Fragile Conviction

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In April 2009 I took part in a three-day dawat, or proselytizing tour, of the Tablighi Jamaat, a conservative Islamic piety movement, which has made significant inroads into Kyrgyzstan since the 1990s. One afternoon our fellowship (jamaat) was seated around a low table in the courtyard behind the mosque, eating a warm lunch. We were talking about spiritual affairs when Maksat, who was on his third dawat asked, “Is it true what they say, that when you go to heaven there will be twelve hundred virgins waiting?” Nur-Islam, a middle-aged Dungan and the amir, or leader, of our fellowship, responded, “There will be many virgins, and what is more, every one of those virgins will be more beautiful than the most beautiful woman you have ever seen in your life. And your own wife, she will be the most gorgeous one of all.” Around the table tongues were clicking. Some of the men expressed looks of affirmation, others of anticipation. Not wishing to confront what to me came across as sexism, yet unable to listen quietly, I interjected, “How is that even possible? I mean, which man would be able to satisfy so many women?” It turned out to be a naive
question. Nur-Islam responded in a serious demeanor, “Well, you should understand that in heaven your manly powers will be multiplied as well.”

Sex and women were recurrent topics of conversation among dawatchis (participants in dawat, or “travelers”), and this particular episode continues to stand out when I think of the three dawats in which I participated. One reason for its memorable nature is that the topic made me uncomfortable, as I was unable to join in the fascination. Another reason was the seriousness and detail with which the virgin story was discussed among the men. Indeed, what fascinated me most was that these ideas momentarily attained a level of reality I had not expected. I was surprised, not only because of my own biases, but also because most of my acquaintances in Kyrgyzstan had only ever spoken of “the virgins” as a kind of joke, if at all. The fantasy did, however, connect with locally widespread ideas and practices. While for young unmarried women the ideal of chastity is valued highly, it is commonly accepted and expected that married men have as many “girlfriends” as their financial and social position allows. The “reality of the virgins” did not emerge out of thin air but was richly connected to ideas of masculinity, sexuality, and worldly success.

In this chapter I focus on Tablighi techniques to make and keep ideas relevant, believable, and embodied. Although we tend to think of ideologies as configurations of ideas, the ideas that make up ideologies do not necessarily travel as a package; they often move in fragments and bits. New ideologies are rarely accepted at once; their internalization can be a haphazard process, characterized by intensification, deflation, and (partial) evaporation. That is, their trajectories are endowed with a pulsating quality. This tends to be particularly visible when ideologies are “new,” that is, when they are encountered “as new” in adulthood instead of being acquired through upbringing and socialization from an early age onward.

The external observer does not usually notice this pulsating quality; and especially when access is limited to one moment in time, this may result in depictions of belief and unbelief as fixed states. By contrast, movements such as the Tablighi Jamaat are cognizant of the pulsating quality of faith and have devised their own strategies to combat the dissipation of conviction. Their central energizing practice is dawat, which can be provisionally translated as “proselytizing tour.” Ideally Tablighis go on dawat for one evening a week, three consecutive days each month, a forty-day dawat each year, and a four-month dawat once in a lifetime. On three-day dawats
(the most common form in Kyrgyzstan), participants travel to a mosque other than their own in groups of six to ten men. During these dawats the three aspects of traveling, male bonding, and storytelling produce an effect of intensification, which allows access to levels of experience that tend to remain untouched in everyday life. Hence, though the Urdu term dawat stems from the Arabic term da’wa, which means “invitation,” and in the Tablighi context can be translated as “proselytizing tour,” the spiritual effect is foremost on the dawatchis themselves instead of the villagers and townspeople they encounter and invite to follow the same path. For the travelers, dawat offers an opportunity to learn, to translate loosely held ideas into an Islamic vocabulary, and to consolidate these in practice and routine. The embodied truth that is thus produced does not, however, necessarily last long after the dawatchis return home.

**Dawatchis in Kyrgyzstan**

The historical trajectory of the Tablighi Jamaat has often been described, starting from its origins in northern India in the 1920s, to its increasingly transnational profile from the 1950s onward, culminating in the late twentieth century in its recognition as one of the largest Islamic piety or renewal movements in the world (Metcalf 1993, 2002; Masud 2000a; Gaborieau 2000). Close-up analyses of the Tablighi Jamaat tend to be frustrated by the movement’s public silence. The movement avoids making public statements and discourages its adherents from talking to journalists. In Kyrgyzstan this low profile meant that many participants were unaware of the name Tablighi Jamaat when they first became involved. The term more commonly used by both insiders and outsiders was dawatchi, which refers to people who go on dawat. Unawareness of the “official” name was even true for Kanat, who had become involved in Tablighi activities when studying abroad. He became a dawatchi after returning to Kyrgyzstan but only discovered that “dawat is the same thing as Tablighi Jamaat” when he asked an alim (scholar of Islam) about the connection. Ignorance of the name has nothing to do with secrecy but everything to do with organizational features. Because of the Tablighi’s decentralized structure and the emphasis on engagement rather than affiliation—there are no registered members—the “official” name is not all that relevant.
Dawat first appeared in Kyrgyzstan in 1992, when Tablighis from Pakistan traveled to the country. According to the story, when they arrived at the central mosque in Bishkek, no one including the mufti understood their motives or background except for one Kyrgyz Muslim who had spent time in Pakistan. This man ended up taking the visiting Tablighis to his hometown of Balykchi, which subsequently became known as the birthplace of dawat in Kyrgyzstan (Toktogulova 2014, 7). In the early years the movement remained small and was barely noticed, but this started to change around the turn of the millennium. The first time I met a small group of dawatchis was in 2003 in a mosque in Karakol (northeastern Kyrgyzstan) while doing research on conversion to Christianity. I asked them their opinion of evangelical missionaries and of Muslims converting to Christianity. Their answer was straightforward: those Kyrgyz had never been real Muslims; Christians had simply done more mission work than Muslims in the 1990s; this was changing now that Muslims such as themselves were becoming more active in calling people closer to Islam. As suggested by this answer, the rise of Tablighi activity in Kyrgyzstan was in part a response to Christian evangelization, just like in the 1920s the movement sprang from its founder’s desire to counteract Christian and Hindi proselytizing in northwest India (Masud 2000a, xxvi; 2000b, 7).

