one a few years after that. This meant new responsibilities in addition to being an activist, a teacher and a wife. She came from a close-knit family and adopting these same values in her home came almost naturally. However, being an activist entailed a constant flow of marches, meetings and arranging fund-raising events. Some events they could accompany her to, while at other times she preferred leaving them with a relative. One occasion in particular stood out for her:

35 Praise be to God.
There was a meeting at St Athens road mosque; it was just after the Trojan Horse massacre. And then they sieged the mosque. And I had left my kids with a family member. You see what happened is that they didn’t want to release the bodies of those students who were killed. And that’s why we met at the mosque. And I went, thinking it was just going to be a few hours then I will be home. So they [security police] surrounded the mosque and no-one was allowed to enter or leave. And by two in the morning our lawyers started negotiating. And eventually by the early hours of the morning only we were allowed to leave. And that time there was no such thing as cellphones! But that night reality struck me. Really. And when I got home, I was given a good talking to. This family member didn’t think the way we thought. Like politically you know. What’s wrong with me and my husband, what kind of mother am I to leave my kids like this. Why are we attending meetings and just abandoning the kids like this? All those kinds of questions and accusations. But me and my husband then also realized we needed to come to a compromise. So we decided that we will alternate. Some meetings he went then I took care of the kids; and other times I went and he took care of the kids. Up till this day if I go to that mosque the memory still traumatizes me. And the fact that my kids were waiting for me. Even though I knew they were in good hands.

The memory of what her mother had told her resonated through the years; and in many ways she felt that she was now fulfilling what had been required from her. She was serving God and dedicating herself to following Qur’anic injunctions with regards to fighting for justice. She jokingly commented that this may not have been her mother’s idea of how to serve God.

My mother would have expected me to recite all the time and do all the other rituals! And funnily enough every year Muharram I could feel myself becoming more fired up. But in other ways also you know. Angry because of all the injustices we were seeing. And it’s
like nobody should mess with me because I was just in another state. It’s like I could just feel that spirit of Imam Hussain! ³⁶

She noted that one of the drawbacks of being involved in the Islamist movement, more specifically Qibla, was the inevitable cynicism and suspicion with which members like herself viewed others.

We started viewing everybody with a sense of distrust, because we were infiltrated. And the truth is many of our members’ lives were endangered because of that. I mean it was a time that things needed to be done. Dangerous things you know. So people often thought we were being selective in who we associated with. Because you are just suspicious of people in general. And my family used to caution me all the time about being locked up. And I must say, as a mother I was cautious, because I didn’t have sisters and I always used to think who will take care of my kids.

She recalled how, during the 1980s, some of her fellow activists were taken into detention and sent to Robben Island. It was during the month of Ramadan (fasting) and, in the spirit of the month of fasting, they requested from the Special Branch whether special food can be sent for breaking the fast. She laughingly recalled how the women made cupcakes and decorated it with the letter “Q”. This was intended to show solidarity with and to serve as motivation to those in prison. In her words: “A small token from our side, but we knew they would understand that we are still strong and we support them completely!”

She noted that sometimes there were issues which arose which were particularly pertinent to women.

I remember when Imam was still outside and we all used to attend his classes. On a Tuesday. And this particular year, it was just the day before Eid. So one of the ladies asked if it would be ok to cancel the next week’s class or else the ladies won’t be able to

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³⁶ Imam Hussain’s martyrdom at Karbala became one of the cornerstones of Shi’ism as a revolutionary movement (and a theology of protest) against tyranny and injustices. This event took place during the month of Muharram, which is the first month of the lunar calendar.
attend because we have to bake and prepare things for Eid. And I tell you Imam exploded!! He said the country is burning, the people are dying and you people have a cookie mentality! People are going into exile and you are worried about cookies and food!

Upon questioning her about this, she contended that men understandably, did not always grasp these supposed trivialities in life.

So yes I may even have thought that he was being a bit unreasonable. We were Qibla members, but we also had families and children and if it’s Eid the table had to be laid. And we had to bake and cook. We ended up having a shorter class that week, instead of cancelling. But that was Imam for you, what he said was true. And he says what he thinks – take it or leave it. But maybe he thought about it afterwards.

She maintained that, as committed as she was to the anti-apartheid struggle, there were certain things she always saw to in her home.

The best school and the best madrassa is in your own house. My routine was that I would come home from school together with my children, put my bag down and go to the kitchen to cook. My husband never had a problem with me being active in the movement, and he would even dish himself. But I would cook and if I needed to go out, I would leave the food on the stove. My children also understood from a young age what we were involved in, and it just became part of their lives too. You don’t become an activist and stop being a mother and wife. You know it’s all about balancing your life. And you can! But you know it was a time when life was very different. When you choose this path you can’t say ‘today I’m busy or I’m not in the mood’. You never knew when your phone would ring and you were needed. And if you were in the middle of cooking or whatever, you just left it. And because we used like codes to communicate over the phone, it was
important that we met in person to explain what the issue was. And we had this saying ‘do what needs to be done immediately.’ People’s lives were often at stake, so you prioritized.

She noted that a very difficult, albeit very real, part of being involved in the movement was having deal with the killings of fellow comrades by the apartheid police.

Of course we would get so angry, and sometimes yes you even get despondent. And even when one of our people was taken into detention – because you didn’t know what could be done to them. And yes you even question sometimes. And we who believe we find strength in what Qur’an says. But it was sometimes very hard. And today we are stronger because of that, you know. Because we did it for the right reasons. That’s why I always say, the struggle didn’t stop after 1994. I mean I was involved now since the 1970s, but there is still so much to be done. Some of our people have made the ultimate sacrifices. They gave their lives. Others neglected their families and children. So we will never give up, or stop speaking the truth.

She expressed her confusion at always being told about the battles in which the Prophet participated, yet so many in her family constantly criticized her for being involved in the struggle. Their focus seemed to be on praying, fasting and reciting – but being involved in politics was not incumbent on Muslims. She recalled how she eventually just learnt to be quiet about her activism when in their company.

I always told my children to stand up for what is right, and for what Allah commands. Don’t follow a leader blindly, but do what Allah instructed you to do. You know I have always taken strength from the Qur’an. And in my family I would sometimes get frustrated, but I really tried to keep the balance. Yes they wanted to do the ‘easy’ Islam.
Having a clear and strong Muslim identity was imperative for her, and it’s what she instilled in her children. She professed her happiness that her children have always been objective and clear in their stance when confronted with ethical dilemmas.

You must have a clear ideology. You must know what you stand for. And you must live your life according to that. Because as a teacher I can tell you that that is how children learn. Not from what you say, but from what you do.

Shanaz

Shanaz, the eldest of three children, was born and raised in Kwazulu-Natal in the 1960s to an activist father and mother. Essentially as children, they were not exposed to political ideologies, and only as she grew older she realized that her dad had been extensively involved in the Black Consciousness movement. Being an attorney, the latter often consulted with activists. Shanaz refers to him as a “covert” activist, and thus the anti-apartheid struggle was never discussed in their home. While she was categorized according to apartheid legislation as an ‘Indian’, she grew up always surrounded by people of different religious, racial and cultural groups.

But I was raised a very ritualistic Muslim. I had a relationship with God which was very limited in a sense.

She reflected on a possible transformative moment wherein she participated in anti-apartheid activities at her school.

I remember this one day the police was chasing us, and teargassing us and my mom must have come looking for me and my friends. How she found out, I’m not sure – interestingly we never really discussed it. So she was driving through the street with all these police vans along the road and throngs of children surrounding the car. And she was looking for us. And we were all just running wildly. And she found us and wanted to put
us in the car. And this white policeman was trying to grab us and put us in the van. And I remember her grabbing his arm and saying ‘Don’t you dare touch my children.’ And I looked at her and looked at her face and I was shocked at the strength in her voice. And the policeman took his baton and struck the car. And then I started screaming at him to leave my mother. This while my mom was clutching his hand and demanding that he let us go. And in that moment I think I just implicitly understood that my parents supported whatever we did in this boycotts. And it’s not as if my mother had to spell it out, it’s as if the knowledge was there, and through her action, I understood it that this is what was right. I suppose like any parent they wanted to protect us and ensure our safety. But they supported us.

She eventually went to the University of Durban-Westville during the early 1980s. At university she started distinguishing between the different political movements and she connected with Shamimah Shaikh, who was at the time a prominent activist within the Black Consciousness movement. She noted that ironically, it was her political activism that brought her even closer to Islam, and not the other way around. It was at this point that she started enquiring about and aligning herself with Islamic movements at the university.

And we interrogated our struggles as Black people, and we searched for the answers as Muslims.

It was a time during which she, for the first time, understood what having a clear identity and purpose was about. She became involved in the MYM but hastened to say that she was never a card-carrying member. Politically the position they had adopted did not resonate with her and her understanding of Islam.

It was through reading the English Qur’an that I started understanding. And I realized that was perhaps why I never strongly identified and never joined any of the other activist movements. It was primarily because my faith already had all the answers; it already
spoke about equality, it already spoke about humanness and humanity in a totally spiritual and physical contextual way. And that hit home with me. And that started my journey with the Qur’an – and I started reading more. Reading about the philosophy of justice; that you must speak out even if it is against yourself. And you know how powerful is that! So that’s why no ideology, no movement could speak to me as powerfully.

Her circle of friends changed during this time because her interests and objectives had changed. She felt that her entire outlook on life, her purpose for existing had been transformed. Finding expression for political activism through her belief system enabled her to cope with having their hostel rooms raided at night, being sjambokked (beaten) and teargassed and seeing some of her friends taken into detention. She then understood why activism was not a choice, it was a religious injunction.

She mentioned that she loved dressing up; wearing hijab never even occurred to her given that it was not the norm in her family.

I was not particular about a physical identity that looked like a Muslim. Essentially I wore hijab when I prayed. Funnily enough though, after I became involved, my dad used to say I made him a better Muslim and that I enriched their understanding about Islam. You see in the way they practiced activism, it didn’t really intersect with religion – even though we were always very clear about being Muslim and practicing the rituals.

She recalled one particular protest when she was carrying a placard with a Qur’anic verse pertaining to justice. She was rebuked by a member of the clergy for carrying the placard and not wearing hijab.

And I was told I have no business carrying a poster with Qur’anic verses while I was dressed like a non-Muslim person! But I wasn’t going to conform just because someone told me to. I understood my own beliefs and where I was coming from. And I knew there was much more to me than someone not wearing hijab.
A second spiritual turning point occurred, ironically enough, not through reading Islamic text or listening to a member of the Muslim clergy preaching, but through a Hindu guru who was invited by a Hindu organization on campus. The latter was invited in response to a talk given by Ahmed Deedat, who had come to address students one day.

I didn’t like the way Ahmed Deedat dealt with other faiths. It was mocking, and I don’t think he was gracious in calling other faiths to Islam. And I do realize that many people embraced Islam because of him. But so I then went to listen to this Hindu guru from India. And he explained how everyone was capable of attaining high levels of spirituality. And I remember him saying how everyone could become a god. He said that we are not gods yet. And some part of my brain went into “oh he is committing shirk” mode. Which is stereotypical for us as Muslims you know! But what I eventually took away from this talk, and what I realized is that, every one of us could reach a level of God-consciousness to the point where you are able to see the divine in yourself. And you are building on that beauty in you. And that is different to putting yourself or anyone else as a partner to Allah.

