

# Biographies of Muslim Activists in South Africa<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article analyses the life-trajectories of three Islamic activists in South Africa. It is focused on their journeys through activism over several decades, using life-story models from William James and al-Ghazali. These are stories of individuals who established or joined the Muslim Youth Movement (est. 1970) at one time or another and played some role in its long history. These stories include accounts of conversion, doubt and significant engagements in pursuit of an activist life. The biographies reveal a glimpse of the journeys that countless others, in South Africa and beyond, have taken in pursuit of an authentic Islamic life.

## Introduction

In 2009, Aishima and Salvatore reminded us that the ‘intellectual trials and tribulations’ that went into the making of Islamic revival have not been sufficiently studied.<sup>2</sup> An enormous body of literature has been produced on Islamic fundamentalism or Islamism, but relatively little

- 1 This work is based on the research supported in part by the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa. The opinions expressed in this work are those of the author, and the NRF accepts no liability whatsoever in this regard.
- 2 Hatsuki Aishima and Armando Salvatore, “Doubt, Faith and Knowledge: The reconfiguration of the Intellectual Field in Post-Nasserist Cairo,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, 2009, 42.

has been written on ordinary individuals who have turned to religious activism in one form or another. Islamism is used in this article as a broad category for Muslims who have embarked on various projects to re-Islamize themselves, society and politics in one way or another. These Muslims follow very diverse theologies and socio-political projects, but they share the conviction that Islam needs to be re-introduced in some way into all sectors of life. We know an enormous amount about prominent leaders such as Hassan al-Banna, Abu al-Ala Mawdudi, Sayyid Qutb, and Ayatollah Khomeini. More recently, radical leaders such as Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abubakar Shekau of Boko Haram have received a great deal of attention.<sup>3</sup> The life-trajectories, including the trials, conversions and back-sliding, of less prominent Muslim activists are either presented in one-dimensional portraits, or simply passed over in silence.

This article is focused on the biographical trajectories of a group of Muslim activists in South Africa. It is a close examination of the journeys of individuals through activism over time. The scope of this article is limited to the accounts of individuals who established or joined the Muslim Youth Movement (est. 1970) at one time or another, and played a role in its long history. They experienced its complex history in diverse ways. They include accounts of conversion, doubt and significant engagements in pursuit of an activist life. Their biographies reveal a glimpse of the personal journeys that countless others, in South Africa and beyond, have taken in pursuit of an authentic Islamic life. Their journeys point to the need for greater attention to be given to the study of life trajectories of activists in this important development within Islam.

### **Making Sense of Identity and Authenticity in Islamism**

There is no disagreement over the importance of identity and authenticity

3 F.A. Gerges, *Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy* (Harcourt, 2007); Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaida Strategist Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri* (Hurst & Company, 2007); see also some discussion of the ideology of imprisoned Egyptian Islamists in Saad Eddin Ibrahim, *Egypt, Islam and Democracy: Twelve Critical Essays* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1996).

in analyses devoted to the study of Islamism.<sup>4</sup> Scholars agree that identity looms large in these movements, but they offer different approaches on what is identity and how it is constituted. There is a body of literature represented by Stephen Humphreys and Roxanne Euben that argues that Islamism is an indigenous interpretive framework or discourse. Identification in this approach is regarded as a broad social development. In another line of approach, Robert Lee and Olivier Roy emphasize a more constructive approach to identity by focusing on individual agency in Islamist projects. This article brings the two approaches into conversation with each other through a ‘psychology of religions’ approach.

Humphreys’ early and perceptive analysis identified the rise of Islamism as manifested in the Muslim Brothers of Egypt and the Jamaate Islami in the Indian subcontinent as a common language of resistance. Emerging within colonial and post-colonial cities, the ideologues of Islamism produced a discourse of resistance and indigenous identity: “... Islam is ... reified into a fixed and eternal body of ideal doctrine, not subject to human hypothesis or revision, which is readily available to anyone who cares about it.”<sup>5</sup> Humphreys highlights the difference between pre-modern and modern forms of Islamic revival, but his main point rests on a new language created for young people living in the new cities and states. Roxanne Euben and Qasim Zaman write similarly about 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.”<sup>6</sup> In such works, the terms ‘identity’ and ‘authenticity’ refer

- 4 R. Hrair Dekmejian, “The Rise of Political Islamism in Saudi Arabia,” *The Middle East Journal* 48, 4, 1994, 627-43; David Westerlund and Eva Evers Rosander, “Reaction and Action, Accounting for the Rise of Islamism,” in *African Islam and Islam in Africa: Encounters Between Sufis and Islamists* (London: Hurst and Company in co-operation with the Nordic Africa Institute Uppsala Sweden, 1997), 308-33; François Burgat, *Face to Face with Political Islam (L’Islamisme En Face)* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2003).
- 5 R. Stephen Humphreys, “The Contemporary Resurgence in the Context of Modern Islam,” in *Islamic Resurgence in the Arab World*, ed. Ali E. Hillal Dessouki (New York: Praeger, 1982), 78.
- 6 Roxanne L. Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, “Introduction,” in *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts From Al-Banna to Bin Laden*, ed. Roxanne L. Euben, and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 1.

to the adoption of an indigenous language and worldview.

Some of the scholars who focus on the language of Islamic activism also suggest that individual agency plays little role in identity formation. Saba Mahmood and Roxanne Euben, in particular, argue that the concept of individual agency is rooted in Western philosophical assumptions and cannot be used to understand Muslim action. Saba Mahmood's famous work on pious mosque movements in Egypt stresses an indigenous discourse of self. In her analysis, she argues that agency plays little role in the conception and formation of self.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Euben argues that rational choice theory may not be appropriate to the study of Islamists.<sup>8</sup>

Robert Lee and Olivier Roy represent a different approach to identity. Their work stresses the constructivist nature of identity and the search for authenticity among Muslim intellectuals and activists. In an extensive work on Muhammad Iqbal, Sayyid Qutb, Ali Shariati, and Muhammad Arkoun, Lee recognizes a search for authenticity that is rooted in the experience of modernity. Muslim intellectuals, he says, are no different from European intellectuals who witnessed the threats and ravages of modernization. Like their European counterparts, they found authenticity in Islam through a critique of modernity and its excesses.<sup>9</sup> Roy's work is a variation of a similar approach applied to the Muslim experience of Europe. He shows that young Muslims in Europe turn away from the traditions of their parents and embrace Islam in their search for authenticity. However, this search is deeply individualistic, and reflects the radical traditions of Europe: "a mixture of sectarianism, guruism, neo-fundamentalism, and weird retraditionalization."<sup>10</sup> Roy's extensive study of European Muslim communities and identities shows how young European Muslims were turning to Islam as a mark of heightened individualism.