Because of the absence of formal membership it is not possible to provide precise numbers, but by 2007 an estimated ten thousand people were involved in Tablighi activities. Several dawatchis claimed that in 2005, often mentioned as the movement’s heyday in Kyrgyzstan to date, some two hundred jamaats (“fellowships” of six to ten men) left Bishkek each Friday to start their three-day dawat. A former dawatchi said: “There was like a jamaat in every minibus leaving the capital.” Though these are probably overestimates, dawatchis certainly became a familiar sight throughout the country. Explaining this relative success is not my primary aim here. However, a discussion of the movement’s advance in the region will lay the groundwork for exploration of my central theme: how commitment and conviction are temporarily produced.

The Tablighi advance in Central Asia has been uneven, making significant inroads into Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan but failing to do so in Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan (see Balci 2012). This may be unsurprising given that the Tablighi Jamaat is banned as an extremist group in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan (and more recently
Kazakhstan). However, the pattern is replicated within Kyrgyzstan in the sense that Uzbeks (who make up a sizable 12% of the population) hardly take part in Tablighi activities. This is counterintuitive because Uzbeks are locally depicted as more religious than Kyrgyz in that they more strictly observe the pillars of Islam. Success among the “less religious” is also geographically visible in Kyrgyzstan where the Tablighis have attracted more participants in the locally depicted “secular” north than the “Islamic” south of the country. A Tablighi alim (scholar) reflected on these patterns when I interviewed him:

Dawat used to be active in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in the 1990s, but [the Tablighis there] made a mistake. They became involved in politics, while our position needs to be absolutely apolitical. So then Allah took [dawat] away from these countries. There is another thing. Uzbeks have traditionally paid more attention to religious education, to going to the mosque, etcetera. And once you have gone down one path it is very difficult to return and start anew. The Kyrgyz were different. They were like a blank slate.

The point about the reverse correlation between doctrinal knowledge and the appeal of Tablighi methods resonated in the following condescending view of an Uzbek man living in Kyrgyzstan: “Why would I listen to those dawatchis who only know the basics of Islam?!” In short, the Tablighi’s uneven progress in Central Asia and the locally offered interpretations suggest that the relative success in Kyrgyzstan is due not only to a favorable political environment but also to the focus on learning through participation, which makes it particularly attractive to people who are interested yet unschooled in Islamic doctrine.

Another geographic pattern is that the Tablighi Jamaat has a larger following in urban than in rural areas. A likely reason is that dawat offers a form of male bonding that fills a real need in post-Soviet urban contexts, and several dawatchis told me that through dawat they reconnected with former school friends. The kind of “outdoor” traveling of dawat is also more likely to attract urban than rural young men. Almost all urban travelers (those aged thirty-plus) commented that dawat reminded them of the Soviet pioneer and Komsomol camps, when they would leave the city to spend time in nature, with only the most basic facilities available.
If the Soviet legacy provides clues for why the Tablighis find resonance among Kyrgyz urban men, this legacy also clarifies why they fail to produce the same response among urban women. In fact, there are hardly any all-women jamaats that travel (accompanied by a related male) beyond their own settlement. Occasionally special dawats are organized for married couples (called masturat dawat), but these are few and far between. First, as an organization the Tablighi Jamaat is less accessible to women, and most involved women are so through their husbands. Second, Tablighi ideas of proper gender behavior do not translate easily to the post-Soviet Kyrgyz context. The (university-educated) spouse of a dawatchi expressed her view of the Tablighi Jamaat to me in a dismissive and condescending tone of voice: “Never will I join them. Their idea of a woman is to be submissive, to serve her husband, and to stay at home with the children.” Such ideas clash, not only with seventy years of Soviet discourse on female emancipation, but also with the fact that most Kyrgyz urban women have jobs outside the domestic sphere. To self-declared modern women, the increasingly public presence of conservative Islamic movements is worrisome (Heyat 2004). The perspective of my male Tablighi acquaintances on this issue was captured best in a joke that circulated among them: “The largest obstacle to dawat in Kyrgyzstan is Kyrgyz women.”

