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Ahmed Deedat:

Original Message -----

From: Zubair Usman

To: ipcisa@yebo.co.za

Sent: Monday, November 26, 2007 5:02 AM

Subject: Meesage

Dear Sir

I just gone through your website and came to know that Mr. Deedat has left this world. I cannot explain how sad I am since I think his speeches have changed my life for ever. I first heard his speech some two years ago on Peace TV and it inspired me so much that even though I was born Muslim I was not a practicing one. After one of his speech[es] where he said that we Muslim have just kept the holy Quran and did not bother to read it I made it a point not just to read it in Arabic but also to read the translation both in English and Urdu. I also started praying five times a day and made it a point to listen to every program that Peace.TV showed where he was speaker. May Almighty Allah give him a place in`paradise and forgive him since I am sure his speeches have touched and changed millions of people like me.

Regards

Zubair Usman

Karachi Pakistan

Ahmed Hoosen Deedat, president of the Durban-based Islamic Propagation Centre International (IPCI), died on 8 August 2005. He had been bed-ridden for almost a decade after being paralysed from a severe stroke in 1996. Deedat, who was born in the tiny village of Tadmashwar in Gujarat, went on to become one of the most combative exponents of religious polemics in South Africa and a figure of international renown in the Muslim world. Even in death, Ahmed Deedat continues to inspire and exasperate. The IPCI daily receives mail from far-off places like Mexico, Papua New Guinea, and Kazakhstan for his books and recordings. A cursory Google search in January 2008 threw up 329,000 websites containing the word 'Deedat.' In reconstructing his biography, this paper seeks to examine questions such as: What qualities were most influential in shaping his life? What beliefs dictated the choices he made? Was he consistent in acting according to these? How did his mission change over time? What impact did this have on his relationship with friends, family, and constituency? How did he negotiate transformations in the wider society and the people around him? Why did some find him offensive while others regarded him as a hero? Why did so many Muslims embrace a personality from the Muslim "periphery" rather than one from the "heartlands" of Islam? What is his importance / relevance in the post-9/11 period?

Early Years:

Ahmed Deedat was born on 1 July 1918 in Tadmashwar, Gujarat, India. His father Hoosen emigrated to South Africa shortly before Ahmed's birth and they reunited when Ahmed came to Natal in 1927. He never saw his mother Fatima again as she died in Surat in 1930. The widowed Hoosen Deedat married Hamida Parker and they had ten children, one of whom, Abdulla, would be Ahmed Deedat's nemesis. Though Deedat did not know a word of English when he arrived in Durban, his father enrolled him at the Higher Grade School. According to a contemporary, Yacoob Maither, he impressed teachers 'with his rapid mastery of English and quick mind' and gained admission to the prestigious Sastri College after completing his primary education. Unfortunately, Hoosen Deedat's precarious financial situation prevented him from furthering his education.¹

Deedat took up a series of odd jobs throughout Natal. His joining *O.N. Mahomed* at Adam's Mission near Amanzimtoti as a retail assistant in 1936 would prove life-changing. He told a reporter that students at *Adams College* often taunted him about Islam: 'They [students] would harass me and make life miserable. They were trained in dealing with Muslims. They asked difficult questions.'² He was unable to respond effectively, he said, because he, like many of his Muslim contemporaries, had only learnt the rituals of Islam. Deedat would later claim that his life was transformed when, while rummaging through old boxes at the store, he came across *Izhar-al-Haq* ('The Truth Revealed') by Rahmatullah Kayranwi which chronicled his 1854 debate with the Reverend C.C.P. Founder in Delhi. Deedat was inspired by Kayranwi's "victory" and began studying the *New Testament* seriously.

He felt that Christian missionaries had done 'great harm' to Muslims during the colonial era and that it was 'shameful' that most Muslims remained 'indifferent.'³ Deedat was also angered by what he regarded as 'anti-Muslim propaganda' in the White-dominated South African media.⁴ Throughout his life, Deedat referred to his encounters at Adams Mission as decisive in shaping his mission. It has been suggested that biography is an enterprise that seeks to create factual accounts from material that has an element of reinvention (fictional)⁵ and one wonders to what extent this legend grew with Deedat's mission.

Deedat returned to Durban in shortly before the Second World War broke out to take up a position with Simplex Furniture Factory. In 1940, he married Hawa Gangat of Northern Natal. They had two sons, Ebrahim and Yusuf, and a daughter, Rukayya. Deedat gave his first public lecture at the Avalon Theatre in Durban in 1942 on 'The Life of the Prophet'. He took a keen interest in the anti-imperialist movement in India and was a fervent supporter of Muhammed Ali Jinnah. In fact, he moved to Pakistan in 1949 and lived there for almost three years. Partly because he was homesick and partly because he became disillusioned with the turn of events, Deedat returned to South Africa in 1951 to resume his career as a furniture salesman. He settled in Verulam, a small town about thirty kilometres north of Durban.

The Islamic Propagation Centre (IPC)

Deedat found the Islamic environment in South Africa 'stifling,' according to G.H. Agjee, his nephew and contemporary. Most Imams, he said, 'were talking moral issues, the do's and don't's which didn't interest us.'⁶ Islam was a taken-for-granted aspect of the lives of most Muslims. This began to change from the late 1940s as younger Muslims drew inspiration from the ideas Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) and Sayyad Qutb (d. 1966). A forerunner of later movements was the Arabic Study Circle (ASC) which began operating in 1950 and constituted itself into a formal body in 1954 with Dr. Daud Mall as president. Deedat joined the Circle in 1954.⁷ From 1955 to 1957 many young Muslims, including Deedat, were influenced by the enigmatic Joseph Perdue. Deedat told *Indian Views* in 1957 that he had 'learnt more from Mr Perdu than I had learnt in the previous 38 years of my life'.⁸ Perdu disappeared when rumours surfaced that he was a Bahai,⁹ but Deedat's association with Perdu stuck. He would later be chastised for being susceptible to unorthodox influences. After Perdu's departure, Deedat attended the lectures of Jack Fairfax, a Christian convert to Islam who had arrived from England in 1957 to teach Muslims how to expound the Bible. When Fairfax also left South Africa in mysterious circumstances, Deedat volunteered to continue the classes because he felt that the 'best way to learn was to teach,' according to Agjee.