Listening to him made her question the fundamental difference between her own faith and lived reality and those of other faiths. Others felt a connection to the deity they believe in, and it is that connection which motivated them to do good, be better people and even participate in the same political struggle she was. This led her to question her own reality, and her own spiritual and physical presence in the spaces she occupied. One aspect she decided she needed to change then was her style of dress.

And I decided I’m going to wear a scarf. And I put it on and I felt totally at peace. I went to sleep feeling at peace and I woke up feeling at peace. It just felt like I didn’t have that conflict inside of me any longer. And let me tell you I loved my hair – it was thick and

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37 The act of assigning partners to God.
long and beautiful and I loved having it styled. And only when I looked in the mirror, gosh, I realized that I looked ten years older! And I remember thinking I now needed to familiarize myself with this person. That’s vanity for you! But besides that, I promise it didn’t feel inhibiting or anything like that. The amazing thing is, there was a different perception from people around me – the way people engaged with me. Guys just seemed to have a different level of respect towards me – and I never felt disrespected! It’s hard to explain. And I realized that a lot of that stems from the way our boys are raised – you know – to engage differently with girls in hijab as opposed to girls who dress more modern. And I still went to movies, enjoyed music and had fun in the same way I did before with friends. All I know is I really felt a different type of freedom. In myself and how I existed in the world. And I felt that my scarf introduced and established my Muslim identity before I said anything. So essentially the Hindu guy got me to wear a scarf!!

She indicated that wearing hijab caused some agitation to many of her family members. Many of the older ladies felt that it reflected badly on them for not wearing scarf. In essence, they felt more than just a bit embarrassed when she attended family functions wearing a headscarf.

I heard all the usual stuff you know. Like why don’t I rather start wearing the scarf after I get married? To which I of course responded that I wasn’t even sure that I ever wanted to get married! I told them there was more to life than being a wife and mother! And of course I shocked them! And I think they grew tired of engaging me because I was so clear about my own choice. But they just wouldn’t stop reminding me and telling others what beautiful hair I had.

During this time she came into contact with many well-known Muslim activists. She related how wearing a thobe when walking to the mosque turned out to be very convenient to transport pamphlets to and fro.
We would walk to the mosque on campus to read salah, and we often needed to walk through the police vans and Casspirs which were stationed there. And we used to strap the pamphlets tightly around our bodies and just casually walk to the mosque where we left it. And whoever needed to collect could collect from there.

In response to my question as to whether she was not afraid of the possible repercussions of being caught, she replied:

I can tell you now that I’m totally fearless. I know and I’ve learnt that about myself. I think it is frightening sometimes, now that I think about many of the situations I was in. So yes I can be fearless. I can do what needs to be done and get out of there intact. And I think I only really discovered this quality in myself through the political struggle. It was when I realized what I was prepared to do, and what I was at peace to do.

When her sister joined her at university, she relocated off-campus. She reflected that this wasn’t an easy time for her sister, who had no idea as to the extent of Shanaz’s engagement in anti-apartheid activities, but knew that the latter was involved. It was during this time that her sister often had to deflect calls from family when Shanaz was at meetings or protests. She remembered that her sister also grew weary of doing this; in part because she was afraid of what could happen to either of them, and also because she was often left alone late at night in a flat in a city which was strange to her.

You need to make a decision at the time on whether the people you are going with are going to be a hindrance or are they going to be assisting. And so, if it’s going to be a hindrance you don’t get emotionally attached to how you are going to support the person in getting there. You simply don’t have the luxury of time to make those kinds of decisions and to sit and get people where you want them to be at. When something needed to be done we needed to do it. So I didn’t have that time to do that even with my sister. At other times of course we would spend time together and she would understand.
that I needed to do what I did. And she didn’t know everything of course. It was safer, it
wasn’t necessary and it also wasn’t the way we operated. You know it was a time when
you had to know where you stood and where you wanted to be. And if you were afraid,
then that fear becomes in a limiting factor. In terms of doing what needed to be done.

Her journey into Qibla started when she met some of the prominent members who were invited to address
some students at university. She immediately identified with the message presented by them. She also
established contact with the group of Qibla members in Cape Town.

And my first impression there was that they operated in a very sort of patriarchal way.
Qibla just had that – that sense of patriarchy is so clear. It really doesn’t gel with me at all! And they could find very good reason for operating that way but I’m calling it what it is and it is patriarchy.

It was when Achmad Cassiem was released from prison and came to Durban to meet with Qibla activists
that she met him and listened to the message he presented.

And for me that was it. It was aligned to my Black Consciousness background. And I understood the Islam he spoke about. I understood that as being our response to the situation we were facing in this country. Our Islamic response to the apartheid regime.

And that the movement was emphasizing Qur’anic injunctions that commanded us to fight for justice.

It wasn’t long after this that she started working. She explained that being a single Muslim woman came
with some constraints at the time. Societal constructs meant that it was frowned upon if a woman like herself drove alone into townships or was seen in the company of a group of males – be it in a car or attending late-night meetings. She noted that this type of disapproval even came from older women activists, who made it clear that this was not permitted within the framework of Islam. This aspect, though she would not allow it to hamper her activities, caused a degree of mistrust from others towards her. She
explained that she understood why they were critical, but couldn’t allow this to interfere with her activism.

Eventually they were a very small group of individuals who aligned themselves with Qibla but who were based in Durban. Her previous activism on campus combined with now being part of the Qibla movement, by her own admission, had made her to become extremely cautious and wary of “outsiders.”

I wasn’t very hospitable or friendly to anyone who wanted to be a part of this group. I suppose my experiences on campus – when one often found out later that certain people were actually informants – made me like this. I would I suppose, just be a hands-off type of person. And I would get irritated when I heard others in the group speak too openly about our activities.

She explained that being an activist during that time, and particularly after her involvement in Qibla, necessitated certain changes in how you interact and engage with others. Essentially it also resulted in limiting who you socially engage with - individuals who understood why you behaved or acted in a particular fashion.

If you get a call, you needed to act. There wasn’t always time for niceties and social graces. And for this reason you limit your social circle to those who understood; to whom you connected politically.

Staying alone during this period was not the norm for a young, single Muslim lady, but it was a choice she made given the political activities she was involved with. She acknowledged that, while she always maintained contact with her relatives, the small group of Qibla members essentially became her family. The connection went way beyond superficial niceties; security was always a concern and people’s lives were often at stake. For this reason their relationships were profoundly intense and deep. She explained particular rituals which became part of day to day life - for example phoning each other at midnight to check on the others’ safety or security police who could be heard outside her house in the early hours of
the morning. Mentally she was constantly training herself for any eventuality. Along with this came the impracticality of getting romantically involved with anyone who was not an activist. Given that she had completed her studies and was working, the expectation from her family was that she ought to get married. She noted that being involved at the level she was meant that this was simply not pragmatic.

She recalled with deep intensity the night she received the news that one of their members, someone she shared a deep connection with, was horrifically assassinated by the apartheid police. They had been together hours prior to his killing; and though there was always an acute awareness of the perilous nature of the operations which were carried out, this was a deeply painful time for her and those close to him. Coupled with this, there was an ideological divide between him and his family, which caused disagreements as to how his burial will be conducted.

The distrust was always there and it was always exacerbated, and you just never knew who to trust. So yes my struggle started with handing out pamphlets and attending protest marches. But it became a struggle of life and death issues, it had security issues. And it wasn’t a time during which you allowed yourself to become close to any person because the nature of that relationship may change at any time. You know from an emotional perspective. You know you literally lead an overt and covert life. And the two don’t mix. You literally lead parallel lives! And for my family it was also very difficult. They knew and understood that I wasn’t going to talk about things because I would place others in jeopardy. But they were always worried. And a part of me always wanted to put their minds at ease.

Experiences like the ones I had makes you become naturally cautious, it makes you question everything and it makes you question the intentions of everyone. And that stays with you throughout your life. In my initial days of activism I found that I had a very sort
of romantic idea of transparency and openness and camaraderie. You think everything should be consultative. But that’s not how it is.

On the question of Shi’ism, she told me that she was drawn to the Shi’a school of thought long before her involvement with Qibla when, through a friend, she met and listened to talks given by a prominent scholar of Shi’ism. Like others, she was drawn to the political interpretations of Islam. She professed that though there was a backlash and many sectarian issues during this time, it did not faze her in any way.

I’m not too concerned with the community’s responses and how they look at these issues. Eventually you realize that the pulpits are controlled by people whose relationship with and understanding of God is different to mine and therefore I had long since decided that I wouldn’t be led by that view. Communities unfortunately choose to some degree to abdicate their responsibilities and allow religious decisions to be taken on their behalf. That explains why the majority of Muslims were complacent during the anti-apartheid struggle. And I understood that. And didn’t exhaust myself by trying to change that.

Activism for her didn’t stop after democratic change in South Africa. She declined working in a corporate environment and continued, in her career, to work with destitute women and children who require professional assistance. She recalled speaking to the Qibla leadership before she took up a post in a government department and how she was discouraged from doing this.

Qibla doesn’t really approve of this you know, of working in government. So I was told that in no uncertain terms. But this feels right. It’s where I can best use my professional skills to make my contribution to social upliftment. It’s a different type of activism, but I’m happy knowing that we are assisting people who otherwise are unable to access legal services. It’s amazing the journey that I had undergone, even the relocating. I am where I am because Allah planned it this way for me. HE knew what I wanted and where my
heart was. I am now doing work which is a different kind of activism. But it’s where I can make a difference. With women, with children, with families.

She has chosen to cease her involvement in the Islamist movement anymore, opting to focus on work and areas of activism which she can contribute to constructively. She maintains that she still enjoys close friendships with some Qibla members; though for the most part, she laughingly says: “I keep a low profile.”

**Conclusion**

The biographies show that Islamist ideology offered authenticity; it was perpetually accessible and became the overarching guideline in the lives of Islamists. Conversion experiences played a pivotal role within the journeys of Islamists, incontrovertibly altering their physical expression of religion. This moment or moments urged them into a life of activism, though at various points they may still have grappled to make sense of themselves, their lives and of Islamism.

Soraya’s journey reveal someone who was, and still is, a deeply committed activist whose vision of a socio-politically just South Africa has enabled her to deal with the challenges of her daily life. This vision is rooted within religious principles which she contends was always the guiding value in decisions she made – both in the public and private space. Her second conversion to *Sufism* has inspired a sense of peace and tranquility within her, which she drew from when she is reminded of the many problems which exist in a post-democratic South Africa. Enhancing her spirituality has also enabled her to be more perceptive to the needs of her family and to set realistic expectations as to what she can achieve as an activist.

Thurea’s narrative lays bare many complex moments in which she was confronted with issues of patriarchy, what she terms “women’s self-oppression”, divisions within the Muslim community between those of Indian and Malay origin and sectarian issues (both of which played out in her private space). Becoming *Shi‘a* and her involvement in Qibla offered the promise of becoming closer to God in a
meaningful way and infused her with a renewed vigor and commitment to Islamizing South African society. A perpetual and committed activist, she imparted all she learnt to her children, and encourages them to live a life true to religious injunctions.