It is not only among educated women that negative opinions about Tablighis can be found. The same was true for many men and women who describe themselves as “not religious.” One of my acquaintances in Kokjangak told me: “They dress like fanatics [fanatiki], and, really, it is impossible to have a normal conversation with them. They only talk about religion, religion, religion [Kyrgyz, deen, deen, deen].” The director of the Kyrgyz Committee of Religious Affairs added his own personal view to his ready-made stump speech about respecting religious freedom when I interviewed him in the summer of 2011:

You know, Kyrgyz people are horse riders. When a boy is born, the first thing he learns is to ride a horse. And horse riders need to wear trousers. This is deeply ingrained in our culture. We were the ones who introduced trousers to Europe! [disapprovingly] Now these Tablighis import dressing codes from Pakistan, walking around in long robes! This is completely alien to our people.
The emphasis on garments illustrates that the Tablighi advance is threatening to notions of Kyrgyz culture precisely by reconfiguring “cultural” elements into “religious” ones, as was also discussed in chapter 3.\(^\text{13}\)

Although some of the practices are indeed of foreign origin, the Tablighis are not a foreign-driven presence. In fact, the decentered nature of the movement means that notwithstanding its foreign roots, it is a local movement and one that, by the late 2000s, had established many connections with secular and religious authorities in Kyrgyzstan. Of these connections, those with the muftiate were especially valuable, because they lent security and legitimacy to Tablighi activities. The muftiate of Kyrgyzstan has a Dawat and Propagation Department that deals with different forms of da'wa, including Tablighi activities. The department issues permissions to dawatchis to go on a forty-day tour (after submitting several documents, including a written agreement from their spouse), which need to be shown to the imams of receiving mosques and to the police when requested to do so. The involvement of the muftiate does not mean, however, that all its clergy are favorably disposed to the Tablighi Jamaat. One of the four deputy muftis expressed to me the following critical view, meanwhile attempting to reappropriate the term dawat by stressing its original meaning of “invitation”:

> These Tablighis should remember that the foremost dawatchi is the mufti himself; I and my colleagues, we are the second-foremost dawatchis. To carry out dawat does not require traveling around. What kind of dawat is it anyway when you leave your family hungry? We are not against the Tablighis, but there is no need to be overly protective of them. And some of their ways, such as their clothing, are harmful to the faith because it scares people away.\(^\text{14}\)

Once again we encounter ambivalent attitudes toward the Tablighis. Their non-Kyrgyz appearance is thoroughly disliked, while as Muslims they are treated with respect; they encounter distrust among secular (and religious) authorities,\(^\text{15}\) but also have multiple connections within the establishment. Such ambivalence also characterizes the relationship between the Tablighis and the law. A 2009 law against proselytism implied that the Tablighi practice of gasht—in which dawatchis go from door to door to invite people to the mosque—would henceforth be illegal. However, the dawatchis with whom I discussed the issue were untroubled by this law,
or as one of them put it: “This law is intended [to restrict proselytization by] Jehovah’s Witnesses. But it is different for us, because this is a Muslim country.” Again, this does not mean that people generally welcome the Tablighis, but rather that their activities are condoned. When asked, the deputy director of the State Committee of Religious Affairs admitted that the law is not enforced in the case of the Tablighis, and justified this by saying that the population largely rejects them anyway: “When they knock on someone’s door, the usual response is ‘Be gone!’ [Russian, poshel ty].”

The Tablighis are, to borrow a famous phrase from Turner, “neither here nor there, they are betwixt and between the positions arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (1969, 95). They are Muslim but of a different kind. They look foreign, but most Tablighis are Kyrgyz. Their message is both attractive and repulsive: the emphasis on learning through doing and the sense of fraternity have appeal to a significant group; their mode of conduct and theology are reprehensible to many others. This liminal position generates an aura of exclusivity and sense of purpose, lending their mission importance and uniqueness. It also contributes to the intensity of spiritual experience, as Turner intimated when he wrote about the blend of “lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship” that often arises in conditions of liminality (1969, 96). These characteristics are applicable to the movement as a whole, but the temporal dimension, the “moment in and out of time” (Turner 1969), reveals itself particularly clearly in the practice of dawat.

The Route There

After the Friday prayers in August 2009, approximately twenty-five men gathered at the mosque in a Bishkek neighborhood. It was one of four mosques in Bishkek serving as sending points for dawat. Several men were wearing the white robe that makes Tablighis instantly recognizable, though the majority were dressed in everyday clothes. Most of the men sported beards, or had started growing them, an indicator of prolonged involvement. Over the next few hours, more men arrived, until at 4:00 p.m. the jamaats (fellowships) needed to be formed. This was first done informally, after which two coordinators ensured that all fellowships had a proper composition. They moved several men around so as to obtain a
good spread of age and experience in each jamaat, and to ensure that the travelers would be able to communicate effectively with each other, either in Kyrgyz or Russian.

After this process was completed each jamaat needed to select its amir, or leader. This can be a delicate issue because potential leaders need to present their experience while retaining a modest deportment. After all, Tablighi etiquette says that “one must not expect nor insist on the acceptance of his suggestion” (Masud 2000b, 28). The procedure began with a round of introductions in which each traveler mentioned previous dawat participation. The more experienced travelers used the opportunity to comment on the values of dawat and thereby allow others to assess their suitability for leadership. Subsequently each traveler was asked to point to the person they deemed most suitable for the position of amir. In our group a young Kyrgyz man received the largest number of votes, only slightly beating a more senior Kyrgyz man. This slightly awkward situation was solved by splitting our jamaat of twelve into a Kyrgyz- and a Russian-language jamaat, and adding a few others from a third group. The Russian-language jamaat, of which I became part, was a heterogeneous mix of three Kyrgyz, two Tatars, one Uyghur, and me. The Kyrgyz-language groups were more ethnically homogeneous, with only one (Kyrgyz-speaking) Russian joining their ranks.

