



EXPRESSING POST-SECULAR CITIZENSHIP

**A MADRASA, AN ETHIC AND
A COMPREHENSIVE DOCTRINE**

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Preface

Most people in the world would probably be completely unfamiliar with Muslims in South Africa.¹ Many South Africans may not be familiar with Muslims in their country. Why then, one may ask, has a book been written about a small group of young women who attend an Islamic education institution in that country? Notwithstanding the fact that each person in the world, no matter how small or wide her scope, influences society in some way, the rationale for writing about this group of young women their attendance of this institution infinitely broadens their scope. This book aims to explain how.

While the analysis in this book does not attempt to engage the global debate on Islam and terror directly, 9/11 has certainly impacted this project indirectly. When I commenced my Master's studies in February 2002

- 1 Muslims and Islam, initially, arrived in South Africa as a result of two separate although interwoven colonial trajectories. South African apartheid policies have also impacted on contemporary Muslim communities. Muslims first arrived in South Africa almost 350 years ago as political exiles and slaves in what is now the Western Cape and then, two-hundred years later, as indentured labourers and traders in what is now Kwa-Zulu Natal (Jhazbhay, 2000: 371; Chidester, Tobler & Wrathen 1997: 3–4). Ebr-Vally (2001: 273) argues that Muslims came to South Africa in 'three distinct waves of immigration'. These are still relevant today in the sense that they are used to make macro distinctions between Malay/Coloured and Indian Muslims (see Vahed 2000: 44). Over time the descendants moved to other parts of the country and became classified as part of a distinct 'race' during apartheid. The Population Registration Act of 1950 made provision for four 'races' in South Africa; Black, White, Coloured and Asiatic, which included Indians. Like all racial groups during apartheid, Indians were relegated to their own residential areas or townships because of the promulgation of the Group Areas Act in 1950 by the National Party government. This Group Areas Act governed the separate physical settlement of racial categories of South Africans brought into being by the Population Registration Act (Ebr-Vally 2001: 44–52).

at what is now the University of Johannesburg,² the images of September 11, 2001 were fresh in my mind. Indeed, those events were etched in the public discourse, as they continue to be. Thus, as I joined a research project entitled Globalisation and New Social Identities (GANSI), Islam and the people who adhere to that religion, Muslims, emerged as a viable unit of analysis to approach the broad research area.

A number of factors, however, mitigated conducting research amongst those directly linked to the events of 9/11, amongst them limited funding, the distance of South Africa to the United States of America and Arab countries and limited time for completing the study. In 'scaling down' the study, the issues related to how a particular Muslim identity is being constructed in contemporary South Africa emerged more centrally.

I embraced Islam in 1996 in Cape Town, Western Cape. In 1997 I commenced undergraduate studies at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, Eastern Cape. I also travelled quite frequently to Kimberley, Northern Cape and in 2002 I was living in Johannesburg, Gauteng. One of the facets of Muslim life in these various parts of South Africa that had caught my attention was women who wore the face veil in addition to covering the head and body. For example, in each of these places different proportions of women preferred to be veiled. These proportions appeared to have been changing and other Muslims' view on their conduct was not uniform in any of the places either.

During my time in Grahamstown the Muslim Students Association (MSA) at Rhodes University were frequently visited by groups from the *Tabligh Jamaat*³ which were travelling around. At the time I had very little knowledge of the movement and its scope, except that they would travel

- 2 Higher education in post-apartheid South Africa has undergone extensive transformation. The University of Johannesburg was founded as a merger of three existing institutions; Rand Afrikaans University (RAU), Witwatersrand Technikon as well as Vista University's East Rand and Soweto campuses in 2005 (Hall, Symes and Leucher 2004).
- 3 'Tablighi Jamaat is an internationally proselytising and preaching movement, dedicated to reaffirming the basic principles of Islam and to drawing back into the fold of Islam who may have strayed' (King 1997: 129).

for varying periods of time from one place to another to remind other Muslims of their faith and accompanying actions such as praying (*salah*).⁴ Some groups that visited Grahamstown had come from outside South Africa. In addition, it became apparent that women associated with the *Tabligh Jamā'at* generally wore the face veil.

For me, the *Tabligh Jamā'at* stood out as a new social identity with global connections that fit the aim of the GANSI project. Results from the study indicated that the movement has a global reach and, although not 'brand new', its identity was currently being constructed in contemporary Johannesburg.⁵ The movement, established by Muhammed Ilyas in the early twentieth century in Meerut, India, was established in South Africa by Bhai Padia in the 1960s and had taken substantial root in Johannesburg by the beginning of the twenty-first century.

A number of factors emerged as influential in the construction of the *Tabligh Jamā'at* identity in Johannesburg. Amongst these were institutions of Islamic education. Older respondents claimed that when they were growing up there were no local institutions of Islamic education. Individuals who wanted to pursue Islamic studies had to travel abroad. Since local institutions have been established, increasing numbers of individuals are able to attend and receive Islamic education. While attending the institutions and after completion the students and graduates are able to share their knowledge, which includes teachings associated with the *Tabligh Jamā'at*.

When I commenced my doctoral studies in 2007 as part of a research project focused on Citizenship and Social Capital, literature suggesting individuals attending institutions of Islamic education were moving away from national society seemed to challenge expressions of citizenship. I thus decided to investigate Islamic education in greater depth in order to understand the connection between Islamic education and expressions of citizenship.

During the investigation a broad issue emerged that would guide the study and that informs this book – religion in public life. While some

4 Practice of ritualistic prayer in Islam usually performed five times daily.

5 See McDonald (2005, 2006).

scholars in the twentieth century understood religion to be dissipating into obscurity, in the twenty-first century religion remains as relevant to understanding social life as ever.

Certainly changes can be observed in this regard, which reinforces the requirement to understand religion in the public sphere. Thus, while this book grapples with data gathered via participant observation at an institution which at one point had only five registered students, it is able to draw conclusions with respect to religion in public life.⁶ We are able to observe that individual lives as they slot in and out of social processes offer much for our understanding of contemporary social life when analysed in relation to existing theories. This book is thus not about a small group of young women only, but about how their story enables us to make sense of post-secular society.

- 6 Research was conducted at an Islamic education institution for young women in Johannesburg referred to as Madrasa Warda. The extended case method (Burawoy 1998) was employed as research methodology. Research methods included participant observation and in-depth interviews. Participant observation was carried out at the institution for six months. Participant observation incorporated the analysis of texts used in the lessons observed. This, together with follow-up in-depth interviews formed the basis for findings presented in this book.