After finding her ideological home in the MYM, Fayruz has been on a continual journey of activism in various forms. Her search for a social and politically relevant Islam has led her to Islamic feminist discourse and it is this area of Islamist ideology that she has chosen to focus her activist energies. The commitment she demonstrated to addressing gender injustices within society was extended into her private domain as well. It is in this space in her everyday life where she ultimately generated the most transformation with regards to challenging gendered norms.

Immigrating shortly after her first activist experience led Farah to find alternate ways in which to communicate her allegiance with South African Islamists. On her return she joined the MSA, eventually journeying towards Qibla. Growing up in a divorced home, her experiences within the Islamist movement and her own academic journey through Islamic Law steered her in the direction of Islamic feminism – an area of scholarship she presently still focuses on in her professional capacity and through volunteer work.

Fahmida, like many other Islamists, did not come from an activist family but chose to become involved in the anti-apartheid struggle after a conversion experience. Although she eventually expressed her criticism of the MSA and MYM, she initially joined them because she wanted to be part of a collective. Her personal encounters with women – through the MYM and NGO volunteering – instilled an awareness of the disjuncture between ideology as an ideal and the actual daily realities of women. Coupled with her own personal experiences and the challenges she faced as a woman has urged her to assist women in need.

The absolute conviction with which she recounted her experiences along with the serenity and tranquility which emanated from Shahida is in line with James’ description of a deeply personal conversion experience. She admitted to wrestling with domestic and familial concerns at various points during a life
devoted to activism, but according to her she understood that these have to be ‘managed’ and not become impediments to being a ‘good’ Islamist. While she was unambiguous about her ‘Muslim-ness’, her understanding of the world bound her to all human beings on the basis of a collective humanity. This is reflected in her life journey which was devoted to confronting injustices on diverse terrains.

Rabia grew up in what she termed ‘a religiously and politically conservative Indian’ home. Her conversion to Islamism was therefore met with perplexity by her family. Joining Qibla and marrying a man who shared her Islamist views reinforced her understanding of God’s instructions when individuals are faced with social and political injustices. Ideologically she aligned herself with Qibla throughout her journey, although she admitted that there were times when gendered norms were challenging to confront. Like others, she aspired to be a ‘good’ Islamist and a ‘good’ wife and mother. This is evident in the challenges she faced in her everyday life.

Shanaz came from an activist family, and chose to express her political activism through Islam. This feeling was compounded after an intense conversion experience wherein she embarked on a journey through the Qur’an. Shanaz journeyed through different movements, but found her ideological home within Qibla. Although she was not uncritical of the movement, joining them set her on a path which irrevocably altered almost every facet of her life. At this stage of her journey she has opted to leave the Islamist movement. According to her, she will always be an activist, and there are alternate avenues through which she can continue the struggle for social justice.

Looking to individuals’ Islamist journeys as they travel within and away from movements, reveal that most ordinary Islamists exercised their agency in terms of shifting to or carving their own spaces within a movement. They did not blindly submit to the respective leadership structures. In both the public and private domains they made choices which they felt best articulated their understanding of the religious ideal - as they constantly sought spiritual enrichment. Their religious experiences therefore extended beyond their involvement in the Islamist movement, into their personal and everyday lives, as they
resolved to stay true to a perceived religious ideal. In this way their search for authenticity shaped and informed their everyday lives and their interaction with those closest to them.
Chapter 6

Findings and analysis

Journeys of everyday political Islam

Islamists deserve more attention for the long journeys they embark upon in their quest for a better society, a more vibrant Islam, and a greater commitment from themselves and others. By definition, Islamists want to change themselves, their families, friends and their societies. Such aspirations court conflicts and challenges by definition (Tayob, 2014: 36).

Introduction

Biographies provide a rich resource through which to explore the meaning of religion for Islamists. These biographies can be likened to journeys which reveal how, inspired by an idealized religious worldview, they set out to be ‘good’ Muslims as well as ‘good’ women. An intensely personal conversion experience marked the beginning of these journeys. Conversions formed part of broader Islamist journeys which entailed a search for authenticity while traversing local politics, questioning mainstream understandings of Islam and facing challenges in their everyday lives. Hence being an Islamist went beyond overt political engagement within a collective, the discourses they encountered in these spaces were internalized and had a clear social and personal dimension.

This chapter presents an analysis of the eight interviews presented in the previous chapter. I start by drawing attention to their conversion experiences which in effect denote the start of their journeys. I then show how conversion was directly linked to their search for a collective which recognized and affirmed new-found religious ideals. In this regard they made choices which they felt best articulated their
interpretation of these ideals. The narratives further indicate that after converting, Islamists considered it necessary to publicly communicate their understanding of authenticity.

Following this, I show how Islamist journeys through and within collectives illustrate the features as outlined by Tayob (2015). However, throughout these journeys, their involvement in the (public) Islamist movement became inextricably linked to their (private) everyday lives. Their journeys indicate that commitment to religious ideology was unequivocal, and the challenges they encountered in their everyday lives were seldom if ever separated from this cause. In positing South African Islamism to be the sum of individual journeys of everyday political Islam, this chapter shows how Islamism was the guiding value in the Islamists’ quest for an authentic identity – both in public and private spaces.

**Islamist journeys: Conversions**

A significant element of South African Islamist journeys is conversion as outlined by James (1902). James emphasized the uniqueness of a religious experience for each individual. Conversion signalled both an arrival – at a new meaning system – and a departure – on a journey informed by this new meaning system. Religious experiences were (and are) subjective. For Islamists, their renewed understanding of religion provided purpose, perseverance and direction. In response to my enquiry as to how and when their Islamist journeys started, all the interviewees could relate specific encounters which impelled them towards political Islam.

For Soraya it was the sight of her asthmatic sister struggling to breathe as a result of the teargas shot by the apartheid police force. Retrospectively though, she noted that her sense of justice might have been awakened through her father who was unjustly accused of being Ahmadi. This may have been the actual starting point of her Islamist journey. After her conversion experience, her commitment to activism was summed up in her words “it consumes you” (Soraya, 2015). It was the start of an ongoing journey which saw her converting to *Sufism* later in her life. For Thurea, leaving the familiarity of her home and immediate community to study at Wits exposed her to Islamist ideology and prompted her to become an
activist. Joining the MYM and attending the weekly halqah affirmed her commitment and cultivated a sense of belonging. While she did not recall a specific moment of conversion, she projected the sense of harmony, fulfilment and certainty through her belief which James predicted for religiously healthy individuals. Fayruz’s journey into activism was a gradual one, prompted by a T-shirt her brother wore which inspired her to attend the MYM halqah programs. Rather than a moment, she had since then been on a continual journey involving herself in various forms of activism. From the first time she attended a halqah, Fayruz knew she had found her ideological home. It was in this space that her conversion was affirmed. Farah’s first experience as a political activist was sufficiently intense to develop an awareness of the liberation struggle, though her involvement came to an abrupt end when she emigrated from South Africa. According to her, the experience nevertheless awakened her sense of justice, and prompted her to search for a cause when she moved abroad. Fahmida recalled how she was inadvertently swept up in the uprisings which characterised South African township schools at the time. Conversion was not a momentary experience, but a transformation which happened over time. Being exposed to a collective in the form of the MYM halqah affirmed her desire to become involved in political activism. Her involvement increased gradually as she became more aware of her ‘duty’ as a Muslim. Shahida realized that she wanted more than just to work to earn a living and be a wife and mother. Her awareness of socio-political injustices, which were institutionalized through apartheid laws, was roused through having to relocate to racially segregated areas on more than one occasion. Her involvement in anti-apartheid politics, however, only started after she got married. She, too, cannot recall experiencing any single transformative moment, though her firm resolve and unwavering belief was reflective of one who underwent a conversion. Rabia posed an interesting case in that her moment of conversion had deep religious underpinnings yet she was too young to remember its details. The narrative, as conveyed by her mother, exhorted her to political activism. Coupled with her first exposure to Qibla, through Achmad Cassiem’s words, she was propelled into Islamism – to which she devoted her life. The peace and acceptance she attained through this chosen path was evident during the interview. Although she encountered opposition from family members, she felt fulfilled as an Islamist. This same peace and
complete submission was evident in Shanaz’s demeanour. A sense of calm and determination tinged every word she recounted. She had two distinct conversion experiences; the first when she was involved in school uprisings and the second when she embarked on her personal journey of the Qur’an.

Converting to Islamism became a liberating experience and allowed individuals to give themselves over to what they understood God instructed them to be. Coupled with conversion came a renewed understanding of the purpose of religion, and a firm resolve to be of benefit to society at large. This commitment to a religious ideology is reflected in the lives of my informants who set out to transform not only themselves, but inequitable conditions within their communities. Activists interviewed spent most of their lives committed to opposing socio-political injustices in different forms. Some, like Fayruz, Fahmida, Rabia, Thurea and Shahida, do this through their involvement in NGO’s and personal voluntary work, while others like Soraya, Shanaz and Farah opted to use their professional skills to highlight and address injustices in society. Thus beyond the validity of individual belief systems, interrogating individual transformative encounters sheds light on their impact in broader society.

The conversion process being only the start of the journey of the Islamist meant that joining a movement was their way of strengthening their religious lives. In line with Taylor (2003) they found religious inspiration in communal spaces which reinforced the personal religious experience they underwent. Individual Islamists strengthened their commitment through aligning themselves to an Islamist movement and partaking in collectively practiced rituals (for example the halqah).

Since the movements discussed in Chapter Four presented competing discourses, each one claiming to present the ‘authentic’ Islamist view, my informants’ journeys included navigating this terrain. The collective they opted for became inextricably linked to their Islamist journeys. Hence, by embracing a particular organization and discourse, they were publicly declaring their personal unique authenticity. Soraya was clear about her own Muslim-ness, yet she was of the view that the MSA did not sufficiently address political concerns in the country. Her concerns about the oppressed in the country, particularly the
working-class, drew her to a movement which was prepared to align itself with mainstream liberation organizations as well. The Call of Islam represented her interpretation of what an Islamist ought to be – a Muslim who is willing to transcend religious and ideological differences in order to transform society for the better. It was an ethos which formed the guiding value in her journey as an Islamist. Notably though, her joining a Sufi group later in life, suggests a feeling of spiritual discontent and challenged her earlier conviction of not wanting to be “a Muslim belonging to a Muslim-only organization” (Soraya, 2015).

This ideological shift is further expressed through her current missionary activities whereby non-Muslims are called on to convert to Islam. Shahida, in a similar fashion, was drawn to COI through her activities in mainstream liberation movements. Yet she made it clear that ideology did not guide her activities and the COI was just one of many groups with which she aligned herself. She was very critical of all anti-apartheid movements, including the COI. In her view, divergent ideologies only served as a distraction from the ‘real’ struggles – both locally and globally. Her understanding of what is pure and authentic is rooted in core values her parents taught her, rather than clear Islamist ideologies. These values transcended time and geographical space and had always been a central part of her journey towards self-actualization.

Joining the MSA at university was a turning point for many Islamists, including Thurea, Fayruz, Farah, Fahmida and Shanaz who found themselves for the first time exposed to a socio-politically ‘relevant’ Islam. Thurea however found her identity as a Malay from a working class background challenged by what she characterised as an “Indian” movement. While she acknowledged that she learnt much from her involvement in the MSA, she was frustrated by the emphasis placed on the ‘mosque issue’ which she contended was primarily a problem in the “Indian areas”. According to her, the MSA devoted too much time campaigning for the right of women to attend mosques. She noted that many women declined attending communal prayers on a regular basis even after this ‘battle’ was won.