After the members of our jamaat had agreed to contribute 100 KGS (two dollars) each, our amir made a phone call to the rukh jamaat (head office), situated elsewhere in Bishkek, which coordinates the travel destinations. The groups’ destinations are decided on the basis of the collected sum of money, the availability of a vehicle, and the even distribution of Tablighi visits to all villages and urban neighborhoods. Our fellowship had a car at its disposal, and we found ourselves being sent to a village located thirty kilometers west of Bishkek. When getting ready to depart everyone turned off their mobile phones—dawatchis are expected to sever all contact with friends and relatives for the duration of dawat. From here on, the dawatchis submit themselves to the leadership of the amir (see also Tozy 2000, 168).

Despite my initial skepticism, it turned out that a three-door Toyota seats seven grown men. Packed together, with one of us repeating zikr (remembrance of God), others exchanging stories and anecdotes from previous dawats, and me listening to it all with my cheek pressed against the window, we reached our destination one hour later. The mosque was a transformed Soviet House of Culture (Dom Kul’tury), an inversion of the
early Soviet practice to turn mosques into barns, sheds, and houses of culture. Both then and now the buildings continue to exude the atmosphere of their previous incarnations. If mosques-turned-sheds preserved an aura that invited respect and care, this House of Culture-turned-mosque had not entirely cast off its Soviet past either. Its dilapidated condition indicated villagers’ indifference. Not long after our arrival the local imam appeared. He agreed to us staying in the mosque and promised to lead the two evening prayers.

The “route there” set in motion a process of detachment and separation from everyday life that allows for the formation of what Victor Turner calls *communitas*: a “generalized social bond . . . of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of ritual elders” (1969, 96). These liminal aspects are core features of *dawat*. To quote Muhammad Khalid Masud, *dawat* is travel in the sense of both migration and withdrawal in which “one temporarily migrates from *dunya* (worldly pursuits) to *din* (religious concerns)” (2000a, xvi). The temporal and social conventions that govern everyday life are suspended during this period.

During the three days of *dawat* the men are not supposed to leave the mosque and its courtyard, except when authorized to do so by the *amir*. The rhythm and pace of life are altered, with only the prayer times remaining the same. There are time slots for going on *gasht* to invite people to the mosque, for studying, for receiving instructions about proper conduct, and for preparing food. Most of these activities are loosely structured, and leave much time for individual prayer, conversation, and resting. The men clearly valued being able to rest from their demanding ordinary lives. They took naps during the day and carried out their assigned tasks at a relaxed pace. Several compared being on *dawat* to being on holidays.

The plan for the day is decided at a meeting, or council (*mashvara*), each morning, during which the *amir* assigns tasks and roles to the *dawatchis*. Assignments take into consideration level of experience and religious knowledge. For example, the *baian*, or sermon, after the midday prayers is given by the more experienced *dawatchis*, while novices are asked to repeat the *zikr* (remembrance of God) for the benefit of the entire *dawat*. All travelers, except those who are very old, take turns being *kyzmat* (helper), charged with preparing food during one of the three days, tasks that in everyday life are considered female ones. Another traveler acts as the treasurer, taking responsibility for the necessary purchases related
to transportation and food. During study sessions the more experienced *dawatchis* teach novices the pronunciation of *suras* and explain the six basic tenets of the Tabligh.\(^{20}\)

These leveling techniques produce a sense of inclusion, equality, and companionship. The *dawatchis* cooperate in the basic activities of food preparation, engage as teachers and students, and learn intimate details about each other while sleeping together in one room and washing themselves side by side. Maksat stressed these aspects while we were smoking cigarettes just outside the mosque territory: “For me this is like the *lager* [camp]. When you arrive at the mosque you never know what to expect, you need to make do with the few available things. We buy some basic food and that is it. And yet nowhere does food taste as good as on *dawat.*”\(^{21}\)

To stick with Turner’s vocabulary, the described egalitarian and pre-structural bonds facilitated the production of commitment and the embodiment of knowledge. But what gave it coherence and direction was the liminal experience. The temporal and spatial dimensions of *dawat* fenced it off from ordinary life, while the tensions with the outside world contributed to a sense of exclusivity and purpose. Beyond that, *dawat*, in its literal meaning of invitation, is all about straddling this boundary between inside and outside, which is revealed with particular clarity in the practice of *gasht*. *Gasht* refers to making rounds through the village in a small group consisting of a leader (*amir*), a speaker (*mutakalim*), and a guide from the locality (*zahbar*), going from door to door to invite men to come to the mosque. This practice of walking is aimed outwardly at drawing other people to Islam, but it is also an exercise in being a good Muslim.

Although Rashid Sultanovich had never been on *dawat* before, during his first *gasht* he was made speaker (*mutakalim*). At first he stumbled over his words, but using suggestions from the others he had his message more or less ready when approaching the fifth house:

> Good afternoon. I am Rashid Sultanovich, and with me are my brothers from Bishkek. As you know, it is very important to pray regularly and to follow the Prophet’s way. Therefore we have come to invite you to the mosque to listen to the *baian* [sermon].