7 Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

8 Roxanne L. Euben, "When Worldviews Collide: Conflicting Assumptions about Human Behavior held by Rational Actor Theory and Islamic Fundamentalism," *Political Psychology* 16, 1, 1995, 157-78.

9 Robert D. Lee, *Overcoming Tradition and Modernity: The Search for Islamic Authenticity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 25.

10 Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: Fundamentalism, De-Territorialisation and the Search for the New Ummah* (London: Hurst & Co., 2003), 230.

There are many other scholars who emphasize individual agency in the construction of identity among Muslims. In her study of young British youths turning to Islam, for example, Sophie Gilliat described the construction of identity around new forms of sacralisation.<sup>11</sup> Veiling has become another subject of identity construction in various Muslim contexts.<sup>12</sup> In most of these works, veiling was a negotiation with the past and the present and not merely a sign of greater religiosity, or an obstinate refusal to change.

Becoming Muslim in Islamist terms, then, was debated between those who stressed a language or discourse, and those who stressed agency. In my view, both approaches provide important insights for studying life-trajectories. In the course of a life, a new religious discourse might be considered, rejected or embraced. People change their minds, grow up and mature, find Islam late in life, or return once again to where they had started. In order to accommodate the dynamism of a life trajectory, I turned to the founder of the modern psychology of religion William James and the great polymath Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (1058-1111). From different perspectives, James and al-Ghazālī provided a framework for understanding individual journeys during which an interpretive framework and identity may be negotiated and embraced.

William James has received some renewed interest recently and provides a good place to begin to make sense of a personal religious journey.<sup>13</sup> James set the foundation for understanding the psychology of

11 Sophie Gilliat, "Back to Basics: The Place of Islam in the Self-Identity of Young British Muslim," in *New Trends and Developments in the World of Islam*, ed. Peter B. Clarke (London: Luzac Oriental, 1998), 93-103.

12 Fadwa El Guindi, "Veiling Infitah with Muslim Ethic: Egypt's Contemporary Islamic Movement," *Social Problems* 28, 4, 1981, 465-85; Arlene Elowe Macleod, *Accommodating Protest: Working Women, the New Veiling, and Change in Cairo* (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1991), XXIV, 206; Suzanne Brenner, "Reconstructing Self and Society: Javanese Muslim Women and "the Veil"," *American Ethnologist* 23, 4, 1996, 673-97.

13 William James, "The Varieties of Religious Experience, a Study in Human Nature." *Gifford Lectures on natural religion delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902* (1929): accessed December 17, 2009, <http://www.psywww.com/psyrelig/james/toc.htm>; Among many others, Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Harvard University Press, 2002); Clifford Geertz, "The Pinch of Destiny: Religion as Experience, Meaning, Identity, Power," *Raritan* 18, 3, 1999, 1-8.

religion in the twentieth century. He argued that religious experience should not be judged for its truth but for its value in the lives of individuals and societies. James based his analysis on a number of conversion testimonies, mostly written by evangelical Christians in his time. He followed their narratives and presented a map of inner conflicts, trials and eventually resolutions. His work suggested a model for personal journeys that traversed through a series of steps. James asserted that true saints and mystics go through a number of inner conflicts, but eventually achieve a state of oneness. Such healthy religious individuals were of great benefit to society. James' model has been adopted and developed extensively in the study of religions, in psychology in general, and in Christian studies in particular.<sup>14</sup> His insights have suggested a developmental path for interpreting religious experiences that may result in healing and fulfilment, that were in turn beneficial to both the individual and society.

Al-Ghazālī is famous for his personal religious journey that he described in his *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (deliverance from error).<sup>15</sup> In his magnum opus *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (Revival of the disciplines of religion), moreover, he presents a map of human psychology rooted in four key elements: heart (*qalb*), self (*nafs*), soul (*rūḥ*) and intellect (*'aql*). He devotes pride of place to the non-physical heart, which he says is the direct link with God, and a distinguishing feature that sets humans apart from other creatures. The heart is equipped with a variety of forces (*junūd*) that may be marshalled either for damnation or salvation. The heart is “in need of these forces (*junūd*) as it needed a vessel and

14 James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); James W. Fowler, *Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984); Lynn Bridgers, and John R. Snarey, “From Father to Son: Generative Care and Gradual Conversion in William James' Writing of the Varieties,” *Journal of Moral Education* 32, 4, 2003, 329-40; Christopher White, “A Measured Faith: Edwin Starbuck, William James, and the Scientific Reform of Religious Experience,” *Harvard Theological Review* 101, 3/4, 2008, 431-50.

15 Abu Hamid Muhammad b. Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058-1111), *Deliverance From Error and Mystical Union with the Almighty*, trans. Muhammad Abu Laylah, Nurshif Abdul-Rahim Rif'at, and George Francis MacLean (Washington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2001).

necessities for a journey.”<sup>16</sup> Some of these forces are tangible, such as the senses and limbs of an individual. Through these, the heart is able to act and experience the world. Other forces are intangible and include knowledge, wisdom, thoughts, desires and emotions.<sup>17</sup> These forces may also be placed at the service of the heart, states al-Ghazālī.<sup>18</sup>

Al-Ghazālī goes on to elaborate on ways of nurturing and disciplining the heart and its capacities, so that its true vocation is attained. The ultimate destiny of the heart is to return to its origins, which is God. In this journey, al-Ghazālī expects a life strewn with multiple threats, obstacles, temptations and possibilities. He writes of a battle going on in the heart of a believer. The main feature of this battle rages between the forces of good pulling a person in one direction, and the forces of evil tempting and making false promises in the opposite direction. In one passage, al-Ghazālī departs from this binary struggle between good and evil:

It is as if the heart is an object attacked from every side. When it is influence[d] by one thing, it is immediately matched by its opposite and changes its quality. When the demon descends on it and calls it to respond to impulse, an angel comes and saves it from that. When one demon pulls him towards some evil, another one pulls him in another direction. When an angel directs him to a good, another directs it to something else. Sometimes, (the heart) is torn between two demons, and sometimes between two angels.<sup>19</sup>

Human beings are not only caught in the middle of a conflict between good and evil, but face opposing and diverse forces. Sometimes, angels and devils pull in different directions, as the self seeks a course of action. This deep and persistent conflict between good and evil, and between

16 Abū Hāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (Cairo: Lajnat al-thaqāfah al-Islāmiyyah, 1356), 2:1347.

17 *Ibid.*, 2:1349.

18 *Ibid.*, 2:1350.

19 *Ibid.*, 2:1419.

varieties of goodness, seems to be the fate of humans, as human beings.