In spite of this campaign, progressive gender policies were not part of MSA or MYM structures. Farah, Fahmida and Thurea were of the view that the MSA and MYM initially provided them with the
ideological tools to pursue socio-political justice. However, they wanted an authentic identity that included issues of gender equality. Thurea expressed her frustration at male leaders who claimed to care about gender issues. She was not prepared to compromise on her understanding of religious injunctions. Others like Fahmida felt strongly that the movements were out of touch with the lived realities of women. “It’s like they didn’t really internalize what they were saying in terms of what they practiced. Even in the movement you know. Like in the leadership and so on” (Fahmida, 2015). While she was clear that her involvement in the MYM transformed her worldview, created an awareness of gender injustices and challenged her understanding of religious texts, it is the movement’s apparent detachment from “real life social, economic and political issues” that she was most critical of. Shanaz, like most, found the weekly study circles (halqah) a helpful and enlightening forum. Through attending these she embarked on her life-altering personal journey of the Qur’an. The political message of the MYM did not resonate with her, yet for most of her student years she attended the halqah and involved herself in its activities. For Fayruz, the MYM movement allowed her the space to develop an Islamist feminist identity: “an Islam that did not overlook gender injustices and political contexts” (Fayruz, 2015). Coming from a conservative ‘Indian’ background meant that staying true to these ideals within her private space proved to be challenging. She noted that these obstacles only made her more determined to change gender stereotypes within her personal domain.

Initially drawn to Qibla through a talk which was a transformative religious experience for her, Rabia found her lifelong ideological home. The lecture linked education (her chosen field of study), politics and religion. Marrying someone who shared her Islamist views and who was a fellow Qibla member affirmed her commitment in the private domain as well. She felt comfortable with the ideological consistency that extended from the group into her personal space and her everyday life. Shanaz’s conversion experience initially led her to the MSA, but she opted to join Qibla after graduating from university. She candidly spoke about the patriarchy which existed within the ranks of Qibla, but insisted that the essential message propagated by this movement resonated with her – according to her it presented an Islamic response to the
apartheid regime which was aligned to her Black Consciousness Movement background. She made her commitment to Qibla clear through her actions which defied conservative social and religious norms. She refused to be deterred at being labelled Shi’a, saying that: “I’m not too concerned with community’s responses and how they look at these issues” (Shanaz, 2015). Similarly, Thurea also journeyed from the MSA/MYM to Qibla. She also refused to compromise on her understanding of religious injunctions, and found that Qibla’s message matched own interpretation of what Islamic texts commanded from Muslims.

Interestingly, because of dominant perceptions of the movement being a Shi’a group, many Qibla members professed to having inculcated in themselves a sense of suspicion and distrust towards ‘outsiders’. This general scepticism also manifested as a form of rigidity in committing to and propagating their understanding of an ‘authentic’ Islamist discourse. This perception greatly impacted on their everyday engagement and interaction with others. Sometimes, this included concealing their activities, even detaching themselves, from close relatives. Farah, who was interested in joining this movement, specifically mentioned the general reticence and aloofness of Qibla members with whom she came into contact with.

The Islamists’ biographies indicate that finding expression through a collective was a fluid process – and their interpretation of the ‘authentic’ altered throughout their life trajectories. This is reflected in their identities, both in their public and private spaces. While they consistently reminded themselves and others of their commitment to Islamist discourse, they at times made pragmatic choices. They for example continued their association with particular movements even if they were aware of incongruities and ambiguities. Shanaz was dissatisfied with the MYM’s political message and she noted the patriarchy in Qibla. Yet she continued her involvement with these movements at different periods of her life. Fahmida criticised the MYM leadership’s inability to relate discourse to “real-life”. She also continued her association with the movement, but chose to develop her personal approach to what an Islamist ought to be. Some others chose to switch from organization to another. While they sought acknowledgement and
affirmation through a collective, their commitment was first and foremost to a higher Islamist discourse that transcended even the organisations within which they were active.

A spiritual experience like conversion is always innately linked to a religious life in its entirety (Taylor, 2003: 24-26). I found that Islamists searched for an outward expression of their faith subsequent to conversion. It is through public engagement that intensely personal transformative religious experiences were communicated with others. Often those close to converted Islamists were left perplexed – and expressed disapproval - as activists adopted the language, dress and symbols of Islamism. My informants developed a distinct mode of conveying their ideas; a language which they employed to publicly express the intense personal religious experience they had. Five out of the eight women I interviewed referred to their changed mode of dress after joining an organisation. In response to her wearing hijab, Fahmida’s family “thought [she] was a bit cuckoo” (Fahmida, 2015). Others found their parents responding with displeasure at their wearing headscarves. My informants saw their mode of dress as one way of publicly communicating a new meaning system. Similarly, reading and discussing the works of Islamists like Mawdudi, Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shariati affirmed their connection with a global Islamist movement. Their use of words and phrases like “becoming conscientised”, “liberation through education”, “non-compromisation” became part of their vocabulary – symbolizing and denoting their allegiance to Islamist thought in South African politics. Many formed close relationships with other Islamists – some of them even marrying within this circle. Through developing friendships like these, religious ideology was re-enforced within their social spheres.

Taylor’s assertions are relevant to those who had a series of conversion experiences. Converting to Sufism later in her life allowed Soraya to focus on a more spiritual expression of religious life. By joining a group she affirmed her commitment. Thurea converted to the Shi’a school of thought later in life. She regarded the political element of Shi’ism as a logical extension of Islamist principles. As a consequence of becoming Shi’a she encountered many personal challenges. Being part of a collective not only eased the difficulties, but allowed her to validate and affirm her commitment to a group that was marginalized
within her immediate circle and her community. Others like Farah and Fayruz converted to feminism – also as a direct extension of being Islamist. They were (and still are) of the view that socio-political equality and justice should include the category of gender. Since religion was always core to their identities, they embraced Islamic feminism – a paradigm they advanced through a group, exploring Islamic texts and endeavouring to implement these ideals in their daily lives.

Searching for an Islam that was socially and politically relevant paved the way for a renewed understanding of their ‘religious selves’. Their choice to commit to a particular discourse and to publicly engage with religion signalled the start of a process of re-articulating their existing religious identities. In line with Humphreys, Islamist ideology became the idiom through which they could express their outrage at political injustices in South Africa, while simultaneously asserting what they perceived to be an authentic identity.

**Islamist journeys: Moving between poles, competing goods, the ‘other’ and destinations**

Journeying between and within movements was always a multifaceted process for Islamists. South African Islamism was located in anti-apartheid politics, but was unquestionably influenced by global trends (Tayob, 2015: 4-5). As their biographies show, the journeys they were on and the dilemmas they confronted were seldom straightforward. Islamists often found themselves vacillating between intellectual or ideological options, but also having to negotiate commonalities within different discourses and religions. Looking towards shared aims enabled Islamists to connect at the same time with a global Muslim ummah, local Islamists and political activists who belonged to other religions. Their narratives show how they chose groups to which they attached or detached themselves, as they continued their search for authentic identities.

Soraya for example noted her discomfort when trade union members consumed alcohol or scheduled meetings during prayer times. She however condoned this, choosing to focus on what bound all of them – which was the pursuit of social and political equality for all. While she was aware of her Muslim
uniqueness, she noted that at these times her South African-ness took precedence. Thurea was encouraged by the Islamic Revolution in Iran to never compromise on her principles and not succumb to what she termed “South African or ANC culture.” Ironically, she was located in South Africa where she could not always escape traditions and customs linked to being a South African Muslim. It was her awareness of the conflict in the Middle-East which prompted Fayruz to don hijab as a form of political protest. Rather than primarily affirming and connecting to her South African Muslim identity, hijab was a show of solidarity with Muslims abroad. Farah recounted a similar sentiment with regards to her wearing of the hijab. In her case, she also chose to also express her allegiance with fellow South African activists by donning a green army coat which symbolized her South African-ness. While she confessed to initially being unable to grasp the ideological implications thereof, Fahmida recalled being influenced by global Islamist forerunners like Al-Banna and Mawdudi in the form of literature which was disseminated by the Muslim Youth Movement. This eventually led her to an awareness of gender injustices where she chose to focus her activism. Like Soraya, Shahida embraced the idea of a global ummah and a lifetime of activism has been embedded in this concept. Her reflections on power struggles within liberation movements led her to conclude that disunity and dissent are located within Christian religious discourse. Ironically, she blamed Christian sectarianism whilst being part of the COI – a movement which emphasized unity with the oppressed regardless of religious affiliation. Within Qibla, Rabia became embroiled in local sectarian polemics. While Rabia did not convert to Shi’ism, she connected her conversion experience and her revolutionary fervour to that of Imam Hussain. It was this global vision of Islam more than any other factor that led to the ostracism of Qibla members. Shanaz explained how a Hindu guru, rather than a member of the Muslim clergy, enhanced her understanding of spirituality and God-consciousness.

Competing narratives, whether drawn from global influences or from alternate religious discourses, often resulted in some degree of intellectual wrestling but ultimately served to strengthen Islamist identities. Detaching themselves from societal issues and global affairs was never an option.
Some choices Islamists faced appeared to be clearer, for example when Islamists chose which movement to align themselves with. Other choices proved to be much more complex. These options were more subtle, and not between two explicit goods. “Little is said about a struggle over multiple goods that appear to be equally right, equally grounded in Islam, or equally attractive” (Tayob, 2015: 6).

The foremost movements all claimed to articulate an authentic Islamist view and to advance the ‘correct’ interpretation of Islam and Islamic texts. Thurea for example was conflicted about what she considered to be the political indecisiveness of the MYM and their perceived failure to practice gender equity. She acknowledged that she has learnt much from the movement but decided to join Qibla. Fahmida recalled the phrase “Liberation through education” which was one of the popular slogans within student movements. Not writing her matric exams seemed to contradict this value, but boycotting the exams was also a form of political protest. The choice was thus between education, as one ‘good’, and refusing to write, which was another ‘good’. After grappling with other contradictions she encountered in the Islamist movement, she has in recent years decided to leave the movement. Though she credited them with having shaped her worldview, she presently prefers to do ‘good’ through other avenues.

Shahida’s journey reflects her firm belief that all humanity deserved equality and justice, and her journey entailed a constant moving between many ‘goods’ – the UDF, Call of Islam, civil society organizations and international bodies. Shanaz eventually chose between the Islamist movement and pursuing a different type of activism through her profession. Having to make choices between options which were all grounded in religion and all seemed ‘good’ meant that Islamists had to delve deeper within themselves to interrogate their understanding of religious authenticity. The choices they made in these situations facilitated the cementing of their individual identities as Islamists.