Such encounters are often unsuccessful in the conventional sense. Only in a few of the encounters that I observed was the invitation accepted and
followed up by the invitee actually showing up at the mosque. The far more common response was for the addressee to wait until the speaker has finished, and then either briskly express disinterest or politely decline the invitation. Such negative and evasive responses were not seen as problematic by the dawatchis; according to the Tablighi code, “the duty of the preacher ends with the communication of the message” (Masud 2000a, xxi).

Moreover, unsuccessful attempts had their own significance for the dawatchis, as the following example shows. After leaving the mosque with our four-person gasht, we were walking through the lush village street. Rashid and the guide were in front, with me and amir Seyit following in a second row. Seyit was marveling at the trees, and explained how each tree, each twig, and even each of the thousands of leaves had been individually shaped by God. He explained, “Everything around us has its purpose, its meaning, all willed by Allah.” He continued by telling me and the others: “When you are on gasht, you are making traces through the village, which are like the footsteps of angels. . . . What we are doing is spinning a web of trails that have positive energy and can be picked up by those who come after us.” In this spiritually charged environment the footsteps and trails woven by the dawatchis were seen as having the potential to transform the place. In a world that is saturated with the visible and invisible signs of the sacred and that is brimming with divine purpose, failure as such does not exist.

I have suggested that the intensification effect partly derives from “internal sharing,” for which the ingredients are offered by dawat. This intensity also relies on a sense of exclusivity, produced through an “external facing,” as illustrated by the negative and ambivalent encounters during the gasht, or village walks. The walks also show the importance of making the experiences meaningful, and storytelling plays an essential role in this. Indeed, what pervades all dawat activities are stories: anecdotes from previous dawats, religious messages, and interpretations of what is happening: the stories energize the dawatchis, invigorate their experience, and animate the landscape.

**Enchanting Stories**

A Tablighi acquaintance who accompanied me on several interviews told me with a laugh: “As you see, it is not easy to interview dawatchis; they talk
too much.” Most of my questions remained indeed unanswered, but listening to their stories was all the more revealing. So after I had joined this acquaintance on several dawats, he told others: “His approach to research is a bit unconventional. He rarely asks questions, he just listens to what people have to say.”

Stories are essential for meaningful living. In his book about Serbia in the early 1990s, Mattijs van de Port writes that he was struck by “everyone’s complete reliance on a story, a story that can give meaning, direction and purpose to (certain aspects of) life” (1998, 29). He refers to this as “narrated/narrating reality” (verhaalde werkelijkheid) a term that suggests the inseparability between the world and experience (1994, 50–56; 1998, 50–52). In other words, stories do more than reflect and refract the world; they also shape lived reality, and do so by engaging the listener as well as the speaker. Rane Willerslev suggests that stories can be “a ‘magical’ tool for ‘humanizing’ hunters” (2007, 165), and according to Susan Harding (1987) it is through talking and telling stories that evangelical Baptists convert others. Stories are an important part of what constitutes experience, and they are tools for convincing others and self of what is true, important, or right.

In the case of the Tablighis stories were important venues by which dawat success was produced. Marc Gaboriau writes that Tablighi literature “is always anxious to proclaim that the preaching tours obtained wonderful results” (2000, 136). Or as amir Nur Islam put it to our fellowship, during dawat one should talk only about religion (deen) and focus on the positive, rather than allow Satan-inspired (shaitan) negativity. Metcalf stresses the centrality of stories for the Tablighi movement, which “engage the listener, . . . not only intellectually but emotionally” (1993, 593) and aim to achieve “experiential, not intellectual understanding” (1996, 110).

This section tries to understand how, through stories, such emotional connections and experiential understandings are produced. According to Geertz (1973, 100) “There are at least three points where chaos—a tumult of events which lack not just interpretations but interpretability—threatens to break in upon man.” His three points, or limits, are those pertaining to the mind, the body, and the soul, or in his words: “at the limits of his analytic capacities, at the limits of his powers of endurance, and at the limits of his moral insight.” These limits, which are obviously intertwined, also surfaced in stories told by Tablighis. The “limits of analytic capacity”
resonated in stories that conveyed awe about the Creation and the occurrence of miracles. The “limits of power and endurance,” referring specifically to the body, were revealed in stories about addiction and sex. The key question about “moral insight” in 2010 concerned the episode of violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks that left everyone shocked. The stories refractions and shape reality, but ultimately point beyond “narrated reality,” to that which cannot be said, to the “really real” (van de Port 1998).

Awe

“Do you know that [Captain Jacques] Cousteau accepted Islam? [On his sea journeys] he discovered that salt and sweet water do not mix. When he found out that this is exactly how it is written in the Koran, he immediately accepted Islam.” Maksat mentioned this during our dawat, but he was not the first to tell me the story. Many practicing Muslims in Kyrgyzstan (and in Georgia) had told me about Captain Cousteau’s instantaneous conversion on receiving proof of the scientific validity of the Koran. One reason for the captain to be mentioned in conversations was surely because the story of this respectable and famous European (television) scientist might also inspire me to convert. Beyond this, the fascination with Cousteau reflected the desire to bolster religious authority with scientific means. (A poignant detail—although irrelevant to the argument—is that Cousteau never publicly confirmed his alleged conversion to Islam and was buried according to the Roman Catholic funerary rites). In similar fashion, newly practicing Muslims in Kyrgyzstan regularly cited the health benefits of regular prayer—as comparable to physical exercise—and talked about participating in Ramadan as a detox of sorts. For Muslims who had lived with the truths of scientific atheism such rationalizations had legitimizing power, meanwhile demonstrating an elective affinity between the teachings of Soviet ethics and Islam (cf. Luehrmann 2011). In this post-atheist environment, the discoveries of a Western television scientist had tremendous appeal.