Al-Ghazālī and William James offer a framework for thinking about religious experiences as journeys through conflicts, diversions, competing forces, and resolutions. Al-Ghazālī was a religious guide helping his readers to discipline the heart for its ultimate salvation and felicity. William James, with his pragmatist inclination, wanted to show that religious experiences that overcome inner conflicts lead to a good society. If we leave aside the objectives that each posited for the individual, we are still left with a rich vocabulary of personal journeys. James' and al-Ghazālī's framework implies that identity making was not restricted to unique discourses and purposeful constructions as we saw in the writings of Humphreys and Euben, and Lee and Roy respectively. Individuals do not, in most instances, embrace a discourse without weighing the options, finding deep conflicts within and without, or turning away through negligence, boredom, frustration or a change of heart for one reason or another. An appreciation of their religious engagement and experiences cannot be limited to an end-result or a moment frozen in time. Religious experiences are characterized by journeys, narratives and struggles. In this essay, I would like to use these insights to navigate the life stories of Muslim activists in South Africa.

### **Biographies of Religious Engagement**

I interviewed and spoke to Islamic activists during the last few years. The idea for this project began in 2010, when I first met a Libyan in Germany who shared his journey with me. He was part of the Da'wah Organization that had opposed Gaddafi for a long time. At one time, he related, he was kidnapped by Libyan security officials and stuffed in a box in the Libyan Embassy. When I met him, he was still grateful that the German security service rescued him. In exile, he became an active member of a mosque, and was eventually drawn to Sufism. His interesting journey prompted this project of examining biographies of Islamic activists. This work began in earnest, then, in Egypt in 2011, when it was possible to conduct a small number of interviews immediately after the advent of the Arab Spring. However, I was unable to return there due to the continuing conflict,



and decided to focus in the meantime on South African activists. Eight structured interviews were duly conducted although a larger number of activists were spoken to informally. Interview partners were chosen from the three cities of Durban, Johannesburg and Cape Town. They came from different apartheid-designated racial backgrounds. Most of the interviewees were men.

Islamic activism in South Africa is represented by three organizations founded in the 1970s and 1980s. The oldest and most widespread is the Muslim Youth Movement which was established in 1970 and was inspired by the Muslim Brothers of Egypt and the Jamaate Islami in South Asia. Students and youths at high schools and universities turned to Islam, and sought to commit themselves to an indigenous Islamic worldview and identity. They read literature written by Islamists in Egypt and Pakistan, and formed study circles and projects to re-Islamize themselves and society. In 1980, another organization emerged in Cape Town under the leadership of anti-apartheid activist Achmat Cassiem. Qiblah was inspired by the Islamic Revolution of Iran, and pursued the dream of an Islamic Revolution for South Africa. In 1983, Farid Esack and a group of anti-apartheid activists founded another organization in Cape Town. Under the banner of the Call of Islam, this new group was critical of the lack of undivided commitment shown by the MYM and Qiblah to South African liberation. In general, Islamic activists in South Africa reflected developments elsewhere, but differed in their commitment to national politics. Moreover, from the 1980s onwards, the MYM and the Call of Islam pursued a path of critical engagement with global Islamist trends.<sup>20</sup> They were engaged in what Asef Bayat referred to as a post-Islamist turn in Iran, Egypt and elsewhere.<sup>21</sup>

I have decided to present three journeys of individuals who have

20 Farid Esack, "Three Islamic Strands in the South Africa[n] Struggle for Justice," *Third World Quarterly* 10, 2, 1988, 473-98; Shamil Jeppie, "Amandla and Allahu Akbar: Muslims and Resistance in South Africa C. 1970-1987," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 4, 1, 1991, 3-19; Abdulkader I. Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa: The Muslim Youth Movement* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 1995).

21 Asef Bayat, "The Coming of a Post-Islamist Society," *Critique*, 9, 1996, 43-52; See also Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence*, 161 ff.

been part of the MYM, and who reflect the changing history of that organization over four decades. This paper begins with one of the founders of the organization in 1970, Faqir Muslim, whose name and presence looms over the organization's history. I then present Sumayya Kariem who was also part of the MYM at an early stage, but never took on a national leadership role. She brings in a very different experience, as a woman and also as an activist who emerged from a peripheral town in the Northern Cape of South Africa. The third individual reviewed in this paper is Mandla Xala who joined the organization in the early 1990s, and became the editor of its newspaper. He became a Muslim at an early age, but was also more deeply rooted in the anti-apartheid movement than Faqir and Sumayya. Moreover, his journey gives us a glimpse of Islamic activism in post-apartheid South Africa.

Taking a cue from both James and al-Ghazālī, I focussed questions on key turning points, conflicts, doubts and resolutions. The three individuals were asked about when they first remembered joining or forming an organization, if they changed their position, and whether they then moved to something else. I was looking for evidence of a journey or a set of conflicting forces as suggested by James and al-Ghazālī respectively. Another aim was to see some partial or final resolutions, or continued vacillation.

### **Faqir Muslim<sup>22</sup>**

Faqir was one of the founders of the Muslim Youth Movement, and has remained passionately involved in its history and engagement in the country. He became the President of the Muslim Youth Movement for a while. His confidence and leadership gave him the opportunity to visit Islamists in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent; a network that he still maintains through personal visits, meetings and electronic communication. In 1987 and together with other senior members of the organization, he was ordered 'to get off the bus' and to make way for new leaders who were more committed to the anti-apartheid movement. He was deeply hurt by this ultimatum and its insinuation. When I met

22 Interviews with author on 4, 6 April 2012, Durban.

Faqir in 2012, he was still attempting to set the record straight about the achievements of the 1970s.

I was deeply touched by Faqir's account of his personal journey and, after listening to it carefully again, feel that it speaks of an activist who experienced Islamist work as a series of competing and opposing forces. His commitment to Islam emerged from confrontations with his racial and class identity, with religious leaders and with anti-apartheid activists. Faqir embraced a vision of Islam with passion, but remained deeply engaged with and mired in these centrifugal forces. His journey is a classic case of al-Ghazālī's depiction of the forces that compete for the heart, never leaving it to rest.

Faqir was only in his teens when he made the decision to declare his Islamic commitment. He was returning home with a group of friends from a local cinema, when the call to prayer beckoned. He asked his Coloured friends to join him, deciding that he would show them who he really was. For Faqir, this invitation was going to be a litmus test of their willingness to accept him. Most of these children came from families who 'tried to be white' and according to Faqir, were the offspring of mixed marriages between Indian men and Coloured women. In Faqir's view, they flaunted the meagre advantages given them by the apartheid state. These included admission to artisan apprenticeships and the privilege to go to the whites-only Addington Hospital. Faqir was not unaware of his superior financial background, but in the world of apartheid these other advantages threatened his self-worth. Half of his friends failed the test that Faqir put to them, and he never saw them again. Faqir had made a decision to be true to himself and since that fateful day never missed his daily prayer.