Over the next few years he became nationally renowned among Muslims as he delivered public lectures on comparative religion in Durban, Johannesburg, and Cape Town. Pamphlets advertising his lectures stressed that 'Christian scholars and Priests are particularly invited.' Deedat appealed to local Muslims, according to Zulekha Mayat of the Women's Cultural Group, because of his "special charisma.... The Mawlanas of the day spoke mainly in Urdu and Gujarati which did not appeal to younger Muslims. And they spent most of their time lashing out against women. Deedat was dynamic and had a way of drawing crowds. Remember too, that there was little else to do in those days.'¹⁰

Deedat and his colleagues G.H.E. Vanker, A.K. Salejee, and G.H. Agjee, all members of the ASC, established the Islamic Propagation Centre (IPC) on 17 March 1957. Vanker was elected president and Deedat secretary. The IPC's aims included promoting Islam through lectures and literature, establishing a mission to train missionaries; building schools and orphanages; and carrying out welfare work.¹¹ A tiny office was rented in Madressa Arcade where the IPC remained for the next three decades. From these humble beginnings, Deedat grew the IPC into an international brand.

Vanker was an important cog in the IPC until his death on 24 August 1987. At the IPC's second AGM on 7 September 1958, Deedat was elected president and Vanker secretary-general because committee members felt that he was better suited to procuring funds and Vanker to administration.¹² The IPC initiated activities such as weekly Bible classes, "convert classes" for African converts; tours of the mosque; distribution of English-language translation of the Qurans, while the lecture circuit, the heart of the IPC's programme, involved Vanker, Deedat and Agjee lecturing throughout Natal. Lectures were also held in Zulu in Alice Street where a large number of Africans passed-by daily, as well as outside the Ahmedia Mosque in Mayville.¹³ There were periodic debates as well.¹⁴ The IPC started a newsletter *The Criterion* in May 1961 but this was shortlived due to lack of journalistic expertise and funding.¹⁵ Extracts from the Quran were placed in local newspapers like the *Sunday Tribune*, *Daily News*, and the Zulu-language *Ilanga lase Natal* under the heading 'the Quran Speaks.' An Islamic calendar, containing Quranic quotes and *hadiths* (saying of the Prophet) for each day of the year, was published for about ten years from the mid-1960s. This was a major source of income. Funds were also raised through personal appeals to businessmen and appeals during the month of *Ramadan* (fasting). Deedat travelled throughout South Africa to personally collect funds.¹⁶

Deedat's message

The Christian has already reproduced the Bible in over a thousand languages and broadcast it to the four corners of the globe, terrifying the nations of the world to accept the 'BLOOD OF THE LAMB,' that Christ died for the sins of mankind, that he [Jesus] is the only saviour. All this is against the clear evidence of his own Holy Book. We must free him from his illusions, and there is no better way than to use his own evidence, his own logic, to refute his claims.¹⁷

- Ahmed Deedat

What made Deedat different from other Muslims was that he analysed the Bible rather than the traditional method of *dawah* (preaching) that involved expounding on the Quran to a non-Muslim audience. By occupying a Christian space, Deedat felt that he was better placed to undermine Christian belief than if he adopted the traditional method of arguing that the Quran stated that the Bible was false. David Westerlund, Professor of Religious Studies at Södertörn University College, Stockholm, summarised Deedat's theology of religion in his core works *Is the Bible God's Word?* (2000); *Al-Qur'an: The Miracle of Miracles* (1991); *What is His Name?* (1997); *Christ in Islam* (2000); and *Muhammad: The Natural Successor to Christ* (1990).¹⁸

According to Westerlund, Deedat focuses primarily on scriptural and doctrinal issues. His views on Jesus, Prophet Muhammad, and the *Qur'an* and Bible fall within the 'orthodox tradition.' He sees *shirk* (associating a partner with God) as the major problem with Christianity, manifested in the idea of trinity. Deedat remains wedded to the classical Islamic idea of the "People of the Book" as people who received divine revelation through prophets like Moses and Jesus but who subsequently distorted parts of the message and neglected other parts of it. Christians and Jews, his works argue, deviated to such an extent from the original scriptures that their salvation lay in reverting to Islam. *Is the Bible God's Word?* argues that

the Bible contains the words of God as well as statements of human beings due to the existence of several early manuscripts and translations. The Bible was 'edited' from the beginning and hence not authentic. Discrepancies meant that it could not be God's work.

This brief introduction to his work does not seek to examine their theological merits. Most Muslims would agree with Deedat even while opposing his methods, while most Christians would disagree with both Deedat's ideas and methods. The theological arguments of Deedat's Christian critics can be found at sites like 'Answering Islam' and the works of John Gilchrist. Karen Armstrong's recent study *The Bible. The Biography*, concludes that 'disparate influences helped to form these sacred texts [Hebrew Bible and New Testament].' The Bible was not seen as a system of 'rigid doctrines, unchangeable legal principles, as if it could be handed down unhistorically,... but as a living message, repeatedly perceived anew in its recitation as the great prophetic testimony to the one and only powerful and merciful God.'¹⁹ From the late nineteenth-century, however, scripture came to be read 'in a literal, no-nonsense manner.... There was a widespread hunger for certainty. People now expected something new from the Bible – something it had never pretended to offer before.' The 'fundamentalist emphasis on the literal,' Armstrong concludes, 'is a breach with tradition, which usually preferred some kind of figurative or innovative interpretation.'²⁰ Christian Bible critics who acknowledge these corruptions argue that it does not detract from its overall integrity.²¹

It was this mindset, a recent phenomenon in Christian history according to Armstrong, that Deedat challenged in his own unique style. He was able to draw on a wide body of Western Bible criticism. What he was saying was not new; what was different was how he interpreted the information and packaged it. Deedat's focus on Bible criticism introduced a new phase in the history of Christians and Muslims in South Africa. While Deedat was not a member of the ulama fraternity, the distribution of his printed and later audio-visual works allowed him to compete with them for religious authority.

The Cape

Deedat's tour of the Cape in 1961 fuelled a national controversy. His actions must be seen in the context of what he and many Muslims in the Cape perceived to be a Christian attack on Islam. The Anglican Church had been concerned about the conversion of former slaves to Islam and established a Muslim Mission Board (1911-1976) to reverse this. The Reverend Roseveare delivered a talk at St Michaels Observatory on 15 July 1946, in which he said that Muslims were anti-Christian, fatalistic, and lacked morals.²² Canon R.H. Birt's 1951 pamphlet *Win Our Moslems To Christ!* implored Anglican missions to aggressively convert Cape Malays.²³ Archbishop Joost de Blank appointed an Action Committee in 1959 to counter the Muslim "menace" by spreading propaganda to dispel the myth that 'Moslems were a very fine set of people.' *The Cross or the Crescent* (1959) by Reverend A.R. Hampson, former director of the Muslim Mission Board, contained statements such as 'Muhammad was a false prophet'; 'the Muslim religion denies Jesus Christ'; and 'It was the Moslems who attacked the Christian faith first.'²⁴ The *History of Hajee Abdoella* by Reverend Pypers of the Green Point alleged that Abdoella, a respected Muslim in the Cape, had converted to Christianity.