If in these examples it appeared to be science rather than religion that held supreme authority, then this was only so because the involved dawatchis had not yet fully understood (or internalized) the Tablighi message that science is ultimately powerless, as suggested not only by Cousteau’s conversion but also the following example. On the second day of
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dawat, Kanat was assigned the task to give the baian after the afternoon prayers. He decided to speak about the universe and its perplexing complexity. He was understandably nervous, but told me (and himself) that he shouldn’t be because those who deliver a baian receive divine assistance. Kanat’s speech was a soft-spoken whirlwind of information, in which he took his audience from the tiniest particles—atoms and electrons—to the galaxy of planets and stars. The lecture was effective because of Kanat’s calm and trust-inspiring manner of speaking and his known position as a doctor of science, which accentuated his claim that not even scientists understand the workings of the universe, and that they are equally fascinated by the fact that the universe displays such an amazing harmony. “Think about it,” he stressed, “everything in this world and beyond is willed by Allah, all is part of His plan.”

The references to science resonated with post-Soviet sensibilities and were meant to demonstrate Islam’s superiority. Kanat’s insistence that scientists are equally baffled by the complexity of the micro- and macro-cosmos and the alleged conversion of television-scientist Cousteau exemplify this. They conform to the following logic: the limitations of science produce awe for the Creation, thereby demonstrating God’s omnipotence. This omnipotence manifests itself all around us, visible to those who pay attention, as the following example illustrates.

One afternoon we were seated in the central mosque of Bishkek with six dawatchis, listening to the consultations of one of the alims. He reached for his smartphone and showed a picture of clouds that formed the name Allah in Arabic. “You see, God makes himself known to us all the time, we just need to pay attention.” We spent the next thirty minutes watching a series of videos that demonstrated divine power, including one featuring a girl whose tears turned into crystals, and one of a snake that slithered out of a grave after the funeral had ended. The gathered men clicked their tongues in amazement at these proofs of divine power. An additional example was a video of the central mosque in Mecca at night, when, at a certain point, the entire mosque lit up. The alim explained that this was due, not to artificial light, but the energy released by prayer, and he marveled at the possibilities of technology: “Sometimes we are not able to see clearly with our eyes, but the camera will nevertheless record it.” The videos produced a momentary awe factor, powerfully evoking divine power. And yet they could easily backfire. One dawatchi told me afterward, “There are
many fakes among these videos, but it wouldn’t have been right for me to challenge the *alim.*”

Desire

The invocation of science and its limitations was attractive, but remained at some distance from everyday concerns, and lacked the kind of emotive energy evident in stories about sex, such as the following one that was shared during one of the *dawats* I took part in: “In paradise I will have a racing car and drive 500,000 kilometers an hour, and I won’t even have to fear an accident.” Amir Seyit was narrating not his own but his friend’s imaginations of paradise, which included one particularly poignant one: “[In paradise] the most beautiful virgins will desire to be with me. So you know what I will do? I will have them play football with each other and I will make love to the ones who score a goal.” These fantasies, even in this secondhand rendering, were able to captivate the audience of *dawatchis.* According to Seyit, whenever his friend would tell those stories, even the *aksakals* [Kyrgyz, old men] would all listen attentively.

To be sure, not all fantasies were as promiscuous as this one. During another *dawat,* amir Nur Islam explained to us that in paradise “the heart of your wife will exclaim your name with every beat.” This combination of pure devotion and loyalty was particularly attractive because, the *amir* continued, one’s wife “will be a thousand times more beautiful in paradise than she is in the world.”

It is impossible to determine with certainty the extent to which such stories were accepted as true by the *dawatchi.* Some appeared to take them for the truth, others may have hoped that they were true, or were simply intrigued by the thought of it all. But it was also clear that being on *dawat* intensified their experienced reality. The *dawatchis* were in male-only company where they had to improvise and fend for themselves, that is, where they were able to be men and feel like men. It is in that context that the stories and fantasies were narrated and listened to with a greater level of intensity than they would have been outside the *dawat* context.

An important question is why these stories were so attractive to these men, beyond the possibility that men in general are enticed by prospects of limitless sex and enhanced virility. What was significant was that my acquaintances’ experiences compared rather poorly with the presented
visions of sex and masculinity. In fact, many of the *dawatchis* in the *jamaat* had difficulties in their relationships with women. Rashid Sultanovich had been kicked out by his wife two years earlier (before he became involved in *dawat*), after which he had lived in a shell of a house at the outskirts of Bishkek without water or heating. My smoking buddy Maksat told me about the throbbing headaches his wife caused in him, and he repeatedly lamented her nagging and constant criticism of his inability to financially provide for his family. *Amir* Seyit, at thirty-two, had never been married and was still living with his mother. He admitted that it was time for him to find a wife, but since he was jobless this was not all that easy. And Kanat commented that *dawat* had complicated his marriage, and he talked about his dream to marry a “real Muslim girl,” instead of having an independent wife with her own career.