This was not the only rejection that shaped Faqir's early life. While at school, a more direct confrontation was posed by another group of children. He attended school with working class pupils from the Durban Barracks, but they insulted him on a regular basis. The name-calling, with its openly sexual undertones, denigrated him as a middle-class Indian. Faqir fought back on the school grounds, and earned a feared reputation. This school-ground taunting reflected the class and linguistic lines that

ran through the Indian community in South Africa. Faqir fought back for his dignity. Interestingly, he did not know until much later in life to which Indian clan he belonged. He relates that he was reminded of his identity by Muslims in Johannesburg and a Hindu woman in Durban.

The Arabic Study Circle was his first real exposure to Islam. By the time he was fifteen, he was listening to Ahmed Deedat, the famous polemicist on the Bible, and to Mr Vanker, who owned a bookshop in the arcade of the Grey Street Mosque. Deedat's lectures on the Bible, where he 'bashed the white man,' helped Faqir and his friends grow 'six inches.' Deedat's lectures had this effect on many other young Muslims in South Africa and elsewhere. Faqir enjoyed even more the debates and conversations between Deedat and Vanker and loved listening to Vanker speaking about the wonders of the Qur'an. Vanker's erudition laid the seeds for an appreciation of the Qur'an and the value of Islam for society.

After finishing school, Faqir's father persuaded him to work for a year in the family business and at the end of that year, offered him a tour of Europe as a reward. Faqir believed that this was a sweetener to forget any ambitions he may have harboured about going to college. As part of his youthful pilgrimage to Europe, Faqir went to the Islamic Centre of Geneva and met its director, Sayyid Ramadan, the son-in-law of Hasan al-Banna who had founded the Muslim Brothers in Egypt. Faqir was only just twenty, but was inspired by the worldliness of this pious man. He had grown up believing that pious people shunned the world but meeting Ramadan taught him that he could be both worldly and religious. Ramadan was the father of the now-famous European Muslim intellectual, Tariq Ramadan, who according to Faqir, reflected the values of his father: being fully Western, modern and Muslim. Faqir was beginning to adopt such a vision of Islam for himself.

Faqir also recollected this worldliness in a close friend and associate Mahmud Moosa, who started the Muslim Youth Movement with him and Hafez Abu Bakr Mohammed. Faqir regarded the latter with great pride as he was both a lawyer and a *ḥāfiẓ* (memorizer) of the Qur'an; both a professional and religious figure. But Faqir kept a special place

in his heart for Mahmud. He remembered Mahmud coming to school in a chauffeured Jaguar. He also recalled that Mahmud's family owned a private plane in which they flew all over Africa on business. He admired the great generosity that he saw at close quarters from Mahmud and his family. This vision of a successful and generous Muslim in the modern world became deeply rooted in Faqir's understanding of Islam.

Faqir was clear that he was a Muslim and neither an Indian nor a boy from the Barracks. At the same time, he never tired of blaming the religious leaders in the city of Durban for failing to inspire and lead him. He probably first developed this suspicion and antipathy from his father, who was widely read in the modern classics of Islam, and familiar with Muhammad Iqbal and Sayyid Qutb. His father was close to the Arabic Study Circle; an organization that considered religious leaders to be obscurantists, traditional and out of touch with modern society.<sup>23</sup> Faqir remembered a remark from his father about people who prayed regularly in mosques. Such a person, he said, was either "a loony or a very sinful person." This was not a theological statement, according to Faqir, but a dramatic rejection of traditional Islam. Faqir hardly missed an opportunity to criticise traditional Muslims, the religious scholars and the Tablighi Jamaat. He found the latter "suffocating [...] and intolerable" and their "display of piety" pushed him away. Religious leaders represented another force that shaped his identity. As with the rejection of identities ascribed to him, the role and value of traditional leaders occupied a prominent place in Faqir's conception of self and Islam.

Nevertheless, there were a number of religious leaders whom Faqir remembers with mixed feelings. While he was rejecting them as a class, he was also drawn to them as sources of inspiration and knowledge. In 1969, when a Mawlana Ansari was appointed Imam at the West Street Mosque, one of two major mosques in the city of Durban at the time, Faqir believed that a new dawn was rising in the city. For the first time, he felt "intellectually in tune with Islam." He recalls that Mawlana Ansari

23 Shamil Jeppie, *Language, Identity, Modernity: The Arabic Study Circle of Durban* (Pretoria: HSRC Press, 2007).

could talk about a range of subjects and Islam. However the Mawlana was suspicious of the theology of the MYM and its international guests. He told Faqir that he was not prepared to engage with “half-baked religious scholars” (*bohre-tohre molvis*). Faqir hung on to the breadth of subjects that the Mawlana shared with him.

As this Ansari remained critical of his youthful admirers, another Ansari from Pakistan filled the space. Faqir was sent by the MYM to Pakistan to invite Mawlana Fazlur Rahman Ansari to conduct a national lecture tour for the Muslim Youth Movement. The people of Durban had known his father-in-law, Mawlana Abd al-Aleem Siddiqi, who had visited the city four decades earlier. This Ansari, says Faqir, “blows our mind - he inspires us - he takes on a high.” He remembers that one of his cousins, Ayyub Faqir, quit the family business and committed himself to Arabic and Islamic studies.

As I probed Faqir for an account of his special religious moments, he turned again to his experience with religious leaders. Faqir watched the Pakistani Mawlana Ansari closely during his tour of the country and admired his indefatigable energy. He added:

in spite of illness, [he] would wake up after three hour[s] of sleep and ... then reflect on Rasul Allah [the Messenger of Allah], what was he doing in that cave year after year. There was no *ṣalāt*, no *dhikr* technically, no Quran ...

It is this non-ritual dimension of Islam that seemed to attract Faqir. While the local Molvis were discoursing at length about ritual obligations, Ansari was directing him to a wider and deeper vision. Faqir shared with me two other experiences on pilgrimage when he saw this vision. On one of his first visits, he met the Syrian Salafi Amin al-Masri (1917-1979) and asked him to lead him in the ritual *ṭawāf* (circumnambulation of the Ka’ba). This was not an uncommon request made to a religious leader, and Amin al-Masri agreed:

One day we went after ‘aṣr [late afternoon prayer]. When I was walking ... with him [around the Ka’ba] he asked me a

hundred questions about all kinds of things, what you do, what is your family, what is your business. When I finished, I asked what was the spiritual message here?

Faqir was surprised that Amin al-Masri did not pray, recite the Qur'an or repeat the names of God, during the ritual. Amin al-Masri was interested in Faqir's family and business in South Africa. Faqir did not tell me how Amin al-Masri answered the question. However, after a short pause, he answered the question he posed to the scholar four decades later: "Maybe that is more spiritual than you think!" On another occasion, Faqir found himself in the company of Mufti Sanjalvi from Johannesburg who was beseeched by pilgrims to pray for them. Faqir remembers his response: "I cannot make *du'a* for nobody. Just let your hearts speak." In these examples, we can see how Faqir was attracted to a vision of Islam beyond rituals, theologies and practices. He was finding Islam to be a world-affirming religion. Faqir believed that Islam should be part of the social fabric, and that it should not be limited to the mosque. He insisted that this is not what the religious leaders preached.