This perceived Anglican attack was taking place in an increasingly volatile political context. The National Party had come into power in 1948 and was busy implementing its policy of apartheid. Racial segregation was justified theologically through the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk--NGK). The NGK viewed Blacks as racially and intellectually inferior, a view theologically justified as early as 1857 when the NGK Synod divided its congregants along racial lines. After 1948, the NGK moved closer towards the NP, and in 1953 established a state theology justifying apartheid.²⁵ It was this twin Anglican / NGR challenge that Deedat felt he had to confront. He challenged the Anglican Church to a debate on 'Cross or the Crescent?' While the offer was not accepted, he lectured on topics

such as ‘What the Bible says about Muhammad’; ‘Christ in Islam’; and ‘Was Christ Crucified?’ before around 50,000 people during a tour of the Cape in 1961.

There was a huge outcry. The Anglican Church distributed thousands of pamphlets condemning Deedat who returned to Durban the day after his last lecture, leaving the Cape Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) to appease Anglican anger. The MJC criticised Deedat and dissociated itself from him. The Cape tour was organised by Saleh Mohammed of Claremont who arranged the venues, printed and circulated pamphlets, and placed adverts in local newspapers.²⁶ According to Mustaq Abdullah, Saleh’s nephew, Deedat’s popularity in the Cape was due to the fact that Christians ‘were stamping all over us ... the people had a lifeline in Deedat.’ The MJC shunned confrontation with Christians, he suggested, because they were ‘happy with their lot’ and felt ‘why should we start a fight?’ For poor Muslims, who worked from morning to night, whose children may have been ‘off-track,’ Deedat was a ‘ready-made solution’ who gave them confidence to withstand the Christian offensive. Deedat did not intend to convert people to Islam but to ‘set the record straight’ regarding Christian propaganda.²⁷ The Muslim Youth Movement, likewise, summed up the appeal of Deedat to younger Muslims:

We remember clearly when Mr. Ahmed Deedat addressed a huge crowd of over 3000 at the Durban City Hall some years ago. Three fundamental characteristics emerged from his dynamic lectures. First, he had an intense devotion to Allah and to the cause. Secondly, he possessed a restless soul, wanting a change – a change for the better in our Islamic society. This accounts for his missionary zeal. Thirdly, he displayed an unshakable will to get things done.²⁸

Muslim Critics

Muslim critics, though few in number, can be grouped into three categories. Some felt that his methods were contrary to Quranic injunctions on the proper methods of preaching. For example, his half-brother Abdullah Deedat, wrote in an editorial in *Al-Mujaddid*, that the Quran ‘breathes into Muslims a spirit of tolerance and understanding towards all human beings,’ citing the following verse ‘Reville not ye those whom they call upon besides God, lest they out of spite revile God in their ignorance (6:108).’ For Abdullah, this verse made it clear that Deedat should not criticise other religions as they might ‘shun the truth and even insult the truth.... If Mr Deedat and his colleagues are to entertain any hope of bringing about an understanding between Christians and Muslims, then they must **STOP THIS FARCE!**’²⁹ Adam Peerbahi also called on the Muslim body, the Natal Jamiatul Ulema to follow the lead of the Cape Muslim Judicial Council and condemn Deedat so that the ‘entire support of the Deedat-type lecturing would stop, and save Muslims of South Africa from a greater shame and possible bloodshed, which I foresee in the near future.’³⁰

Mohammed Makki, editor of *Muslim Digest*, criticised Deedat for confusing Muslims by presenting the Christian perspective. The crucifixion of Jesus is one such example. In ‘Was Christ Crucified?’ Deedat quoted the Bible, Quran and medical authorities to argue that Jesus did not die on the cross, but was overtaken by a deep breath-like swoon. He was on the Cross for a short period, fainted, went into a coma and did not die on the Cross.³¹ Most of the mainly-Muslim audience would cheer Deedat during such debates even though he contradicting Islamic teachings. Most Muslims believe that Jesus was not nailed to the Cross but miraculously Ascended to Heaven and will reappear on earth. For Makki, Deedat’s Islamic knowledge was acquired from ‘dubious’ sources because of his lack of grounding in Islamic theology. This made his views on Islam ‘most dangerous;’ he was no more than a ‘pretender to the ISLAMIC THRONE.’³²

Deedat was also criticised by conservative ulama such as Mawlana Sadick Desai of Port Elizabeth, editor of *Majilis*. Desai opposed the mosque tours as well as distribution of Qurans. For example, he described the ‘tourist calls’ (mosque visits) as ‘despicable because people

were entering in a state of *janabat* [impurity]. Musjids are not tourist attractions... Deedat is trifling with Imaan [faith],... his end shall be disaster.'³³ Desai also opposed the distribution of Qurans because they might be handled by non-Muslims in an unclean state.³⁴

As-Salaam: A Dream Unfulfilled

Deedat had been greatly impressed with Adams College and was determined to open an Islamic seminary. At the second AGM of the IPC in 1958, he argued that the future of Islam lay with the country's indigenous population and that missionaries had to be trained to spread the message of Islam and educate those who embraced Islam.³⁵ For three Fridays in succession in December 1958, Deedat carried out conversions at West Street Mosque. This impressed businessman Suleman Kadwa of Umzinto who offered seventy-five acres in Braemar, about ninety kilometres south of Durban to establish a seminary.³⁶ Deedat formed a Committee of local businessmen to oversee the project. An As-Salaam Trust was formed in December 1960.³⁷ The committee decided that a full-time person was required to monitor the project, so Deedat resigned from his position as a furniture salesman, and relocated to Braemar with his young family. The task was onerous as the land was undeveloped and there was no electricity, water, sewerage or proper roads. Within a few years he built a mosque, two cottages, dormitory for students, and reservoir for storing water.³⁸

The Seminary was not the success Deedat envisaged. The burden of collecting funds, maintaining the land, establishing educational programmes, and attending to its day-to-day proved too much. Deedat also had to travel to Durban several times a week. When Dr. Ahmed Sakr, the US-based member of the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, visited Durban as guest of the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) in 1973, he suggested that the MYM, which had been holding annual camps over Easter at As-Salaam for school children, take over the institution so that Deedat could return to the IPC. Deedat agreed, conceding that As-Salaam was 'breaking my back.'³⁹ The MYM's As-Salaam Educational Institute took over in January 1974. Deedat's endeavour was not totally futile as the Institute still exists and is currently involved programmes such as Adult Education and skills training, to both Muslims and non-Muslims in the area.