It is against this background that the significance of stories about women and sex becomes evident. The stories expressed the hope that through *dawat* the men would solve some of their relational and marital problems. Success stories were actively shared, such as the following one: “My wife would always scold me . . . but once I started to go on *dawat* regularly, she became much softer. One time when I returned from *dawat*, I entered the house and she asked me: ‘Are you hungry my dear? Just sit down, I will prepare food for you.’” Often, when we were having such conversations one of the experienced *dawatchis* would say that this was all very well, but that ultimately our experiences in this world are insignificant in comparison to the next. As *amir* Seyit put it: “Everyone creates his own heaven, but the real heaven will be much better, it is beyond any imagination. When you approach heaven and you see its entrance, you will look at it in awe for forty thousand years.”

Justice

In late June 2010, a week after the three-day conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks had left its deadly and destructive traces in southern Kyrgyzstan, people were trying to grasp what had happened. *Dawatchis* in Bishkek were no different. Like others, they wanted to understand why these events were happening. Seated in the mosque, *alim* Muhammad was asked by one of the men gathered there: “How is it possible that this is happening in Kyrgyzstan, given that *dawat* is more active here than in neighboring
countries]?” The question was troubling because it seemed to contradict the shared notion that when you give to Allah, you will receive back manifold. Alim Muhammad had his answer ready: “Think of how we relate to children. Imagine that you are watching children at a playground. If someone else’s child misbehaves, you won’t be concerned; you will think: that’s their problem, not mine. But surely you won’t be that complacent when one of your own children is misbehaving. You will reprimand and punish them.” He paused, looked around as if to make sure that everyone had understood the message, and then added: “There is more to it. You know, the places where dawat is strong, those are also the places where Satan tries to fight back.”

Judging from the responses, this explanation managed to convince. And yet the logic could be bent in multiple directions. A few days before listening to alim Muhammad, I overheard another experienced dawatchi (addressed with the title kudama) who offered a radically different interpretation. He was talking about Uzgen, a town that was infamous for the eruption of ethnic violence in 1990, but where, contrary to expectations, everything remained calm in 2010 when violence ravaged nearby cities. This miraculous absence of violence, he explained, was because dawat had been more active in Uzgen than in other towns in the south. It was proof that Allah protects those who go on dawat.

While the alim interpreted the violence as reflecting a father punishing his beloved children or because of Satan’s countermoves, this other explanation suggested that Allah’s children were spared because they had been more active in dawat. Because of the flexibility of Tablighi (or other religious) logic, it is a useful vehicle for making crises understandable and digestible. Any event could be interpreted as either gift or punishment by Allah, or alternatively as the work of Satan. Simultaneously, this flexibility also constituted the weakness of the logic, and it was dependent on not asking too many questions. As Seyit put it: “It is wrong to question everything—what counts is how you act, how many zikrs (remembrances of God) you say, and how regularly you pray—that’s much more important than knowing the answers. Reading suras is good, but if you start adding up and comparing all the interpretations, your head starts spinning.” For Seyit the response to “heads that are spinning” would be acceptance, which is accomplished during dawat and contributes to the intensity of experience. But it is not necessarily of a permanent nature.
The Route Back

After three nights and days the *dawat* fellowships return to their sending mosque. This final part of *dawat* is meant to provide further spiritual food that will sustain the travelers until their next three-day *dawat*, in principle one month later. It is also the moment when inquiries are made about intentions to go on a forty-day *dawat*. On two occasions at which I was present this final “briefing” had an energizing, or at least a consolidating, effect: the travelers narrated how *dawat* had strengthened their relationship with God and how it had provided them with new knowledge. Several of the travelers expressed an intention to go on a forty-day *dawat*, and travelers who had befriended each other agreed on the date for their next three-day *dawat*.

The August *dawat* that has formed the basis of my earlier descriptions, however, had an ending that I had not anticipated. We arrived at the mosque exactly at 4:00 p.m. and sat down on the carpets outside in the open air. The coordinators who debriefed our fellowships asked each of us to reflect on our experiences. The first one to respond was Kanat. He stayed in line with etiquette when commenting that this *dawat* had strengthened his commitment. He mentioned that during the previous three days he had witnessed the power of *dawat*. To sustain this claim he mentioned that after we had made a request (*dua*) for food, the villagers had come out to give us food, and that our prayers for making the *gasht* successful had resulted in several villagers coming to listen to the sermon (*baian*). In response, Kanat received the straightforward advice to improve his regularity in prayer and *dawat*. The next traveler up (named Bolot) echoed this advice by saying that he was still struggling to achieve regularity, and nodded when the coordinator stressed that in comparison to eternity we are asked to sacrifice only a very small amount of time. Several others followed, but then the positive flow was interrupted by Edil, who reported, “I understand everything, but my heart remains closed. It is as if it is blocked. Something just doesn’t allow it to change.” Perhaps his honesty was unexpected, because the coordinator struggled to give satisfactory advice. The last person to speak said that he was confused more than anything else. While on *dawat* he had felt “something,” but now all that remained was ambivalence. Possibly his nonchalant voice provoked the coordinator to emphasize sternly: “It is not that we go on *dawat* for three days and then have the rest of the month off!”
When leaving the mosque Bolot asked if Kanat would lend him money. Knowing Kanat as a generous and economically well-off person, I was surprised that he refused to lend his fellow dawatchi the small sum requested. Instead he offered to buy groceries, which Bolot politely declined. Afterward, Kanat explained that Bolot was an alcoholic, and several times had come to dawat while still drunk: “When he is on dawat it is fine, but in between he loses it.” Kanat had asked the elders at the mosque, who advised against lending money, but to try and support him otherwise.