In spite of the worldliness that he sought, Faqir and the early MYM did not see their struggle as a political struggle against apartheid. This attitude changed over time, but has since become the locus of tension that shaped Faqir's self-representation and vision. Faqir was adamant that the MYM did not avoid politics in its early years: indeed, it was in close contact with the Indian and Black Consciousness Movements in Durban in the 1970s. According to Faqir, the MYM presented Islam to the liberation movements. Speaking directly to Steve Biko, Faqir offered Malcolm X as a perfect model for South Africans living in apartheid. However, Faqir was more unsettled about another issue. He was dismayed about Muslims in the anti-apartheid movement who had turned their backs on Islam. Their commitment to justice was overshadowed by what Faqir considered to be their moral depravity, particularly evident in their tendency to become drunk, and to mislead the 'country bumpkin' Muslim students who came to study in Durban. He was also resentful of those Muslim women who joined the Natal Indian Congress and donned what he termed "Hindu

*Sarees.*” He recalled, however, that many of these wayward Muslims had eventually found their path back to Islam in their later lives; however, he could not forget their treachery. Shortly before the African National Congress (ANC) stalwart Kader Asmal died in 2011, Faqir challenged him on the moral degeneration of the country. Faqir told him that the revolution would have been saved from corruption and depravity if it had not abandoned religion. Faqir’s vision of Islam included politics, but it did not include participation in the anti-apartheid movement. He seemed conflicted about Muslims who joined the struggle without taking Islam with them. Faqir was clearly unsettled by those Muslims who, in his view, had turned away from Islam and had apparently abandoned its language and symbols.

Faqir lived his life through a series of forces that he experienced in apartheid Durban. At least three key elements can be identified around which he embraced the language of Islam and shaped his identity. The first of these was the question of race and class, which were shaped by the many lines of demarcation and divisions promoted and supported by the apartheid state and society. Faqir was particularly moved by Coloureds who he believed attempted to cross over to the other side of the apartheid divide. He also became Muslim in relation to and in opposition to being Indian. He was also moved in equal measure by the religious scholar and the atheistic anti-apartheid Muslim. It appears that these both attracted and repelled him.

Faqir’s journey in Islamism was a restless one, marked by rejection and attraction. His journey in activism was a very good example of al-Ghazālī’s contending and competing forces within and without; these became a defining part of Faqir’s self and his identity. As we follow his journey, we do not see a great moment of revelation or resolution. Thus, James does not seem to be an ideal model for Faqir’s life although when looking closer, we cannot fail to see a vision of Islam. Faqir’s vision was not defined by any specific shape or content. I have the impression that it was a yearning for Muslim pride in society and on occasion, it was a yearning for a simple religiosity that was unencumbered by too many rituals.



**Sumayya Kariem<sup>24</sup>**

Sumayya Kariem had a less prominent profile in the Muslim Youth Movement than Faqir. She did not hold any position, but was no less pioneering than Faqir. Sumayya Kariem was born and raised in Vryburg, in the Northern Cape, and speaks with admiration and gratitude about the Muslim Youth Movement's rallies and public talks in the 1970s. Sumayya has remained passionate about Islamic activism over the years, but her journey was both literal and figurative. She moved to Brits, a small town in the North Western Province when the family business moved there and when she married in 1977, she moved with her husband Ebrahim Aboo to Pretoria. She moved again in 1987, to Pietermaritzburg in KwaZulu-Natal where her husband opened a shoe factory. These journeys opened many new vistas for her and reflected the personal journeys that she experienced as an activist.

In the early years after its establishment, the MYM visited almost every Muslim community in South Africa. Through lectures and social gatherings, it literally drew a symbolic map of Muslims living within the national boundaries of the country. Vryburg was a prominent landmark in this map. Sumayya's family supported the MYM financially, particularly in relation to the international visitors who were brought to the country. The apartheid government required a deposit to be paid for every such visitor, and the Kariem family supported that guarantee. Sumayya related playfully that for this reason Vryburg could not be ignored. But there was a more personal reason why Sumayya became deeply involved in the local MYM branch. Her brothers were sent to boarding school in Kimberley and Swaziland, while she and her sister matriculated in the Afrikaans-medium school in town.

Vryburg already had an active Muslim community, including a Muslim Women's Organization of eighteen young women. The Vryburg MYM branch brought more Islamic knowledge and activism into such activities. It embarked on a number of charity drives and Sumayya was actively involved in these. She learnt from the Christians how to organize

24 Interview with author on 21 June 2012, Pietermaritzburg.

cake sales on the pavement outside her family business as well as how to generate money and interest in the activity of their movement. Many of the Muslim women did not like the new Islamization that Sumayya promoted but they have since told her how appreciative they were of her role in turning them to Islam. Sumayya was not perturbed that they had mostly become part of the Tablighi Jamaat: a more traditional form of religious activism than the one pursued by Sumayya.

As Sumayya grew up, her father encouraged her to extend her charitable work within the Coloured and Black communities in the town. Going to the Coloured community of Blikkiesdorp was easy as she had gone to school there. She realized the needs of the township, but was struck by the deeply connected life between the Indian and Coloured communities. With more money in their pockets, young Indian boys and men prayed avidly in the mosques and argued about religion, but they also preyed on the vulnerability of the poorer girls and women in the township. Sumayya told me that their family business supported many of these unmarried single mothers and their offspring.

When she extended her interest to the African township, local police told her that they could not guarantee her safety. Undeterred, Sumayya went from house to house, and conducted a survey of the needs of the community. She was struck by the level of poverty and told her father that he would have to support the whole town. But she also remembers, four decades later, a blind woman who offered her tea in her humble but dignified home. She told Sumayya in impeccable Afrikaans how she made a fire and cooked her meagre meals by feeling her way through the house.

Sumayya did not hold a leadership position in the MYM branch, but she recalled the role that she was called upon to play at Christmas parties in her family business. All the staff were invited to a meal, which included prayers by the different congregations that constituted the workforce. Sumayya was called up to recite a Muslim prayer at the Christmas celebration. She remembers taking her place on the chair, reciting the opening prayer in the Qur'an for everyone, and wishing everyone a Merry Christmas.

In 1974, Sumayya moved with her family to Brits, where she wasted no time in getting some women together to recite a Sufi *dhikr* at her home. The next day, she was informed by the town's leader of the women's Tablighi Jamaat that this was not acceptable. She had never experienced a firm rejection like this before and indeed, this was the first time that she had experienced any form of inter-Islamic conflict. For the moment, she decided to take advantage of the proximity of activist groups meeting in Pretoria and Johannesburg and so, on a weekly basis, she and others joined members in the branches of the MYM in the Indian area of Laudium (near Pretoria). When she married in 1977, she also moved there permanently.