The 1970s

Deedat returned to Verulam and resumed his fulltime position with the IPC, whose program continued with renewed vigour. One popular activity was the tour of the Grey Street Mosque. By the early 1980's around 1500 people were visiting annually. Deedat saw this as an opportunity to 'educate' white Christians who saw Islam and Hindusim as simply 'Indian' religions.⁴⁰ The tour was included in the Durban Town Council's tourist brochure and was conducted by a trained guide. The IPC distributed thousands of books internationally.⁴¹ These did not contain the almost mandatory copyright restrictions; in fact, the public was encouraged to reproduce and distribute the literature without prior permission. The IPC also sold at nominal price audio-tapes covering Deedat's lectures, discussions, and debates. Thousands of English-translation Qurans were distributed to the USA, Sri Lanka, United Kingdom, and other countries at nominal cost.

Deedat also "advertised" Islam by placing giant signs that read 'Welcome to Islam!' and 'Read Al-Quran – The Last Testament!' which flashed in bright red and green lights, on several conspicuous buildings in the Durban city centre. This was especially provocative in the South African context where Christians were in the majority. Use of "Last Testament" was designed to arouse Christian curiosity given its allusion to the Old and New Testament. Councillor Arthur Morris considered them offensive to Christians, but the DTC ruled in May 1989 that the signs did not contravene by-laws and that all religious groups were free to advertise.⁴²

Deedat toured several African countries during the 1970s. He considered Africa an 'ideal' target for Islam, quoting H.G. Wells in *The shape of Things to Come* on one occasion: 'Africa

is a fair field for all religions but the religion which the African will accept is a religion which best suits his needs. And that religion, everyone who has a right to speak on the subject says, is Islam.’⁴³ In August 1975, he visited Zambia where he lectured in Lusaka, Ndola, Chipata, Livingstone and Mazabuka. While there, Deedat ordered 10,000 copies of President Kenneth Kaunda’s *Humanism*. He pronounced that the book’s message, that all humans were God’s creatures, was appropriate to South Africa, where apartheid divided its peoples. In Zambia, one newspaper profiled him with the headline ‘Meet Allah’s messenger.’⁴⁴ Deedat visited Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and Zambia in 1978. Lectures were popular and drew huge crowds.⁴⁵

Deedat, controversy, and lawsuits were synonymous. One example was high-profile case in 1976 when attorney John Gilchrist sued him for R1000 for defamation. Deedat and Gilchrist, founder of the ‘Jesus to the Muslims’ organisation in 1972, debated ‘Was Christ Crucified?’ in Benoni on 25 February 1975. There was drama towards the end when Deedat accused Gilchrist of distributing an anonymous booklet titled *The Prophet’s – What was God’s real message to them all?* under the false impression that it was a Muslim publication. He threatened to sue Gilchrist for ‘impersonating as a Muslim, false representation, deception and chicanery.’ Gilchrist sued for defamation when Deedat refused to apologise.⁴⁶ The matter went to court in October 1975. When judgement was given on 14 February 1977, magistrate P.J. Fourie considered Deedat an ‘aggressive’ witness whose evidence consisted of ‘untruths,’ and awarded judgement in favour of Gilchrist with costs.⁴⁷ Deedat disregarded advice to settle out of court. According to Mustaq Abdullah, he saw the court battle as an opportunity to make a theological point; rigid legal procedures, of course, did not allow this.⁴⁸

During January and February 1978, Deedat undertook another highly controversial tour of the Cape. *The Cape Herald’s* headline ‘Storm over visit by Muslim Scholar’ captured the controversy that the tour generated. There were angry responses from Muslims and Christians. At the Cape Town City Hall he angered Christians with his statement, ‘If all the people in the world were created by God in the likeness of Mr. Vorster [South African Prime Minister], it would have been a very ugly world indeed.’⁴⁹ MJC secretary, E. Jackot, told the *Cape Herald*: ‘We washed our hands off Mr. Deedat. We don’t agree with his policy. We preach tolerance and we have told him once before that we want nothing to do with him.’ Five Christian evangelists drove through Bryant Street attacking Islam with a loudspeaker. According to eyewitness Solly Levy, there would have been bloodshed had cool heads not intervened.⁵⁰ Deedat considered reports of the tour in *Muslim Digest* defamatory and sued Makki Publications for R10,000. The trial took place in March 1981. Deedat had no legal basis for suing and eventually settled with costs of R3,500 in August 1982. Justice Didcott advised him to be more prudent because ‘most people end up at the end of the defamation actions with their reputations in greater damage than it had ever been at the beginning.’⁵¹

There was drama in Durban after Deedat spoke on 19 February 1979 at the Durban City Hall on ‘The Quran or the Bible? Which is God’s Word?’ Anti-Muslim graffiti such as ‘Moslems, Dogs, Devil’ and ‘See Papers ... Iran Murderers’, was peppered on the walls of the City Hall and Post Office in black crayon. Ibrahim Bawa, secretary-general of the Islamic Council of South Africa (ICSA), issued a statement that the lectures did not ‘help to build sound human relationships ... Islam also does not teach us to debase or criticise other scriptures. Mr. Deedat is a very capable man but by drawing comparisons between the Christian and Islamic faiths he is provoking strong reactions.’⁵² An unrepentant Deedat told a reporter that Hindus and Muslims were ‘living in an ocean of Christianity, and Christians are constantly knocking at our doors seeking converts. We are like sitting targets. I realise that religion is a highly emotional issue but I give the lectures because it is necessary to educate people to counter Christianity.’ Deedat added, sarcastically, that in two decades of preaching he had never been assaulted because he ‘handled the subject delicately.’ The graffiti, as far as he was concerned, was a victory because it showed that the ‘Christian fanatics cannot find answers to the

questions I raise.... I know the Bible better than anybody. Authorities on the Bible are like putty in my hands.”⁵³

1980s: Going International

Ahmed Deedat’s form of engagement is particularly meaningful to Muslims who feel disempowered through colonialism and the seeming religio-cultural hegemony of “the West”. It is thus not unusual to find up to fifty video tapes of Deedat in a single Muslim home in Britain or Abu Dhabi. The compulsion appears to be “what we are losing daily in the world of economic and cultural power can be compensated for by our victories in religious slanging matches”

- Farid Esack

The IPC reached the height of its powers during the 1980s as a result of Deedat’s overseas tours, meetings with kings and prime ministers, circulation of books, videos and audiotapes in many languages and countries, and international debates on comparative religion. All of this attracted ‘petro-dollars’ which transformed the Islamic Propagation Centre into a transnational organisation, the Islamic Propagation Centre International (IPCI). Also revealing is what some regard as Deedat’s growing political conservatism as his support base increased in the Middle East.