In line with Tayob’s model, the ‘other’ as “the significant partner that shapes and determines a course of action, an attitude and relation” played a crucial role in the journeys of Islamists (Tayob, 2015: 7). For most of my informants, the significant “other” was the ‘ulama (Muslim religious leaders) who did not
provide leadership in the anti-apartheid struggle. While Farah was clear about not seeking their approval, her own public identity has been shaped around not being or thinking like ‘them’. In addition to the ‘ulama as the ‘other’, Thurea seemed to direct her attention to the leadership within the MYM which she contended did not allow the space for women to grow. The ‘other’ for her was also Muslim women who ‘self-oppressed’, and those who elevated culture above religious junctions. She declared that her own public and private identity would always reflect her rejection of what these ‘others’ represented. Fayruz’s vision of the ‘other’ included the religious leaders of the Deobandi school of thought. She specifically challenged the patriarchal norms which women submitted to and shaped her own identity to oppose these inequalities. For Rabia, sectarian polemics and accusations of being Shi’a created two significant ‘others’: mainstream clergy and those in the Muslim community who ostracized them for being ‘unbelievers’. Notably, the existence of the ‘other’ was a key component in the identity construction of Islamists. Their resoluteness in not reflecting the convictions and practices of the ‘other’ entered into their activist journeys.

Destinations and resolutions, another feature highlighted by Tayob, is the feature that is most significant to the notion of journeys. Soraya’s occasional disenchantment with the present ruling party has become more manageable after her conversion to Sufism. Her journey continues, and she is focused on her destination to not only deepen her spirituality, but to extend this into improving society on all levels. Thurea has had serial destinations, as a direct outcome of her determination to not compromise on her religious principles. She first found comfort in MYM ideology, and then shifted to that of Qibla. Theologically, her destination now resides with the Shi’a school of thought. Yet one is left with the distinct impression that she is on a continual search for what she perceives to be the truth. In this sense her destination may still be amended. As an activist, she was emphatic that justice and socio-political equality has not been achieved and she expressed a commitment to always play her part in attaining this. Gender justice always featured extensively in Fayruz’s vision of the ideal. This ideal found expression in both her private and public domains. Farah’s journey is indicative of someone who has had serial
destinations. The Islamist movement did not satisfy her, and she is now pursuing a different destination through professional activities. Religion still plays a significant role in her life, but her own interrogation of dominant religious understandings impacted on her resolutions as an Islamist. Her destination is now in line with Islamic feminist rather than ‘pure’ Islamist thought. Fahmida experienced her fair share of disillusionment within the movement and in her personal life. Her words seemed to indicate that she is, at this point of her life, more realistic about the available options. Shahida’s journey shows a resilience that seems to be the outcome of having faced many challenges in her life. Yet her destination, which is ultimately justice for all humanity, never shifted and she remains committed in word and deed to it. Shanaz’s destination has not altered; she remains focused. Having left the Qibla movement, she found, through her professional life, alternate ways of ‘arriving’ or achieving her goals. Rabia expressed her immense sadness at the current conflict within the Cape Town Muslim community, particularly among those who have played leading roles within Qibla. Members who used to be united are now facing each other from opposing sides in a court of law. She resolved to be part of the solution to this issue, and to bring about unity again. This has become her next destination.

Islamist journeys: Everyday lives and daily realities

The journeys of Islamists show how their vision of authenticity and their identities were continually constructed and reconstructed as they found themselves confronted with competing narratives and conflicting influences. Adding to the complexity of identity making was the fact that Islamists were constantly traversing competing journeys as well. One element of their journeys, as discussed so far, took place within a group and through overt social and political activism. But their journeys were also shaped by their everyday lives within private domains.

Journeys of everyday political Islam brings to the fore encounters with issues of race, class and gendered norms within so-called private spaces. The everyday was about activism and encounters in the movements, but it was also about coping with family dilemmas, constraints and everyday realities. My
informants were committed to being good Muslims, but it is within their roles as women that they often found themselves emotionally conflicted – wanting to be ‘good’ women and meet the expectations of their loved ones as daughters, mothers, sisters and wives.

The narratives reveal that activists considered themselves to be on a trajectory, which were intercepted by temporal moments wherein they were required to make choices and/or negotiate in order to preserve or alter their articulation of the ideal. These choices were not confined to any one specific journey; competing journeys meant that options they were presented with differed vastly. These ranged from explicitly ideological choices to matters of the seemingly mundane kind. Yet a study of their everyday lives show that, while Islamists strove to live lives true to ideological convictions, they often grappled more with issues which they confronted in their personal spaces that touched them and their families personally.

In relation to Islamism and the daily life of the activist this meant that at times they had to negotiate in their private spaces. Certain issues in particular stand out in the narratives. Activists found themselves having to manage dissent with their husbands, extended family or community; they had concerns about their children’s well-being, encounters with hijab, issues of race, disagreements with religious authorities and disputes within the Islamist movement.

Not being easily deterred by everyday challenges, conflict or ambiguities raises a number of questions. Among these would be an enquiry into what drove them to remain so committed in the face of difficulties. Delving into the everyday life of the individual facilitates the emergence of a more nuanced image of the journey of the South African Islamist. Moreover, it shows how religious ideology was often used to negotiate through ambivalent and seemingly contradictory moments.

When confronted with a suspicious husband in addition to parents and siblings who disapproved of her activism, Soraya found solace in the obligatory ritual of hajj to explain her spouse’s behaviour. She explained that God had created men to be inherently egotistical. This inborn egotism meant that humility
and the ability to compromise did not come naturally to them. She needed to do more to placate and reassure him with regards the importance of her family in her life. By doing this, she ensured her continued involvement in activism. By suggesting that “God created men to be egotistical” she implicitly also absolved her husband from any blame when he made unreasonable demands. She also noted the paradoxical nature of activism – women were welcomed within the movements yet the issues in the private spaces were not addressed. The resultant pressures placed on relationships often led to their disintegration. Soraya found herself facing two ‘goods’ in her everyday life - being an activist and being a devoted wife and mother. Not prepared to sacrifice her family, she chose to be both. Soraya prioritized her family’s happiness by advancing an explanation rooted within religious discourse when explaining her husband’s behaviour. Balancing entailed a shift in mind-set and an understanding that these conflicts should not be taken personally, but also needed “neutralizing” (Soraya, 2015). She noted that the negotiating skills that she acquired through her personal struggles in her private domain have been of enormous value to her in her professional life within the NGO she works for. It seemed clear though, that her ‘woman-ness’ caused her some difficulty at times – particularly in the home where she was not always the “ideal wife and mother.” Yet her Islamist journey is one wherein she was (and still is) a committed mother - she washed nappies, prepared bottles, tended to her husband’s needs, worked full-time and made time to attend movement meetings. It was a journey in which she knew her value as an Islamist, yet she doubted her value as wife, a daughter and a mother. She was committed to reform a society fraught with injustices, but struggled to live up to her own - and that of her husband and family’s - expectations of a good woman. These daily realities frustrated her at times, though never sufficiently to abandon the journey she had embarked on.

Thurea maintained that compromise was not possible if one is on the right path – which she believed she was. Islamic ideology needed to permeate every aspect of life and all decisions needed to be taken within this framework. Her immediate family was supportive of her activism, though she accepted her father’s decision when he forbade her (as a woman) from studying abroad. She however voiced her unambiguous
disapproval when she experienced gender bias within the public space of the MYM. Unlike Soraya, she felt stifled within the movement yet in her marriage she felt the freedom to express herself and to live her convictions. To her it was not surprising that she was challenged by her community and by some in the Islamist movement. She simply detached herself from those, even within her family circle, whom she perceived as holding her back.

Thurea felt herself particularly confounded by some women’s clear rejection of hijab, an aspect which she felt was central to the daily physical expression of faith. She reasoned that many people have a distorted view of “being modern” (Thurea, 2015). Rather than highlighting the rights accorded to them within the Qur’an, they were complicit in their own oppression. She was clear that you can never separate your personal and public identity.

Throughout her Islamist journey, Thurea found herself in various minority contexts: as a Muslim at a university with predominantly Christian students, as a Malay woman in what she perceived to be an Indian movement, and as a committed Muslim woman who challenged dominant norms in her family and community. Her encounters with entrenched racial categories was not limited to the public space of the movement, but crossed into her personal domain. She challenged her husband’s family’s racial stereotyping. According to her, their disapproval of her outspoken character and the choices she made as an Islamist was rooted in their cultural prejudices. They saw her firstly as someone belonging to a different “race,” and not as one who lived by her convictions as an Islamist. Their disapproval was compounded when she made known that she converted to Shi’ism. Once again, she refused to pay heed to what, in her view, was a narrow-minded Indian view. Her life was dedicated to pleasing God; this did not include conceding to aspects of ‘Indian culture.’ While she did not clearly define her understanding of “Islamic culture”, she suggested that it is rooted within religious injunctions. Inculcating this culture meant a constant awareness of God’s commands and shaping your identity around this. To her it implied that your religious beliefs should always reflect in your words and your deeds whether you were in a public or in your private space.
Yet, Thurea found herself making pragmatic choices at certain times. When her husband cautioned her against becoming too involved in risky political activities, she attributed complying with his request as being the correct response of a ‘good’ wife. She adopted a similar position when she initially converted to Shi’ism. Recognizing that due to her husband’s traditional upbringing a public declaration of her conversion may cause conflict in her marriage; she bided her time and gradually convinced him to accept this school of thought. In spite of her commitment, she found it necessary to employ strategic measures to ease the challenges encountered in everyday life.

Fayruz came from a very traditional Indian home and her father was often unhappy with her choices. His disapproval intensified when she insisted on expanding her knowledge about Islam at an institution abroad. She was not deterred and insisted on pursuing her vision of a non-sexist, non-racist and socially relevant Islam through the MYM; a movement whose ideology resonated with her. A practice which deeply agitated her family was her wearing of the hijab. She had chosen to adopt this mode of dress as part of a broader political statement, though, according to her, it eventually became a marker of her Islamist identity. It was a practice which resulted in her having to adapt her social circle at university, and a practice which she suggests impacted negatively on work prospects.

She deeply valued the lessons she absorbed within the public space of the halqah – particularly those related to gender justice. It is this ideal, more than any other, which impacted on her everyday Islamist journey. She declared to her family that she regularly visited mosques and cemeteries, spaces which were traditionally reserved for men. While she regarded these actions as part of her search for a relevant and authentic Islam and identity, her family was stunned by her boldness. She maintained that the norms observed by her family were not rooted in religion and her daily actions needed to reflect her rejection of their ideas.

Fayruz’s vision of gender equity was again challenged after she got married, and she was expected to comply with gender norms insofar as cooking and cleaning were concerned. This personal struggle could
not be resolved in isolation of her ideological perspective. On one occasion she was conflicted about whether to stay true to her beliefs or protect her father-in-law’s credibility. She recalled that: “He didn’t want to rock the boat, this was his community and he wanted to be accepted. So by me going to the Eid salah and flouting convention, it would be seriously problematic for him and his standing within the community” (Fayruz, 2015). She opted to stay home, but ensured that those around her were aware of her discontent and made an implicit ideological statement by not assisting the other women in the kitchen.

Not wanting her children to be confronted with biased norms and standards is what incentivized her to start a Madrassah (religious school) from her home. Fayruz used her personal and everyday struggles to recreate an alternate, equitable and religiously relevant experience for her children as well as others. She has consequently ensured that her children don’t see religion as being a constraint, and to question insular understandings of Islam. Her Islamist journey became, and still is, a medium through which to challenge preconceived norms and standards and to confirm the value in living an authentic life. Her conviction that Islamic values needed to find expression in private spaces, even at the risk of causing offence to some, provided her with the emotional resilience to confront challenges. Certain individuals might have misconstrued her behaviour as audacious; however Fayruz felt that principles of justice and reform could not be confined to a constitution of a movement. These values needed to find expression in the daily lives of individuals within the movement.