Her time in Pretoria was a period of intense learning, and also the time when she raised her three daughters and son. Some key events bring out some of the defining experiences as an activist. Sumayya lived in a block of flats, and one day joined her neighbour who had called women to a Tablighi Jamaat meeting. At one of her visits, she asked them if she could choose her own book: "you are reading from a man-written book, can I read from my book?" Sumayya found the Tablighi Jamaat to be too traditional and felt more at home with a women's reading circle (*ḥalqa*) set up by the MYM. This group met in the Jewel Street Mosque for about six months, until local religious leaders forced it to close. The women then moved the meetings to their homes, where they developed a vibrant reading culture. They also organized smaller public meetings in a local men's club, which they were permitted to use, away from the control of the mosques. From this study group, Sumayya became actively involved in broader social activities. In particular, she participated in various charity drives in townships and addressed the scourge of drug abuse among wealthy Indian youth.

When she moved to Pietermaritzburg in 1987, she continued her charitable work. She was concerned about her growing children and attempted to promote a more enriching religious education for them. She contacted the local mosque to establish an Islamic Montessori pre-school, and a *madrasa* to teach the basics of Islam. The mosque officials adopted her ideas, but did not want her as a 'woman' managing the school. She also embarked on a project to improve the general standards

of pedagogy in the city *madrasas*. Initially, she won the support of local religious leaders and a Durban-based educational institute to organize workshops for teachers. When one of her trainers joined a Sufi shaykh (guide), however, he insisted that all the women in his class should wear face-veils, and that he would only teach them from behind a curtain. He claimed that his spiritual guide instructed him to do so. Sumayya called his guide, and tried in vain to get him to change his mind and so the project eventually collapsed.

Political developments in Pietermaritzburg and the province of KwaZulu-Natal pushed Sumayya in a completely different direction. With the outbreak of violence among political factions in that province, she was called upon to organize support for families displaced from farms. She was contacted because of her charitable work within the MYM. For five years, she joined Christian and Hindu groups who worked with each other to provide food to a local school. This cooperation provided a measure of stability and a plate of hot food for pupils. From there, Sumayya continued with other charity drives with different religious groups. When asked whether this was a change from her days in Islamic charities, she admitted that working with these diverse groups was much easier; however she stressed that the MYM was open to the development of all people. The real obstacle came from her extended family who insisted that she must work for Muslims. She remembered, however, that her father told her: “if you can’t be useful to *insān* [human beings], you are of no use [...]” He also used to say that it does not matter if they are Christian, or Hindu or Muslim.

As a new day dawned on the political front in South Africa, Sumayya’s cooperation with inter-religious groups expanded and came to include cooperation with the Afrikaanse Vrouevereniging [Women’s Organization], the Roman Catholic Women’s Group, the Cancer Association and Lifeline. Suddenly, Sumayya felt, her “horizon was expanding.” In 1992, she joined a group that met regularly over tea. At the first meeting, Sumayya recalled, she shocked her Afrikaner hosts by her fluency in Afrikaans. She summed up her experience: “they would come to our homes, and realize oh ... it is all the same.”

At one of these meetings, Sumayya was inspired to return to practising the yoga that she had learnt in Vryburg. She had not told me that her father encouraged her to learn *Iyengar* yoga from a teacher who learnt it in Mauritius. In Pietermaritzburg, Sumayya converted her basement into a yoga studio and led women in her neighbourhood in yoga exercises. She and the women ignored the fact that a Mawlana had declared yoga *ḥarām* (forbidden) on his radio programme. She assured the author that she did not participate in any incantations, and saw yoga as good breathing exercises. Muslim women from diverse backgrounds and Islamic persuasions joined her every week.

At around the same time, Sumayya was exposed to Sufism and later, to Sufi teachers. She completed a degree in Islamic Studies with the University of South Africa, with a thesis on Soofie Saheb (d. 1911), a well-known Indian Sufi leader buried in Durban. As a result, she gained a greater appreciation of Sufi rituals in that city. Previously, she related, they had reminded her of a circus with all their flags, processions and noise. She hosted Sufi leaders in her home and some she appreciated. She then informed me that she now brings women together at her home for *dhikr*. In these meetings, she related, “one feels in touch with yourself and with Allah.” She then continued:

I sometimes do meditation for my girls [daughters]. Where we hold hands, and we do breathing. After 10 minutes of breathing and saying *lā ilāha illā Allāh* [there is no god but the God], I tell them visualize yourselves sitting in Medina and now you are right in *Rawḍa Mubāraka* [lit. blessed garden] and clear your thoughts. I leave them for a while to contemplate, and then I do a *dhikr* afterwards. I find that it helps.

She was asking her daughters and, later, other friends in her inner circle to imagine themselves sitting in the presence of the Prophet, at his tomb. When asked if this is something that she learnt from one of the Sufi teachers, she answered that she learnt it from a woman in Pietermaritzburg who came to her *dhikr*:

she took us on this trip [figuratively] ... and I found her very inspiring ... and then I tried it once or twice on myself and I found that it worked ... and now I do it with the ladies ... with the names of Allah and then I go in and help them.

When I met her, Sumayya had taken up the challenge to promote a reading culture through a local Islamic library. She raised funds with the active support of her daughters and son, and runs her many charitable projects from this base. What was new, however, was the success of the library in opening the world of literature to the women of the town. Women, she related, were avid readers and were not only interested in Islamic books that they accessed for completing University assignments. More passionately, they used the library to explore the world of novels.

Sumayya's journey in activism stood between the models of James and al-Ghazālī. One could represent her Islamic activism from the perspective of the obstacles put in her way, particularly starting in Brits and continuing in Pietermaritzburg. Those obstacles played an important part in her individual trajectory, but they would miss an equally large part of how she negotiated her life around them. Many a traditional scholar or male chauvinist stood in her way but she stood firm in her resolve and never let the confrontations shape her. The women who became members of the Tablighi Jamaat or the people who hijacked her educational programmes did not perturb her. She was sometimes almost naïve in her engagement, as she contributed in general to the Islamization of individuals and communities in the towns that she passed through in her life. In al-Ghazālī's model, Sumayya would have shown a greater degree of confrontation or inner struggle. James's model of conversions and enlightenment is more applicable to Sumayya. She did not share with me any specific moment of enlightenment or euphoria, but her life journey took shape against the background of a continuing and deepening activism among women. James is also helpful in appreciating her expanding activist horizon in the city of Pietermaritzburg, her engagement in literature through the library, and her return and incorporation of yoga breathing exercises and Sufi rituals.