The decade began with the Iranian Revolution. When the Shah was ousted in December 1979, Deedat expressed his delight because the Shah, he told a reporter, was oppressive and had stolen millions from Iranian coffers. The Iranian Revolution, he argued, showed that Islam was ‘dynamic, alive to the principle problem of the age – the ruthless domination of the weak by the very powerful.... May Allah give Ayatollah Rahullah Khomeini strength, guidance and forbearance to govern Iran in accordance with the teachings of Islam.’⁵⁴ Deedat was invited to Iran in 1982 to address the Third Anniversary celebrations of the Revolution. In 1984, he accepted an invitation from the ‘Call of Islam Society’ in Libya to lecture on the most effective methods of propagation to students from around fifty countries.⁵⁵ Deedat also raised the ire of Jews when he distributed 50,000 pamphlets in 1982 stating that Menahim Begin had been a terrorist and that the British government had offered a reward of \$48,000 for his capture just before he became premier.⁵⁶

The making of Deedat into a global figure was carefully cultivated. The Muslim Youth Movement organised several youth camps at As-Salaam in the early 1970s while Deedat was based there. Many members of the MYM came to have a high regard for him, which might seem anomalous given the age gap and difference in approach. According to Fuad Hendricks, then a member of the MYM, members were ‘fascinated with Deedat’s passion to share the faith, fascinated with his ideas, and fascinated with the way he presented them.’ As young Muslims who felt under siege because of Muslim subservience internationally and the ‘swaart gevaar’ and ‘very hostile’ interpretation of Christianity in South Africa, they were captivated by Deedat’s intellect in his area of specialty, comparative religion, by his ‘valour and heroic approach,’ and above all his piety. ‘Yes,’ adds Hendricks, ‘only those who were close to Deedat appreciated his deep spirituality.’ Young Muslims were looking for a ‘hero to confront what was perceived as the “enemy”. They could not do so in technology and science, where the West was far superior, but could do so at the level of faith.’ For Philip Lewis:

The reasons for the popularity ... are varied: the trauma colonialism wrought on Muslim peoples whose religious self-understandings as ‘best of all communities’ led them to suppose that Islam should prevail over all religious and ideological alternatives; the wounded pride of living in a post-colonial world within the continuing hegemony of western culture; the painful realisation that for many Muslims voluntary exile or political asylum in the West provides greater security and religious freedom than many Muslim-majority countries; the dislocation wrought by migration, exacerbated by racism and

Islamophobia;... In a world in which history seems to have gone all wrong ‘some dignity at least can be preserved by the claim to moral and religious superiority.’⁵⁷

It was the MYM that arranged for Deedat to address the annual congress of the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), founded in Riyadh 1972 to help Muslim youth ‘preserve their identity through education and training’ and ‘establish a relationship of dialogue, understanding and appreciation between Muslim organizations and the western societies.’⁵⁸ When Dr. Ahmad Totonji, the Secretary-General of WAMY, was approached for a ten-minute speaking slot for Deedat in 1976, his immediate reaction was, ‘What do we have to do with an Old Man?’ Deedat was fifty-nine at the time. WAMY relented and Deedat made the most of his brief opportunity. Speaking on ‘The challenges facing the Youth’ his ‘blunt approach took the delegates by storm,’ according to Ebrahim Jadwat. He was subsequently invited to appear on radio and television in Saudi Arabia. Fuad Hendricks had little doubt that Deedat would be a ‘hit.’ ‘Although Deedat was ‘a non-entity at that stage, he charmed delegates. The thing is that while most delegates were ideologues, Deedat was a salesman. He would take a hundred no’s before a yes came, but he persevered.’ It was WAMY who introduced Deedat to influential figures in the Middle East, but he had to first build an international reputation.

The Trinity

Three key events propelled Deedat to international prominence. The first was an attempt to engage the Pope in dialogue. On 1 June 1984 he wrote to Pope John Paul II for a meeting: ‘Whenever you visit a foreign land where Muslims abound, your desire to have dialogue with us is one of the themes in your message. To this end, we call on you to meet us in this dialogue ... at St Peter’s in Rome.’ The secretariat replied that the Pope was agreeable, but there was no further response to that or subsequent letters dated 17 September 1984, 29 November 1984, and 27 December 1984.⁵⁹ On 4 January 1985, Deedat sent a telegram that the failure to respond was ‘creating the sad impression that your wanting to have dialogue with Muslims was a big bluff.’⁶⁰ Deedat distributed 250,000 pamphlets worldwide in January 1985 headlined ‘His Holiness Plays Hide and Seek With Muslims.’ The Pope was labelled a ‘master psychologist [who] makes everybody happy. On every foreign soil he lands, he kisses the ground – he makes the SOOJOOD, the prostration (the climax in the Muslim prayer). This makes the Muslim very happy. Why? because the Pope is blessing his land.’

Deedat’s international profile increased as a result of debates with several high profile televangelists. This included the Reverend Jimmy Swaggart; Dr. Anis Shorosh, a Palestinian Christian, at the Royal Albert Hall in England in December 1985; and Dr. Floyd E. Clark, a theology professor at Johnson Bible College, at the Royal Albert Hall, England on 7 July 1985. Deedat’s pre-tour publicity for the debate with Dr. Clark boasted that the visit would be ‘an invasion in reverse. The British ruled over India, Egypt, Malaysia, etc. for over a hundred years. Now for the conquest of Britain for Islam. Not with bombs and guns, but with love, compassion and logic. Let us hope the Anglican bishops and Archbishops will prove more manly than the Pope.’⁶¹ In what many Muslims describe as the ‘greatest-debate ever,’ Deedat and Swaggart of the American Evangelist Movement, which had an annual budget of \$100 million, debated the ‘Authenticity of the Bible’ on 3 November 1986 at the University of Louisiana in the USA. Around 8000 people attended from as far afield as San Francisco, Dallas, and Chicago.⁶² More important, a recording of this tape became a best-seller throughout the Muslim world. Deedat publicly offered Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson \$10,000 each to debate on any topic relating to Christianity and Islam at Madison Square Garden, but they did not take up his challenge.⁶³

Deedat’s stocks rose in the Muslim world when the Committee of the King Faisal International Award gave him an award on 9 March 1986 for “Services to Islam”. Deedat is the only South African to have won this prestigious award which carried a gold medal and cash prize. As Deedat’s popularity increased, the IPCI opened stores in Abu Dhabi (1983),