Farah’s trajectory as a political activist and a self-declared feminist was nurtured through being raised by her divorced mother in a rather conservative Indian community. This was a significant experience, though as a teenager she could not assess the prejudice directed at her mother through a religious or ideological ideal. Like many of the other women, Farah’s family deeply disapproved of her becoming involved in the anti-apartheid struggle. She explored alternate ways of pursuing activism while abroad. She joined a Muslim Student’s group while attending university there; searching for some way to live a socially and politically relevant Islam. During this time a green army jacket became an identity marker; setting her apart as being a South African political activist. Inspired by a personal desire to further highlight her
identity as a Muslim, she put on a scarf. It was a time during which global developments resulted in an anti-Muslim sentiment at her university. Though this practice resulted in some verbal clashes in her family, she was resolute in publicly expressing her Islamist identity. Opposition from within her private domain did not dissuade her.

On her return to South Africa she attended the University of Durban-Westville where she became involved in the MSA. She was elected to a leadership position and through various initiatives acquired a sense of re-claiming a distinct South African Muslim identity. It was during this time that she was faced with a significant moment in her journey. She found herself drawn to a different expression of Islamism in the form of the Qibla movement. What made this encounter particularly significant is that she also became romantically involved with a member of Qibla. Beyond the fact that her connection to a particular ideological discourse deepened, this moment also illustrates how the temporal, human factor is always present when navigating religious ideals and lived experiences. Individual Islamist journeys whether they take place within the public – through movements – or within the private domain – involving daily lived realities – always intersect and connect. These seemingly parallel journeys are intimately intertwined, with each consistently shaping and impacting on identity construction.

Another notable personal conflict arose for Farah when she came to the realization that wearing hijab was not contributing to her vision of the religious ideal anymore. In her view a political and religious symbol had become purely an expression of piety, and in what could be considered a contentious move, she stopped wearing the hijab. By this time her involvement within the Islamist movement had ceased, thus it could be suggested that she did not feel bound by the common language and symbols associated with a collective. Whereas at the start of their journeys they sought acknowledgement and affirmation within a collective, as Islamists journeyed on, they not only developed their own understandings of religion, they also became more secure in the individual identities they forged.
Farah’s work at present still entails a deep and multi-layered involvement with issues of gender equality; interrogating women’s lived experiences through the lens of Islamic law and noting the countless incongruities in Muslim communities. She also contends with the incongruities in society, particularly the gendered, raced and classed realities which she faces daily in various NGOs she volunteers for. She now questions idealized understandings of wanting to Islamize society – a notion she believes to be completely unfeasible and impracticable given the conflicts amongst Muslims themselves. Though she made clear that she has gone beyond coveting acknowledgement from the traditional clergy, it is significant that she noted the incoherencies and the dissonances she still experiences as an academic scholar of religion. This is an ambiguity which is at present still an indisputable part of her lived reality.

Farah’s journey indicates that though her religious identity is secure and grounded, her overly public Islamist identity has dissipated over the years. She professed that it was her aversion to being labelled that made her shy away from publicly committing to a particular school of thought, including Shi’ism, of which she has a deep understanding and awareness. Deliberately leaving ambiguity in this regard while she displayed boldness in all other spheres of her life raises questions as to how and why activists decide to grant certain causes or ideals legitimacy and others not.

As a high school student Fahmida came face to face with other declared activists at an MYM/ MSA camp who all argued for a perfectionist ideology which at the time completely eluded her. She expressed her surprised at the amount of ‘black’ Muslims who attended – though she was at the time already involved in anti-apartheid demonstrations at school. This incongruity is reminiscent of what Schielke terms the “individually idiosyncratic” which typifies the everyday human experience of the activist (Schielke, 2010: 13). Being a private person meant that she was not usually easily drawn into groups, yet her urge to become part of a collective political struggle drew her to the Muslim Youth Movement. The movement offered the promise of religious and political relevance which she was keen to pursue.
Not writing her final high school exams was again an ideological choice - one which impacted on her everyday life and which was met with disapproval from her parents. Though this raised questions about being a ‘good’ daughter, she remained resolute in her decision which she viewed as a form of political protest. Her family attributed her decision to wear hijab to her daring nature, rather than recognizing that it was a public declaration of an emerging Islamist identity. In a notable shift, which could be linked to her own ideological development and at times even disillusionment, she later decided to ‘liberate’ herself from the restrictive “scarf pin” she wore. In later years, she too stopped wearing the hijab in the way inducted by the Islamist movement.

Unlike most of the women interviewed for this research, Fahmida attested to not being drawn to any one particular ideology. She was exposed to the MYM and inadvertently became part of it. The movement responded to a deep seated desire on her part to be involved in the betterment of society. Her subsequent involvement specifically related to gender injustices stemmed from her own reflections and exposure to the lived realities of women. Her difficulty in understanding the daily struggles of Muslim women in light of what she had learnt of women’s rights within the MYM, led to her questioning the ‘ideal Islamist vision’. This is indicative of another moment of crisis which she linked to her personal experiences. Interrogating this idealized message of the MYM did not lead to her fully discarding Islamist ideology, she simply realized that it was not reflective of her own or others’ ‘real’ life. As she developed her sense of selfhood she understood that living a life imbued with ambiguities and contradictions was not conducive to spiritual, emotional or intellectual growth. It was at this point that she instituted certain drastic changes in her personal life; opting to express her activism through avenues she deemed to be more sensitive to the daily realities faced by women like herself and others. Fahmida implicitly critiqued ideologues in the Islamist movement for their dishonesty and for side-lining basic religious values and principles in favour of “modernist and progressive” ideas. She is of the view that essential foundational ethics and standards were discarded in favour of purely intellectual notions. She concluded that while the Islamist movement may have shaped her worldview, the core ideals of being a ‘good Muslim’ were
taught to her by her parents. In her view neither the clergy, nor leaders within the Islamist movement, fully understood religion as a lived reality. Religious engagement and Islamist journeys were not only about being intellectual and progressive. In addition to this, there ought to be more acknowledgement and awareness of the everyday realities faced by women in their private spaces.

Though she did not wish to expound in detail on this, Fahmida’s narrative suggests that her personal experiences as a divorced woman alerted her to many of the daily struggles faced by Muslim women. Like her, many other women made huge strides as Islamists and even attained success professionally. Yet, according to her, these same women often encounter(ed) tremendous obstacles in their private spaces. In her case, marrying someone ideologically likeminded did not facilitate her journey as an Islamist within her private domain. She eventually found herself living a life contradictory to her ideals and was thus compelled to make changes. She is emphatic that her journey and identity is presently still shaped by core religious beliefs and maintains that she will always strive to improve societal injustices.

It was the thought of having to face her God one day and having to answer to Him about whether she made a positive difference in society which prompted Shahida to become involved in the anti-apartheid movement. Her belief in the equality of all humans, not just Muslims, guided her to becoming involved in broadly-based liberation movements. Her involvement with the Call of Islam stemmed from this, though she was clear that her values and principles would guide her regardless of which organization she was involved with. Shahida’s journey reveal many moments of ambiguities and disillusionment in her everyday life. Like many others, she navigated through these moments using an Islamist lens and became further incentivized to change herself and society.

The fact that she described herself as a “troublemaker” implicitly suggests a self-view as perceived by others. She acknowledged that being Islamist “came at a great cost to our relationships with our children and with our families” (Shahida, 2016). Seeming to choose between the two ‘goods’ – expressing her
Islamist leanings as opposed to devoting herself to her family and living an ‘ordinary life’ – impacted profoundly on her journey and her identity.

From a young age she expressed her abhorrence for apartheid racial categories of Indian and Malay which permeated the Muslim community. Yet these categories were entrenched in her own family, and she married an Indian man at only sixteen years of age. She found herself at a difficult disjuncture when her husband demanded that she cease her involvement in the activist movement. Suspicions about his wife’s fidelity combined with fears for his own safety first evoked an impatient retort from Shahida. Eventually she acknowledged his insecurities and justified his complaints – explaining that due to his actions she was not taken into detention. She validated his response to her political activities by locating it within the religious concept of *taqdir* (predestination). By doing this she implicitly dismissed the possibility that he was subverting her commitment to the anti-apartheid struggle. It is a concept she continually drew from to affirm the choices she made and the direction her journey took.

On the occasions when her children’s safety was at stake, she chose to protect them from the harsh realities of political activism – indicating that at times her identity as a mother rather than her Islamist identity took precedence. She at present still experiences feelings of having neglected them due to her commitment to activism. This presented a type of moral dilemma for her, but she reasoned that for a Muslim woman embarking on a path of activism is in fact an obligation. This is again indicative of the varied and intricate ways in which parallel journeys and identities were cultivated for Islamists.

Shahida emphasized her Muslim-ness rather than her South African-ness and expressed her preference to connect herself to others on the basis of her humanity. Her faithful commitment to this precept is illustrated on various occasions throughout her journey. In word and deed she did not privilege any terrain of struggle over another and hastened to show her solidarity to any group of people in need. According to her, the quest for justice and peace transcended nationalities and religious differences; and connected

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38 Often translated as theistic pre-determination, *taqdir* is the doctrine held by most Muslims that everything in our lives take place through the power, will and knowledge of God.
public and private spaces. Explicit political struggles may happen in the public, but by becoming involved you were implicitly, in your everyday life, teaching your children essential values like caring for humanity, being truthful and being just. While she may at times have experienced a sense of guilt for not always tending to her children’s needs, her commitment demonstrated to them religious principles which could not be acquired any other way. Thus, as a mother and an Islamist, she realized her resolutions in ways which do not conform to conventional norms. While she emphasized her own unpretentious and simple approach to injustices, both globally and locally, she embraced and internalized basic tenets like caring for humanity, speaking the truth and being mindful of the difficulties of others. Her understanding of activism was rooted in a deep belief in the power of prayer and being a proactive person rather than ascribing to a specific political ideology. Her disillusionment stemmed from her belief that many individuals in society lack these basic values. People are driven by money and power, which frustrated her immensely. For individuals like Shahida though, the mental wrestling and the incongruities were but a part of the broader struggle for socio-political justice – and rather than deter her, she harkened back to core human values taught by her parents to continue her activist work and to cope with everyday realities.

Rabia faced her first significant dilemma when she found her religiosity questioned by college lecturers who alerted her to the political state of the country and the fact that she, like many other Muslims, focused only on the ritualistic aspects of Islam. She found herself at an impasse which impelled her to search for an Islam that was socially and politically relevant. She eventually found her answer in Qibla’s Islamist ideology, though this “type” of Islam was frowned upon by her family whom she loved and respected dearly. Not deterred, she opted to initially become involved without their knowledge. When she decided to accept a job in an area her father objected to, she noted the difficulty she had in defying him. Rabia believed that her action was divinely ordained and was aligned to her path of becoming an activist. By implying that the decision was made for her, she tacitly absolves herself from having agency. As a deeply religious person, she would usually consider disobeying her parent to be a sin, but in line with
Schielke’s argument ambiguities like these need to be viewed as ways in which people live and their attempts to make sense of their lives and possible dilemmas they find themselves in (Schielke, 2010: 12).