### **Mandla Xala**<sup>25</sup>

Mandla Xala was born and raised in the Eastern Cape. Like other children around him, he was drawn to the political struggle against apartheid in primary school. Mandla was a precocious young school pupil who would recite poetry at anti-apartheid meetings. In 1996 at the age of sixteen, he decided to embrace Islam as a religion of his ancestors. He was quickly disillusioned with this vision of Islam, but re-confirmed his conversion in the 1990s when he joined the Muslim Youth Movement. Mandla joined that movement when it had transformed itself completely. From the 1980s, it had embarked on a sustained critique of the Islamist ideology promoted by Mawdoodi, Qutb and others, and embraced a critical approach to Islam and the apartheid state. Mandla's account shows how individuals balanced this Islamist history with a new critical spirit.

Mandla was very alert and conscious of his identity. He reminded me of Faqir, although he was more self-reflexive and aware of his place and his decisions, from the time he converted to Islam to his resignation from the MYM. James provides a model for his life. Mandla dealt with a number of self-discoveries that propelled him through life. Looking back, he saw a journey marked by destiny: "From the time I was a youngster, I fared well with books ... I believe that I deserved to be successful ... and I believed that other human beings had no business to frustrate [me]." This self-reflexive view spoke of a vision of unity that embraced a full life. However, this confidence seems barely to suppress what al-Ghazālī would call the heart's conflicts and confrontations. There were conflicts and people who attempted to frustrate Mandla's destiny.

Mandla attended rallies where he recited poetry, but he remembers his development of political consciousness, particularly black consciousness, through sports. As a young boy, he decided that he would not support Kaizer Chiefs, the leading soccer team in South Africa, because its goalkeeper was white. Similarly, he refused to support South African boxer Gerrie Coetzee who briefly held the world title in 1983. He did not mention the African-American boxer who was defeated by Coetzee, but held in high esteem John Tate and Mike Weaver. Mandla was passionate

25 Interviews with author on 26 February 2013, Stellenbosch.

enough about black consciousness ideas to earn the nickname Mugabe. Zimbabwe was the most recent country to have achieved freedom from colonial rule, and Mugabe was a strong supporter of Black Consciousness movements in South Africa.

It was Black consciousness that led Mandla to Islam. One of his friends lent him a book that changed his life. Mandla does not remember the author, but remembered both the title and its argument. It was called *Black People of South Africa and their imported Religions* and argued that Islam was a religion of Africa. Mandla was converted: "... [the book] captured my imagination immediately; I said no! That this is the faith! I wanted to become a Muslim and this is the religion of my ancestors." He decided to embrace Islam as a Black, African religion.

Mandla's mother was worried about his conversion. He was attending a Catholic school at the time and she feared that he would lose his scholarship. She was concerned about his future prospects without education. Also, his father had passed away a few years earlier, which put additional pressure on the family. However, Mandla was adamant, the way only a fifteen-year-old can be. When his mother recognized his determination, she supported him wholeheartedly.

I fasted in 1986 - she was the one who woke in the morning so that I could have ... it was a huge sacrifice ... it was winter, it was cold and she would be the one who made sure that I had something to eat.

Mandla soon struggled with his new tradition and community and he was shocked to learn that he was expected to take a new name, Ahmad. He was uncomfortable with the "new colonialism" that was replacing the old. His socialist inclinations also put him on a collision course with many Muslims around him who, he believed, "used their financial muscle to influence Islam to be pro-capitalism." With these conflicts, Mandla decided to reconsider his momentous decision to convert. However, he did not renounce Islam, although he did not call himself a Muslim for the next few years.



At the time, South African school campuses were in the midst of an intense anti-apartheid struggle. In common with many other people, Mandela longed to leave the country to join the struggle. But he held very little influence in the local Black consciousness organizations towards which he veered. Echoing his determination to convert to Islam, his strong will and independence in meetings and organizations put him on a collision course with those older and more experienced than him: "I was defiant; I was challenging leadership and they punished me by depriving [me] of bursaries and studying." Undeterred, the young Mugabe decided to head north. His journey took him through Botswana and into Zimbabwe where he registered as an exile, and was allowed to stay for two years. But then, without the support of any of the liberation movements, he was briefly imprisoned for staying longer. He eventually returned to South Africa, disillusioned with politics, particularly with the Black Consciousness parties with which he had aligned himself. He still remembers with sadness that Black Consciousness as a political trajectory was not very successful in the national elections.

Around 1993, Mandela borrowed money from his mother to visit the local office of the MYM in a last desperate attempt to find work or an opportunity to continue his studies. There he met Tahir Fuzile Sitoto, who was a leading member of the MYM. Sitoto took a personal interest in Mandela, and encouraged him to join the MYM and to continue with his studies. Mandela found the organization embarking on a programme of Africanization that was still dear to his heart. He easily merged his activist and Black Consciousness background into Islam, and in particular with MYM's mission to turn to Africa for inspiration. Mandela referred to this experience as a "second coming." It was a second chance to become a Muslim, and a second chance to embrace Black Consciousness.

Sitoto discouraged him from getting a job as a labourer for an Indian businessman, warning him that this would be the first step on a path of no return. He would have enough to eke out a living, while trapped in a cycle of living just below or above the breadline. In the next few years, Sitoto shared his wages with Mandela and also introduced him to members of the MYM who would support him financially to complete his studies. This

encouragement was crucial for Mandla, as he was determined to work for his family who had supported him until then. He could not stop talking about Sitoto as a “down to earth, humble, listening, very supportive human being.”

Mandla assumed various leadership positions in the MYM, first in the Eastern Cape and then as editor of the MYM’s newspaper (1996-1999) at a national level. As regional chair and later editor, Mandla used this opportunity to educate himself about Islam. He naturally started with the Qur’an, but found this to be challenging: “Reading the Qur’an was very difficult; it is not like the Bible, it is not a story, right?” But he was determined, and found some answers in the books that the MYM was reading at the time. They were diverse and often contradictory. They included reflections on the biography of the Prophet by the Sudanese Islamist, Zakaria Bashier, but also Fatima Mernissi who challenged Islamist readings of gender and politics in the history of Islam. Mandla singled out Amina Wadud who introduced him to the Qur’an from a feminist perspective. Mandla found that “these books helped me to understand the Quran and what came from where, and why?” The intellectual journey was fulfilling and exhilarating.

The religious yearning was always there, and came out spontaneously when I probed this dimension of his life:

... when I moved away from the Muslim community for the first time, there was this verse that followed me. It is surah 4, verse 75 – ‘why do you not fight for the cause of men, women and children who are oppressed ...’ that stayed with me ... that verse followed me throughout.

And he continues:

... and when I came back, Verse 135 urging us to speak the truth even if it be against yourself, if it be against you, even if it be against the poor or the rich ... Islam really reinforced the importance of humility, the importance of compassion

because a revolutionary without a sense of compassion, without a sense of mercy, a sense of love, is simply an anti-something activist.

Mandla recalls the chapter and verse number of the Qur'an, providing a sense that he had been debating and discussing them with others. I did not get this type of Qur'an citation from the other people whom I interviewed.