UAE (1985), and Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (1986) where Deedat's debates and books were sold. Deedat published over twenty books on comparative religion. He had tremendous faith in the printed word and once told Pakistani journalist Abul Kalaam that 'no agency, no medium, no means of communication can penetrate the heartlands of Islam more deeply than the printed page. And no agency or medium can criticise so daringly as the printed page. And influence so irresistibly as the printed page.'⁶⁴ Deedat had a special message for Arabs. He said that their forefathers carried the vision and mission of Islam to all parts of the world. Present-day Arabs lacked 'the same grit and conviction of their ancestors' to carry their mission worldwide. Fortunately, they were blessed by God with wealth' and had to spend their 'petrodollar wealth to push back the frontiers of Western encroachment. The Islamic dawah should be financed to the hilt. This will make a difference to the many societies which are battling to make ends meet to print their booklets and to finance their *da'wah* efforts.'⁶⁵

The international status of the IPCI was complete with its relocation to ostentatious premises in Queen Street when the former Sayani Centre was purchased for the then massive sum of almost R5 million in March 1986. Ironically, Deedat's main opponent at the auction was South Coast property developer and businessman, Goolam Hoosen Kadwa, whose father had given the land at *As-Salaam* as a gift to Deedat!⁶⁶ Another R2 million was spent to add an extra floor and large glass face to the building, the latter reflecting the Grey Street mosque.⁶⁷ Deedat paid off the bank loan with funding from the Middle East. He attributed his success to the debate with Swaggart. He told a reporter that 'a man in Saudi Arabia saw the tape. At the time I still owed R3 million on the building. I received a phone call from the man, who asked what he could do to support Islam. He agreed to pay off the balance of the building. I didn't ask him but he also paid for a property over the road including the renovations.'⁶⁸ He was referring to the purchase of the Rajab Centre, which included the landmark Shiraz Cinema, for R3,75 million in April 1988. The building was renamed the *Ibrahim Aal-Ibrahim Centre* in honour of its Saudi benefactor.⁶⁹

In the three years between 1985 and 1988, the IPCI attracted almost R10 million in funding, with which four buildings were purchased. Saudi overseas funding can be traced to the oil boom, the 1979 Iranian Revolution, takeover of the main mosque in Makkah, and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. These events instigated the growth of Saudi charities, which was supplemented by funding from oil-rich Gulf states like the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait.⁷⁰ The Saudi state and private benefactors have spent around \$70 billion since 1979 on overseas aid, channelled through organisations and charities such as the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD), Muslim World League, Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), International Islamic Relief Organisation (IIRO), World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), Rabitat al-'alam al-Islami, and the Benevolence International Foundation (BIF). Wealthy private individuals have also contributed large sums of money. Saudi Arabia was financing, wholly or partially, around 200 'Islamic Centres and 1500 mosques worldwide in 2001.'⁷¹

Saudi patronage was not scrutinised until the September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York. Critics now see it as an insidious plot to spread terror networks and Wahhabi ideology globally. According to one website, Saudi funding of Western institutions 'aims at the total Islamisation of the West. Everything else the Saudis may do is mere window-dressing aimed at weakening the West and dulling its perceptions to the real danger of Islamist plans.'⁷² Malise Ruthven finds it ironical that 'oil, lifeblood of the global economy and symbol of the dependence of modern technical societies on un-elected Arab dynasties that helps fuel the transcendentalist theology promoting separation between Muslims and infidels. Saudi Arabia, bastion of Ibn Taymiyya's theology of separation, is one of the world's largest exporters that militate against mutual understanding.'⁷³ But as Zaman points out, 'there does not seem to be any direct correlation between Saudi patronage and the [Sunni] ulama's activism. We should be wary of any simplistic equation between Sunni militancy and Saudi

support. Religio-political activism ... springs from a variety of causes and to reduce it to any single or overarching cause is to misunderstand its depth.’⁷⁴

As the IPC attracted more funding and it became necessary to reorganise it into a private non-profit organisation for tax purposes. The original constitution called for an elected Trust Board, but there are no records of elections or annual general meetings. The new governing structure had Deedat as president; Vanker and Agjee became Joint-Secretaries; Yusuf Buckus was appointed Secretary-General, and Yusuf Ally treasurer. Yusuf Ally was a Durban jeweller and long-time friend of Deedat, while Buckus, a young lawyer, was identified as Deedat’s successor. After Buckus’ first public lecture in 1983, *Al-Qalam* commented that he was ‘like a veteran and seasoned professional, reminiscent of the Deedat of the fifties He is certainly destined to step into the kingsize boots of Mujahid-e-Islam, Ahmed Deedat.’⁷⁵ This was not to be as Buckus resigned in 1987 following disagreement with Deedat, ostensibly over staffing matters.⁷⁶

The Trust deed was duly registered by the Master of the Supreme Court (IPCI) in March 1985. In 1986, Deedat and Agjee nominated two other trustees, A.T Rasool of the Arabic Study Circle and Dr. G.M. Hoosen of the Islamic Medical Association of South Africa, increasing the number of trustees to seven. After the resignation of Buckus in 1987 and death of Vanker, the vacancies were filled by Yousuf Deedat, youngest son of Ahmed Deedat, and Dr. Naushad Hoosen, son of Yusuf Ally. This changed the dynamics. According to several informants, Yousuf Deedat exerted strong influence on his father, creating tension between Deedat and older members of the IPCI. Mustaq Abdullah believes that Yusuf ‘wanted to achieve a lot in a little time. He took the focus away from the IPCI’s core activities.... He got involved in side issues like Salman Rushdie which detracted from our main work.’⁷⁷ Tension would emerge between Deedat, Agjee and Yusuf Deedat, on the one hand, and Yusuf Ally and Naushad Hoosen, on the other, who opposed Deedat’s unilateral decision-making. The death of Vanker in 1987 and resignation of Rasool and Hoosen in 1991 led to a straight “shootout” between the Deedat’s and Ally’s which engaged the IPCI during the nineties. Part of the problem was that Deedat failed to distinguish between himself and the IPCI, continuing to see it as “his” organisation.

Influx of petro-dollars, as much as Deedat denied it, seemed to change his politics. He stood firmly behind Kuwait during the Gulf War. For example, he placed adverts in several Muslim publications strongly condemning the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq and called on Saddam Hussein to ‘withdraw if he wishes to avert a total devastation of Iraq. This act of Saddam has brought an awesome combination of power against him – power that will extirpate his country if unleashed.’⁷⁸ Abdullah Deedat labelled Deedat a ‘pro-Western mercenary’ who was motivated by ‘monetary considerations alone. He is obviously on the payroll of the Saudis and the Kuwaitis and knows that if he speaks out against Saudi Arabia and Kuwait his pipeline will be shut.’⁷⁹ To charges that he was a puppet of conservative Middle Eastern regimes, Deedat maintained he received funds from private philanthropists and not governments. However, given his support for the Iranian Revolution and Libya at the beginning of the decade, it is not surprising that many questioned his political u-turn.