Though Rabia never converted to the Shi’a school of thought, she was labelled as one because she belonged to Qibla. This caused a substantial amount of dissention in the community, and more friction between herself and her family. She remarked how they were at that time fighting the apartheid government on the one hand, as well as mainstream religious leaders who branded them as being disbelievers. Again, this only strengthened her resolve that she was on the right path. This is in line with Orsi, who argues that the view, in this case Islamism, which offers hope and faith can simultaneously lead to frustration and marginalization (Orsi, 2005).

Rabia’s husband was a Qibla member as well and fully supported her activism. As a mother though, she sometimes found herself conflicted when she had to leave her children with family members; particularly given their disapproval of her activities. Like many of the other women, she considered herself duty bound to do what she did – not just as a Muslim or a South African, but as a mother who ultimately wanted her children to be grow up in a just society.

Movement activities and ideology at times overlapped with seemingly mundane activities stereotypically associated with women. When fellow Qibla members were arrested and taken into detention, Rabia and some of the women within the movement used their baking skills to declare their dedication to an ideology. Simultaneously they proclaimed their allegiance to shared aims between themselves and those imprisoned. Through the act of making cupcakes decorated with the letter ‘Q’, an ordinary everyday activity like baking, which is associated with warmth, comfort and homeliness intersects with and entered a space associated with violence, coldness and unpredictability. The event in a profound way illustrates how gendered norms were employed by women to affirm their commitment to Islam. For women like Rabia, Islamist ideology was pervasive, and not limited to her journey within the Qibla movement.
On another occasion the same activity of baking arose, this time to illustrate how entrenched gendered norms and traditions hindered women’s participation in Islamist activities. Rabia was committed to being a ‘good’ woman and a ‘good’ Muslim, and while she challenged certain norms throughout her journey, there were times when she navigated her different identities with circumspection. She recalled attending a Qibla class and the lecturer’s rejection of the request by some women that the class be cancelled the day before Eid, reminding him that they were expected to cook and bake. She professed that: “So yes I may even have thought that he was being a bit unreasonable. We were Qibla members, but we also had families and children and if it’s Eid the table had to be laid. And we had to bake and cook” (Rabia, 2016). Rabia seemed to be aware of the contradiction between their commitment to Islamist doctrinal education and expected gender roles.

Practicing religion solely as a set of rituals in your daily life was, according to Rabia, the ‘easy’ Islam. Leading a life governed by Islamist ideology is a necessary, albeit challenging route through which to express your everyday religiosity. She is of the opinion that it is a path which God has chosen for her, and the few choices she made were ultimately through His guidance. It was a lesson she imparted to her children as well: “Do what God instructed you to do!” (Rabia, 2016). The open-ended nature of this directive is reminiscent of Islamist ideology itself and the ways in which Islamists adapted and amended this discourse when they were faced with doubts or challenges.

Shanaz is the only interviewee who was born into a family of activists. Contrary to her particular expression of activism, namely as an Islamist, her parents’ political activism did not intersect with religion. For Shanaz activism could only be located within her expression of everyday religiosity. This was a choice which resulted in many instances of personal challenges and stresses and permeated her life. Shanaz was an activist because it was a duty as a Muslim. She was drawn to Qibla because their message resonated with her Black Consciousness Movement background and her understanding of an Islamic response to socio-political injustices in South Africa. While she found patriarchal norms within the Qibla movement disagreeable, it was an aspect she was willing to condone because she felt the movement gave
clear ideological direction with regards to opposing the apartheid regime. She professed that in her private space she would never tolerate any expression of sexism. She therefore made an explicit choice to occasionally demarcate between her private and public Islamist journeys insofar as gender equity is concerned. Unlike many other interviewees who compromised on this matter only within their private spaces, she acknowledged this ambiguity within the public space of the movement and dealt with it by making a pragmatic ideological decision.

Her refusal to wear *hijab* even after she was rebuked by someone from her own faith, then donning it to affirm a Muslim identity after listening to a Hindu, is confirmation of her ability to contemplate independently of mainstream understandings of Islam. Her wearing of the *hijab*, as with other interviewees, caused a fair amount of rumbling in her family and a moment of vanity for herself. As with all the various challenges, she confronted the comments from her family and made it clear that she will not be dissuaded from doing what she understood to be the right thing.

Her family, though supportive of her activities, were constantly worried given her fearless nature and the security situation at the time. The period her sister stayed with her was of particular concern for her, but Shanaz again made a pragmatic decision to not inform or involve her in anti-apartheid activities. The fact that she loved her sister dearly yet chose to emotionally detach herself – rather than reassure and support her – indicates the ambiguous nature of her everyday life.

Shanaz’s choice to remain emotionally aloof, a characteristic she developed as a direct result of her involvement in the Islamist movement, manifested in another significant way which challenged normative traditions associated with her gender. Having completed her studies, it was traditionally expected that she get married and she was questioned by her family on this matter. She chose, however, to avoid romantic involvements. She used the word “allowed”, implying that she made an explicit choice to steer clear of emotional encounters. She reasoned that she was reluctant to expose another individual to constant security issues which were part of her daily lived experience. Shanaz demonstrated her commitment to the
Islamist cause, while simultaneously showing how Islamist journeys were never detached from conventional and everyday practices like being in romantic relationships. Being emotionally aloof did not extend to those who shared her Islamist aims and objectives. This became evident when she lost a close friend and comrade. While she always understood that being Islamist was “a struggle of life and death issues, it had security issues” (Shanaz, 2015), the demise of her friend was emotionally devastating.

Shanaz pointed to the parallel lives she led, yet her journey indicates how these journeys continually intersected and how she repeatedly confronted the ambiguities - dealing with these in a manner which was always aligned to activism. In other words, the disjunctures never deterred her; rather she managed them through an ideological lens. This is illustrated in the way in which she consistently challenged gender norms through her Islamist activities and her everyday life. She stayed on her own, which was considered unusual for single Muslim females. Opposing tradition through a practice as seemingly ordinary as her choice of private space was in itself an ideological decision. Being alone in the company of males, as well as driving alone at night was frowned upon; even by fellow Islamists who considered her behaviour to be un-Islamic. Her already limited social circle became even smaller, as others viewed her with mistrust because of this ‘deviant’ behaviour.

She was unconcerned about the suspicion directed toward her; in fact suspicion and distrust towards “outsiders” was a significant aspect of her journey. Due to the fact that security concerns were ever-present, she was constantly vigilant, cautious and suspicious of others who were not part of her immediate circle of activists. These qualities have now become inherent to her nature, which suggests a type of paradox given that professionally she aids women and children to resolve their legal struggles. Thus, characteristics which enabled her to be a ‘good’ Islamist in the past now need to be suppressed as she currently performs a very different type of activism.

While she opted to detach herself from Qibla when she accepted a post in a government department, she is still unwavering in her pursuit of justice. Shanaz’s journey reveal many moments of ambiguities, but
being dissuaded from activism was never an option for her. She was involved at a level where leading a “normal life” was an impossibility – every aspect of her life was, and to a large degree still is, governed by ideology.

Conclusion

Islamist journeys illustrate how the political, the social and the personal were inextricably linked. As a consequence, Islamists faced competing – at times even contradictory – influences and messages on their journeys. They were compelled to traverse these influences as they continued their search for an authentic Islamist identity.

Conversion experiences were an inextricable part of Islamist journeys. In fact it was this intensely personal religious experience which marked the commencement of their journeys – shifting not only their worldviews, but altering their lives. The urge to strengthen their religious lives and to communicate their ideas to others led them to join collectives in the form of the MSA, MYM, COI or Qibla. By linking themselves to a movement Islamist engagement became a publicly visible expression of their faith.

Whereas their initial conversion was to Islamism in its most succinct form, namely locating the political within religion, it was by aligning themselves to a particular Islamist movement that they cultivated a distinct ideological direction. Doing this also resulted in them adopting particular modes of dress and practices. They developed friendships with likeminded individuals within the respective movements. These relationships re-affirmed their new-found ideas, and provided a social basis for their religious ideology. As they continued their journeys through and within the respective movements, their identities were further shaped and informed by these ideological discourses.

Tayob’s framework allows for the interrogation of Islamist journeys through and within the movements. Competing discourses allowed them to navigate between choices, to deliberate over multiple goods, to reconstruct themselves in relation to the ‘other’, and for some of them, to gain ultimate fulfilment. This lens uncovers their quest for authenticity, the immense impact ideology had on their journeys and how
identity was consistently constructed and re-constructed. Essentially, an exploration of their biographies from this perspective exposes the profoundly complex nature of Islamist journeys as these take place in the public domain.

However, parallel journeys took place in their everyday lives, necessitating the re-invention of ideological parameters. Ultimately, this was done to enable them to be ‘good’ activists, and also ‘good’ women. Thus their biographies not only reveal explicit political struggles which took place in the public realm, but how activism connected to the daily realities of their lives. It is within the journeys of everyday political Islam that concurrent struggles, beyond ethical self-fashioning, emerged. In light of this, I suggest that Islamists not only turned to religion to reconstruct their engagement in the public realm, but also to affirm and re-construct their identities within their private spaces.

They interpreted and reinterpreted aspects of Islamist discourse as the need arose in their lives, yet they never saw these as compromises. Rather they made pragmatic decisions which still enabled them to be ‘good’ activists and ‘good’ wives, mothers, sisters or daughters. Given that these moments involved the intersection of religion, politics, encounters with race, challenging gender norms, emotions, and many other elements, I suggest that encounters in the private spaces were often more complex and challenging than those confronted in the public sphere. The parallel journeys reveal, even if their Islamist identities took precedence at times, encounters which were intrinsically linked to their roles in the private realm.

Following Schielke and others’ arguments on the everyday, the narratives indicate that maintaining unanimity between their acquired knowledge, their convictions and their everyday behaviour was always a core concern for the activists interviewed. Collective struggles in the public domain and solitary struggles in private spaces frequently intersected and formed part of their ongoing quest to make sense of themselves, society and the world they lived in. Their journeys of political Islam were as much journeys of self-discovery as it was a quest to bring about various forms of justice. It seems apparent that for Islamists the ‘open-ended’ nature of Islamist ideology allowed for it to be actively debated, yet remained
a dependable source of direction. In this regard Tayob notes the value in a discursive approach, but cautions that one should be cognizant of the dynamic element therein. “The discourse is not static but in production and invention through both words and deeds, over time” (Tayob, 2015: 10).

Commitment to religion in general and Islamist ideas in particular informed most decisions they made in both spheres. Though their occasional conciliatory choices could be misconstrued as a momentary slackening of their allegiance to ideology, I suggest that these moments in effect revealed and strengthened their commitment. The pragmatism they displayed when they were faced with difficult choices and the strategic approaches they employed to resolve issues demonstrated their commitment. Rather than abandoning ideology when they encountered challenges, they exercised prudence and made necessary choices which enabled them to be ‘good’ Islamists or ‘good’ women. In this way they ensured that balance and stability was maintained within their public and private domains. Furthermore, this is also illustrative of the diverse ways in which commitment manifested in the lives of Islamists. Commitment was about submitting and pledging allegiance to a religious discourse; however it was also about the ability to adapt and compromise when necessary.