As editor of the newspaper of the MYM, Mandla promoted the Africanization of that organization. By this time, he had completed a journalism diploma with the support of Sitoto and Ahmad Said Moolla. He succeeded in changing the content of the articles in the newspaper to reflect on developments in Black communities, and to cover developments in Africa. He was less successful at an organizational level and when I interviewed him, he seemed weary of the stumbling blocks in his way. Some of these represented just part of his frustration in working within an organization but others were frustrations with what he felt was deep racism within the MYM. In the MYM, he felt, indigenous Africans were not treated with the same respect and dignity as Indian and Coloured members. In Mandla's view, the MYM was not fully committed to Africanization and it was this realization that led to his resignation in 2011.

This was a difficult decision for him, as he felt that he had failed to transform the MYM. However, he then justified this failure in terms of a greater vision of life and death: "Even though at times it pains. You wish things were different. Because you believe you were right you should have won." Here he was referring not only to his experience at the MYM, but also to his early experience in politics. In the face of these frustrations, he found solace in something that he had read in the biography of the Prophet by the Egyptian author Muhammad Haykal: thus, the Prophet Muhammad "was offered ten years to live before his death and ... and at his last moment ..." and here Haykal described it vividly, "... he says 'Better you O Lord High, better you O Lord.'" For Mandla, this was not a wish to return to God as the Prophet had apparently done, but a yearning

to understand things better: “so the best of people have paid a high price ... and I have learnt that, and I pray to God that God could help me make sense of things, make me understand.”

In spite of his frustrations, Mandla was deeply touched by his experiences with other members of the MYM. Apart from Sitoto, he particularly mentioned Shameemah Shaikh of Johannesburg who had championed justice for women in the Muslim community. Shaikh, he said, had died “before her time” when she succumbed to cancer in 1998. He included older members whose politics may not have been aligned with his. For example, Yusuf Mohamedy from Stanger was a quiet pillar of strength while Ahmad Said Moolla from Pietermaritzburg did not waver in his financial support from beginning to end. Mandla felt privileged to be part of a community of activists that inspired him from day to day and he believed that that was in answer to a prayer: “... along the way I have asked God to link me with good people.”

James and al-Ghazālī provide the language to interpret the life-trajectory of Mandla’s life, as they had done for Faqir and Sumayya. Following James, we recognize some key moments of discovery and revelation in the life of Mandla. Indeed, on the day of my interview with Mandla, he looked back at his life from the vantage point of a self that was fully composed and integrated. Al-Ghazālī provides some insights about the push and pull factors in a life challenged by the world of Islamic activism, Black consciousness and post-apartheid Africanization.

## **Conclusion**

The three journeys presented at length in this essay tell us a great deal about identity and authenticity among the MYM’s Muslim activists in South Africa. They show the diversity of backgrounds that the youth movements in the country brought together. Individuals from the city, town and township, from different genders, ethnic backgrounds and different temperaments, joined Islamist movements in South Africa. They all found, at some point in their lives, religion as a unifying identity. This is a unique feature in the MYM that is shared by local and global Islamic activist movements in their diversity.

If one were to represent these three activists at the height of their participation in the MYM, one would have the impression that Islamic activists had adopted the language of Islamic politics and social activism in their lives and projects. As Humphreys and others had noted, the language of Islam, and then later politics shaped their sense of self and community. However, following James and al-Ghazālī, I have shown that this shared language was part of a longer journey and part of an on-going struggle to make sense of self, other and the world. Faqir exhibited a greater sense of conviction in Islamic activism, but he fought many of the demons and angels that we saw in al-Ghazālī's model. Sumayya and Mandla were struggling too, but they had achieved a sense of composure that James projected for the accomplished saint. In these three life trajectories, there was evidence of both James and al-Ghazālī. There was a combination of a journey of fulfilment, achieved through struggles, confrontations and overcoming obstacles.

Within South Africa, their journeys tell us a great deal about men, women and Black people in the religious movements in South Africa. Faqir and Mandla as men took ownership, or were given positions, without asking for them. This was in stark contrast to Sumayya who radiated leadership in every part of her journey, but was hardly noticed on a national level. She only found full and final recognition in a multi-cultural and multi-religious city. Mandla's journey and struggle revealed his on-going struggle with race, not only within himself but within the organization. In spite of the unifying language of religion, the factors of race and gender mattered a great deal. The language of religion set apart Islamist movements and individuals, but these other factors marked the experiences of Islamic activists.

The construction of identity was clearly evident in these narratives and agency was central to their journeys. It is clear that each of them decided to adopt a path unique in their contexts. The conversion of Mandla was most clearly evident, but this was also true of Sumayya and Faqir. They chose to set themselves apart from their families, peers and friends and they often struggled to persuade others to join them in making a change. They were agents of change in every sense of the term.

Agency and identity were deeply rooted in the conception of the Other. Their commitment and devotion to religion was not driven by a deep theological challenge or a spiritual crisis. Being Muslim was chiefly shaped by a heightened sense of the Other as traditional (Faqir), misogynist (Sumayya) or not Black (Mandla). Faqir's story is clearest in his series of rejections of what others stood for, and Mandla constructed Islam in relation to racial and class identities. The Other was least dominant in Sumayya's journey. In these and other interviews, I searched in vain for theological conflicts or doubts. There was always conviction about Islam, supported by a confrontation with the Other.

The conflict with religious scholars was particularly evident with Faqir and Sumayya and may direct us to the religious and spiritual vision sought by Islamic activists. In Faqir's narrative, important religious scholars who informed his vision of Islam are identified although he remained vehement in his rejection of their position in society. Similarly, Sumayya was never allowed to forget the obstacles placed in her way by religious scholars. And yet, from Vryburg to Pietermaritzburg she seemed to pave the way for the promotion of Islamic practices in society. They both wanted more religion in society, but they were repelled by something represented by traditional religious leaders. They were unable or unwilling to specify what this was. They were invested in the vision of a vibrant, relevant and progressive Islam. In her experiences of Sufism, Sumayya had moved beyond activism. Mandla also seemed to draw on the emotional and spiritual resources of his readings. Faqir seems to represent the quintessential Islamic activist, aptly illustrated in al-Ghazālī's depiction of a heart torn by demons and angels.

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, by their nature, court conflicts and challenges. Al-Ghazālī's idea of competing forces (*junūd*) within the heart presents us with a model for thinking about such challenges and confrontations at a deeply personal level. He alerts us to the multiple desires, temptations,

attractions and aspirations in the life of each individual. His model alerts us to the conflicts both in doing good, and not doing wrong. With inner conflict a deeply endemic feature, the self takes shape around the vision of the Other, the perception of the world, and the objectives of activism. We cannot ignore the resolutions and fulfilment that some attain after a long journey. Both al-Ghazālī and James would like us to know that the attainment of virtue and saintliness is not impossible.