International Impact:

We were not given the intellectual artillery to do battle against those who belonged to other faiths. One day I met someone who told me he had a video tape on Deedat versus Swaggart. Deewho? Swaggart I knew ... on TV thumping his Bible. So I watched the tape. And was I in for a nice (make that NICE) surprise. My knowledge was growing about the Bible. I watched several more of his tapes. Great! Here was a Muslim analysing the Bible and from my point of view putting to shame the Christian preachers.⁸⁰

- Pakistani journalist Abul Kalaam

Deedat's travels took him to many parts of the world, and where he did not go, his tapes travelled. In October 1987 he met General Zia al-Haq of Pakistan and lectured at thirty venues across Pakistan. In December 1987, he visited the Maldives where President Abdool Khayoom paid special tribute to his work at the opening address of the Organisation of Islamic Conference.⁸¹ In 1988, Deedat presented talks on television channels in Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar which he visited under the auspices of the World Muslim League. The United Arab Emirates television network visited South Africa to cover Deedat's work and make a documentary on him, testimony to his growing popularity in the Middle East. Deedat met the first Muslim to visit space, Prince Sultan Salman Abdul Aziz⁸², in January 1988. From 13-19 June 1988, Deedat toured the UK, lecturing at Cambridge University, Wembley Stadium, and London Mosque. From 22-29 June, there was a tour to Bombay where Deedat delivered six lectures. According to reports, he was introduced to enthusiastic audiences as 'Darling Dynamite,' 'Staunch Defender of Islam,' 'The Dashing Mujahid of God,' and 'A real living Omar Mukhtar.' In November 1988 and again in February 1989, Deedat, now referred to as 'Faisal Laureat', lectured in Jeddah under the auspices of the Muslim World League and The Forum of Social studies.⁸³

He met the President of Egypt and then President of the OAU, Hosni Mubarak, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, and Idi Amin, the "Butcher of Uganda", during a tour of the Middle East in October 1989. By this time the IPCI was handling an average of three hundred letters per day from countries as diverse as Rumania, Fiji, Yugoslavia, Nigeria, China, Bolivia, Siberia and Cyprus. Deedat also presented talks on several television channels in the Middle East, which he visited under the auspices of Rabitah al-Alam al-Islami (World Muslim League). The crew of a UAE television station visited South Africa to cover his work as Deedat's reputation grew. This followed his visit to that country in late 1987 to attend the tenth anniversary of the opening of Al-Ain University. His trip included visits to Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar. A highlight for Deedat was his July 1988 meeting with Prince Sultan Salman Abdul Aziz, the first Muslim to visit space.⁸⁴ In August 1988, Deedat was back in the UK as 12,000 attended his debate with Dr Anis Shorrosh on 'The Quran or the Bible - Which is God's Word?' at the Birmingham National Exhibition Centre. Six thousand people had packed the Royal Albert Hall for Deedat's first debate with Shorrosh in December 1985. The second one lasted over five hours. Deedat's visit to Sweden in October 1991 was his first tour of the region. He toured Malaysia and Indonesia in February and March 1992. In December 1994 Deedat met with the President of the United Arab Emirates, Shaykh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan at his guest house in *Rawdat Al Reef*, Abu Dhabi. Also in attendance were Shaykh bin Hamdan, chairman of the Protocol and Guest House Department and Kamis Butti Al Rumaiti, Director of the President's office.⁸⁵ He visited Canada in July 1994, the UK in 1995, and Australia in April 1996. It is not necessary to detail all of Deedat's tours. These examples underscore his broad international appeal.

Deedat and controversy went hand-in-hand. He was barred from entering France in November 1993 after being interrogated for three hours at the Charles De Gaulle Airport because French officials felt that his presence constituted a public threat. The IPC protested to the Consulate of France in Johannesburg that the incident had caused 'considerable anguish and embarrassment.' Liaison Officer Ebi Lockhat complained that 'as a man of peace,' Deedat 'remained apolitical and never advocated interference in the political affairs of other nations.' A demand for the French government to submit a formal apology and reimburse costs was ignored.⁸⁶ When Deedat visited Canada in July 1994, he was welcomed by over 700 supporters at Toronto's Pearson International Airport. As was his way, he stirred controversy when he said that Canadian Muslims were 'cowards ... timid sheep and goats, afraid to be identified...' because of their failure to wear traditional Middle Eastern garb, while the 'turbaned Sikhs look like lions.' He compared Americans to the Biblical towns of Sodom and Gomorrah, which, he said, were destroyed for their sexual deviancy. 'The way Americans behave, God will have to apologise to the people of Sodmo and Gomorrah.'⁸⁷

Deedat's visit to Australia in April 1996 where he addressed capacity crowds in Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane stroked the ire of Australians. On Good Friday he addressed an audience in Sydney on 'Easter, a Muslim Viewpoint – What Makes a Good Friday good.' *The Australian* labelled him a 'Bible-basher' while ABC News and Channel 9 gave prominent coverage to the simmering religious row. Sydney's Wesley Central Mission head, Dr. Gordon Moyes, was "scandalised" and wondered how Muslims would react if Christian activists targeted the beginning of Ramadan with a critical gathering or an evangelistic talkfest. Deedat's response: "What do they expect us to talk about during Easter, Mahatma Gandhi or Mohammed?" Australian immigration officer Ian Campbell threatened Deedat with deportation. He remained unflustered and said that he would continue his tour 'until we have got our Muslim point of view across on the death of Christ.'⁸⁸

Deedat had a tendency to present himself as a "saviour". The message that he conveyed over and over again was that Muslims were under siege from the West politically and threatened collectively by rampant missionary activity. For example, he told *Islamic World Review* that he was worried that about 'the future of the younger generation. Christian missionaries are active in almost every Muslim country.... If Muslims do not respond to the challenge, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and even Pakistan may see a large increase in Christian numbers in the near future.... Not many Muslim institutions take the Christian evangelical missions seriously.'⁸⁹ 'Pakistan has become killing fields for Christian missionaries. Leaving for Karachi Fri 4th Sept for 3 week shake up. Isha-Allah. Pray for success,' Deedat wrote in a telegram to Dr. Ahmad Totonji on 18 August 1987.