This study therefore challenges Schielke’s notion of viewing ideologies like Islamism as a grand scheme which represents the religious ideal, but remains external to everyday life. According to Schielke, grand schemes like Islamism are invoked when needed and contravened at other times. The narratives show that Islamists embodied and internalized ideology and they consistently viewed everyday challenges and ambiguities through the lens of Islamism. Ideological engagement extended into their personal spaces and informed the way they spoke, dressed, managed their families and in most cases, even their professional lives. They invoked Islamist ideology when faced with personal dilemmas; interpreting and adapting it according to what they perceived to be the correct way.

Identity construction and the search for authenticity feature prominently within their narratives. Beyond this though, Islamists’ biographies reveal their fulfilments and convictions, and uncover moments of
ambivalences and frustrations in both the public and private domains. Their journeys were not linear, predictable or homogenous. What is unequivocal though, is the fact that religion rooted them, and that they remain agents of change in all domains.
Chapter 7
Conclusion

Since the inception of apartheid rule in 1948, a minority of Muslims expressed opposition to the apartheid state. But it was during the 1970s and 1980s that anti-apartheid discourse and engagement amongst Muslims increased markedly. Although the majority of Muslims accepted apartheid hegemony, the contribution made by Islamists is hugely significant and vitally important to understanding and recording the political history of South Africa.

This study explored the lives of some of these Islamists and tracked the trajectory of their activism. It contended that in order to gain an understanding of activist commitment, it is necessary to delve into the biographies of Islamists. Examining life trajectories allowed me to probe how Islamists traversed their everyday realities while remaining true to the religious ideals which they considered pure and authentic.

Biographies, as a tool of analysis, allowed for the exploration and intersection of the everyday, the social and the historically contextual. In this way biographies link micro and macro levels of society. Furthermore it provides an alternate perspective to the notion that societal change is only possible through the actions of significantly famous individuals.

By tapping into individual experiences through narratives or biographies, this study revealed uniquely distinct understandings of the religious experience of individuals. While biographies offered Islamists’ distinct accounts of what prompted them to embark on what is perceived to be ‘true’ Islam, their stories also revealed how Islam was interpreted during a particular period in a particular space. Biographies offered insights into the noteworthy daily encounters experienced by individuals and uncovered some of the misgivings they felt. Studying the life trajectories of South African Islamists showed the multiple layers of socio-political developments while simultaneously locating the ‘subject’ within a particular
context with regards to race, class, gender and religion. Overall, it is only through the personal accounts of Islamists that a more nuanced understanding can be gained about their commitment to activism, their religious experiences and their search for authentic identities.

In line with prevailing literature on Islamism, this study acknowledged the search for an authentic identity and charting unique approaches to Islam as being primary objectives of Islamist movements and individuals. Scholarship on global Islamism demonstrates that, instead of turning to Islam as a theological resource only, religion is a tool through which to engage in the public realm. This thesis demonstrated that Islamism as an ideology in South Africa has effectively become a “discourse of resistance”- a language through which to express discontent while simultaneously affirming an authentic identity (Humphreys, 1982: 78).

In the South African context, Tayob shows how Islamism became the rhetoric which allowed Muslims to express their discontent in the public sphere, with the quest for identity and socio-politically relevant interpretations of Islam being the key driving forces (Tayob, 2014). Muslims were racially discriminated against and religion provided them with an opportunity to reconstruct their public lives. While the local clergy were emphasizing theology and espousing politically conservative and myopic views on Islam, Islamists used religion as an ideological tool to re-construct their own public engagement within the Muslim community and the broader national sphere. Their views were shaped by both global developments as well as local circumstances. Although local Islamist movements upheld different ideological viewpoints, they each maintained that within the foundational texts of Islam were the answers to socio-political inequalities. As Tayob points out, being Muslim was central to their personhood, and their quest for a distinct identity expressed in the language of Islam was of absolute importance (Tayob, 2014: 35).

However, concurrent with their public engagement, there was also a private dimension to their engagement with Islamist ideology. Islamism was not only a tool for reconstructing a public identity –
embracing this discourse resulted in the reconstruction of private identities as well. In addition to being located at the intersection of religion and politics, being Islamist also entailed contending with realities of everyday life within private spaces.

The findings of this study show that Islamism in South Africa was societal in terms of efforts to Islamize society, and political in terms of anti-racial politics. Moreover, Islamism always had a personal element – in terms of the everyday lives of Islamists – which this study focused on. Tayob’s metaphor of journeying provided a valuable lens through which to view South African Islamist biographies. Likening their life trajectories to journeys opened up the space to delve into moments of doubt, ambivalences and their struggle to make sense of themselves and society.

This study found that conversions, in line with William James’ model, signaled the start of these journeys (James, 1902). This profound and intense religious transformation formed part of broader Islamist journeys and ushered in a life of political activism. For Islamists, conversion signaled both an arrival – at a new meaning system – and a departure – on a journey informed by this new meaning system. Converting to Islamism gave them direction and purpose and enabled them to benefit not only those close to them, but broader society as well. This study cannot claim to offer clear answers as to exactly what motivated some individuals to become Islamist, and not others. It cannot offer clear answers as to why some chose to pursue activism more rigorously, while others chose not to. I do suggest though that undergoing conversion experiences proved to be a highly significant factor that impelled them to engage in various socio-political activities.

In line with Taylor, joining a collective and outwardly communicating their conversion experience was evident within the journeys of Islamists (Taylor, 2003). Aligning themselves with an Islamist movement was one way through which they affirmed and strengthened their religious experience. It was in this communal space where they participated in collectively practiced rituals like the halqah. The four movements discussed played a vital role in shaping the public engagement of Islamist activists. By
explicitly associating themselves with a group, Islamists effectively subscribed to the attributes or distinct characteristics of said movement or movements. They adopted a particular dress and language in line with Islamist ideology, and adapted their social circles to reflect their new-found beliefs and identities.

The four features identified by Tayob were relevant in this research study. In line with Tayob’s framework, I demonstrated how Islamist ideology allowed activists to move between poles, to deliberate over multiple goods, to reconstruct themselves in relation to the ‘other’, to alter their destinations and for some, to gain absolute fulfillment.

The life trajectories of Islamists revealed the continuous negotiating of their identities as they found themselves within different contexts and confronted with conflicting influences. As the socio-political environment changed, their vision of what represented an authentic identity adapted. Looking at individuals’ Islamist journeys as they travelled to, within and away from movements revealed that they exercised their agency in terms of shifting to another or carving their own spaces within a movement. They, for example, did not blindly submit to the respective leadership structures. This process was repeated within their private spaces where they often challenged pre-existing norms and standards related to gender, culture and traditions.

An Islamist journey entailed more than public engagement within a movement, the discourse they encountered in these spaces shaped and informed the way in which they traversed their everyday lives. Islamist narratives indicate that religious experiences and religious lives were not confined to specific times and spaces. Delving into their everyday lives allowed me to explore the relationship between their perceived ideal worldviews and the daily realities they faced as mothers, wives, daughters and sisters.

Challenging engrained practices particularly in their private spaces proved to be exceptionally challenging, but they drew encouragement from Islamist ideology and continued carving out spaces for themselves – again showing the fluidity of their own identities and their commitment to activism. Contradictions they encountered within movements and within their private spaces caused immense
frustration at times. They negotiated ideological commitment through local politics, gendered norms, patriarchy and conservatism from the clergy. This commitment was tested in public and private spaces; and their journeys point to a deep resilience and a continual relationship with their conceptions of authenticity – rooted in notions of justice and equitability. While they were clearly agents of change, it is significant and ironic that at times some of them turned to the concept of taqdir (predestination) as an explanation for their own or the actions of those close to them. Not only is this indicative of their reflections and attempts to make sense of their lives, but point to the varied ways in which commitment was interpreted and communicated.

The research showed that, more often than not, challenges were not seen as setbacks; rather these personal struggles were viewed and dealt with through the ideological lenses of Islamism. What seemed to be a personal struggle or conflict became interwoven with Islamist thought. Islamist language was often used to navigate and negotiate issues. Terrains of conflict seemed to only motivate them to find solutions that enabled them to continue with activism. Though there were times when they seemed conflicted about not meeting the expectations of their loved ones, feelings of despondency and or disillusionment were momentary rather than enduring.

Their journeys showed the intersecting of the political, the social and the personal, yet these journeys were neither linear nor predictable. They were uniquely complex and nuanced. Islamist ideology did not hover peripherally in their lives; their actions bear evidence that they internalized this new meaning system and gave expression to it in their everyday lived realities. They may have employed different approaches when confronted with challenges and frustrations, but they remained focused on religious commitment. The shared aims, the challenges and the doubts all formed part of longer Islamist journeys wherein public and private religious engagements were inextricably linked to their search to make sense of the world.
The narratives indicated that there seemed to be consistent mediation on two fronts: striving towards an Islamist ideal vision within the public, while maintaining an ideal vision of a good Muslim woman in the private. For them, Islamist discourse encompassed notions of humanity and facilitated transformation of the public and private spheres. Yet in both spheres the ideal often eluded them, largely due to pre-existing and entrenched norms within both spaces. Actively aspiring towards an ideal did not necessarily lead to them being favorably acknowledged by those close to them, or by society. In this way Islamist ideology provided direction and guidance, yet it was also the source of doubts and anxieties. Implicit within this approach is a clear challenge of two perceived binaries: between society and individuals or the public and private and between religion as an ideal and religion as a lived experience.

Lived experiences are complex and messy, as there is no homogenous normality. Interrogating this necessitated an in-depth approach which took heed of Islamists’ perfectionist ideals while remaining cognizant of personal realities. This study aligns itself with others who have challenged notions of a monolithic Islamism; rather Islamism has proven itself to continuously transform – even within local contexts like South Africa. For my informants, Islamism was a contested domain where definitions and boundaries were not static, and they were entitled to re-interpret and question the discourse. I therefore suggest that perfectionist ideals do not constitute the entirety of a religious life; rather included in such an investigation should be the ambiguities and dilemmas encountered. This entails an understanding that such a life is located within a particular world-view, but cannot exclude frustrations and uncertainties. Doing so leads to a better understanding of not just individuals’ ideals and objectives, but also the everyday consequences this had. Moreover, it substantiates the contention that South African Islamism can best be explained as the sum of a multitude of journeys of everyday political Islam. In this way, this thesis offers an alternate line of enquiry into religious activism as a lived experience.
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Interviewees

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Shanaz. 2015. *Interview*. Cape Town. 2 December.


Thurea. 2015. *Interview*. Johannesburg. 16 September.
Appendix A

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Information Sheet for Research Participants

Title of research project:
Islamist Biographies: Religious Experiences of South African Muslim Activists

Nature of research:
Semi-structured interviews

Details of researcher:
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Implications of this research
I am a student at the University of Cape Town and I am conducting interviews towards my Master thesis as entitled above. Please feel free to pose any questions you may have regarding this study. No financial compensation has been offered or received for this interview.

During this interview, which should last approximately an hour and a half, you will be asked some questions relating to your experiences as a political activist. If at any point during the interview, you feel uncomfortable recounting a particular event or encounter, please do not hesitate to inform me. You are also free to stop the interview at any point.

All your personal information will be kept confidential and the data collected will be stored securely. Prior to the submission of this thesis, you are entitled to withdraw any of the information divulged during this interview. However, once the study is completed, this thesis will be publicly available at the University of Cape Town and may be used for further research and/or publication purposes.