In 2010 I met up again with five of the dawatchis I had traveled with the previous year. Edil, who at the time had been struggling with commitment, managed to sideline his doubts. He divorced his wife and married a practicing Muslim from a religious family. Amir Nur Islam similarly continued to be actively involved. But for Ruslan, Rashid Sultanowich, and Kanat it was different. Ruslan had stopped going on dawat, but emphasized that dawat had helped him overcome the chronic backaches that doctors had been unable to cure. Rashid Sultanowich was still involved, but no longer maintained the regularity of the previous year. Kanat had been unable to go on dawat for the last four months. He explained that the worldview of the Tablighis had become too restrictive for him:

As long as you are inside it, it all makes perfect sense, but from the outside it looks differently. There are those who give up their jobs, who lose their families. And to be honest, this started to happen to me too. My job suffered as I spent all my time and energy on dawat. And then one day I came home and found my wife crying. It was her birthday, she had bought tickets for the movies, and I had been too busy with dawat. That is when I decided to shift my focus. I think that there is a time when you need to be actively involved, and then there is a time when you need to find a balance again.

The logic of the Tablighi method is precisely to ensure that a balance is found between dawat and everyday life. But for many dawatchis this was difficult to achieve. The dawat experience was so intense because the men felt a release from their everyday commitments, and yet this was also why it tended to remain a “bracketed reality.” Finding a balance depended on the strength of the Tablighi network as it continued to exist in between the periods of traveling. Such a network was certainly developing, and Kanat often made a point of helping out his acquaintances from dawat, for example, by making sure that he bought from their stores. But for the moment,
the gap between life among Tablighi brothers and life at home continued to loom large for many of the travelers.

**The Pulsation of Dawat**

The Tablighi Jamaat, like some Christian missions, is acutely aware of the need to provide regular boosts of energy lest people’s conviction and devotion dissipate. In the movement’s literature this is known as the “dry-dock parable” in which man is compared to a ship that is constantly being rocked by rough waves that damage the ship and steer it off course. In order to deal with these distracting and troubling worldly forces, Muslims need to have regular access to a space of refuge (or dry dock) in the form of the mosque or a jamaat (fellowship), where they can be spiritually nourished and replenished.27

This pulsating quality of conviction resonated in many stories told by dawatchis: Nur Islam compared dawat to food, of which the body always desires more. “When you go back to the world, you are faced with constant demands. It is always about money. You find yourself sitting at the table not wanting to listen anymore.” It was for this reason, he said, that he avoided speaking about nonreligious topics during dawat. The stories also revealed that the distinction between everyday life and life during dawat consisted of several dimensions. On the one hand, dawat was, as in the parable, a space of refuge from the turmoil of everyday life. Maksat, for example, told me: “You know, this feels like a holiday. Just being here, no problems, no stress.” Dawat provided relaxation by offering a place of withdrawal from everyday difficulties, and a space to fantasize about different realities. But this experience of relaxation was complemented by an experience of intensification that was rooted in the joint activities of the men and their exposure to the reactions of the villagers (and officials) they encountered en route. This tension between relaxation and intensification generated affective energies from within.28  Indeed, it was in relation to both these aspects that the constant circulation of stories created an atmosphere in which one was able to come closer to Allah, and in which signs of God’s presence became more credible. However, we have seen that the elation can dissipate quickly. As a former dawatchi told me: “When you are on dawat, everything makes perfect sense. But afterward it appears too
simplistic.” The logic that is so powerful when part of a fellowship looks different when the social surrounding is made up of people who are not connected to the Tablighis.

The immediate and the longer-lasting effects of the *dawat* experience depended on the temporal and social contexts in which they unfolded, as illustrated by the comments of Kyrgyz and Pakistani *dawatchis* about each other during a joint *dawat*. The differences between them were a frequent topic of conversation, with the Kyrgyz saying that the most significant difference was that the Pakistani had been born and raised in Islam. They admired the Pakistani for their certainty, and stability in matters of faith. And they complained about their own difficulties of having grown up during atheistic times and living in a largely secular society. By contrast, the Pakistani expressed amazement about the intensity with which Kyrgyz were able to live their faith, and they repeatedly commented on their fervor and energy.

What we seem to have here, then, are two different modalities of religious experience. For the Pakistani, Islam was part of their habitus, of the world with which they had been familiar since their youth. To them, *dawat* was important to sustain their commitment, and to ensure that their belief (*yiman*) would not turn into indifference. For the Kyrgyz, *dawat* was about something different: it was about overcoming doubt, and hence the cycles of believing and disbelieving were much more intense. Interestingly, this pattern could be observed, not only among individual *dawatchi*, but with reference to the Tablighi movement in Kyrgyzstan more generally. As one Kyrgyz scholar who associates himself with the Tablighi Jamaat told me: “In the 2000s, the number of three-day *jamaats* traveling in the northern regions on weekends was nearing a thousand. This was the period of highest popularity reaching levels of fashion. Since then the numbers have dropped significantly, but [now] there is more regularity, experience, and formalization/legalization of the practice.” The trade-off between intensity and regularity, between charisma and routine, are there for everyone to see. The particularities of this trade-off, in a post-Soviet context where Islam returned to the public sphere, help us understand both the power and the fragility of conviction.