In 1994, he told a reporter of *Muslim World* that Christian missionaries were 'boasting' that they had converted 15 million Indonesians and five million Bangladeshis and planned 'to make Indonesia a Christian country by the turn of the century [2000].' More Muslims, he said, converted to Christianity since independence than in the previous century.⁹⁰ When a medical doctor in Peshawar requested Deedat's assistance to fight communists, he replied that it was becoming too much even for him (Deedat) to 'fight the communist for you, the Jew and the Christian.' Pakistani's themselves had to act. The reporter wanted to know whether Deedat would be visiting Pakistan more frequently in light of the problems that he had outlined: 'It looks like I will be forced to. I will come, Insha-Allah. I have to do that to force more and more people to think in the right direction. This is vital because the other forces are doing that.'⁹¹

The IPCI's media exposure was superb. There was widespread publicity and appeals in Middle Eastern newspapers, such as *Al-Sharg Al-Awsat Arabic Daily*, *Arab News English Daily*, and *Al-Muslimoon Arabic Daily*. Deedat also advertised in South African newspapers, *Time magazine*, and international newspapers like *USA Today*. His visits to the United Kingdom were covered in mainstream newspapers like the *Guardian* and *Independent*. Yousuf Deedat understood the power of advertising, as he told a meeting of trustees on 26 March 1990: 'People are giving us money for advertising in the *USA Today*, in the *Time magazine*, sixty eight thousand dollars a page. A man has given us a hundred thousand dollars to be spent in the *Time magazine*. That money of his, he wants to see you spend it in the *Time magazine*, and you show it to him, and he can give you a million dollars. First he wants to build confidence in you. He has lost confidence in the Muslim Ummah.'

Local Context: 'From Hinduism to Islam'

We deplore attempts by any group to degrade or criticise the religious beliefs and practices of any other community.... We urge Mr. Deedat to act responsibly with understanding of the fragile base of South African society.

- Islamic Council of South Africa.⁹²

Though the IPCI's gaze was outwards, its local activities continued. The 'Islamic Visions Programme' entailed opening auditoriums where Deedat's lectures and debates were broadcast. A *daee* (supervisor) was stationed to answer questions. The first was opened in 1987 in West Street. Shops at street level at the IPCI Centre were converted into a small auditorium in 1989. In 1991, the IPCI converted the Shiraz Cinema in Victoria Street into an auditorium with modern equipment for mass viewing. A fully fledged editing room ensured the highest standard of reproduction. Deedat concluded an arrangement in May 1989 to place an advert promoting the Quran during peak hour viewing on independent television station M-Net. N-Net subsequently decided that the advert might lead to criticism from other religious groups and cancelled it, compensating the IPCI for production costs.⁹³ Deedat's willingness to tread into uncharted waters led Iqbal Jassat of the Media Review Network to describe him as 'a pioneer who understood the strategic significance of communication skills. He expended enormous energies to develop and deploy such skills to promote and defend Islam.'⁹⁴

The publication of *From Hinduism to Islam* in 1986 was a defining moment in Deedat's relationships with South African Muslims. The video desecrated some Hindu gods and associated Hindu idols *saivalinga* and *yoni* with male and female reproductive organs.⁹⁵ Hindus were outraged. R.B. Master of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha opined that Deedat had done Islam a great disservice by 'ridiculing the Hindu mode of worship in obscene language unbecoming a person who professes to be a missionary of Islam.'⁹⁶ The Sabha's appeal to the IPC to withdraw the video was in vain, as were attempts to ban it. Deedat's response was to challenge Hindu leaders to a debate which he would record and distribute worldwide.⁹⁷

This threatened longstanding goodwill between Indian Hindus and Muslims. Many Muslims condemned Deedat. ICSA, for example, 'deplored attempts by any group to degrade or criticise the religious beliefs and practices of any other community.... We urge Mr Deedat to act responsibly with understanding of the fragile base of South African society.'⁹⁸ *Muslim Digest* devoted all 168 pages of its June 1987 issue to Deedat to 'stop him before it is too late.' Makki wrote that 'never before in the history of the Muslims of South Africa and Natal in particular, were relations between Hindus and Muslims so damaged.' Zulekha Mayat of the Women's Cultural Group regards the video as Deedat's 'greatest disservice' to Muslims. Her friends, and patients of her husband, a medical doctor, wanted to know what action Muslims were going to take. According to Zulekha Mayat, while some Muslims spoke out, many 'remained on the sidelines and did not do enough to silence him.'⁹⁹

Sentiment was turning against Deedat. The changing social, political, and economic context was crucial. In 1951 only 6 percent of Indians regarded English as their home language. Around 25 per cent of Muslims spoke Gujarati and the rest primarily Urdu. Economic mobility and residential segregation were the main features of Indian life after 1960.¹⁰⁰ Education played an important role in raising literacy levels. The number of Indians who regarded English as their home language increased to 93 percent in 1996. Politically too there were fundamental changes. Christians, Hindus and Muslims like Farouk Meer, Ebrahim Rassool, and Jerry Coovadia were active members of the United Democratic Front (1983). Haron also points to inter-faith cooperation during this period. The South African Chapter of the World Council of Religion and Peace was led by the Reverend Gerrie Lubbe and Farid Esack for most of the period from 1985 to 1993; many Christians joined Muslims in denouncing the NGK Synod's pronouncement in 1986 that Islam was a false religion; and many Muslims supported the *Kairos Document*, issued by a group of black South African theologians challenging the (in)action of churches against apartheid.¹⁰¹

Deedat remained in the public eye. As South Africa was moving towards non-racial democracy, there were reports of a stronger alliance between the IPCI and Inkatha, the mainly Zulu-supported party that was the main rival of the African National Congress (ANC). In

May 1993 a local paper quoted Yousuf Deedat as saying that the IPCI was helping Inkatha make contact with businessmen in the Middle East to raise at least R50 million for its election campaign. These businessmen, Yusuf Deedat claimed, opposed the socialist policies of the ANC.¹⁰² In September 1993 a delegation of King Fahd met with Inkatha leader Mangosutho Buthezi during a visit of South Africa.¹⁰³ Tensions were raised further when *Jane's Defence Weekly* correspondent Helmut Heitman told a local reporter that Saudi's could give the IFP military assistance in the event of civil war with a future ANC government in return for trade concessions and opportunities for proselytisation.¹⁰⁴ The 1994 calendar of *As-Salaam International* contained a photograph of Deedat and Buthezi, with the latter praying in Islamic fashion while another photograph had Deedat standing in front of an IFP flag with Buthezi sitting to his left.

Deedat created further controversy with his publication of *The Combat Kit* in June 1994. The kit, in Deedat's words, was to be used to 'to convert the Christian scud [The Holy Bible] into a Patriot Missile.' It was distributed free with a Bible in which Deedat added topics like 'Types of Incest in the Bible,' 'Israelites: Insatiable Whores,' and 'Rape' in the index. In an Open Letter, a group of forty pastors noted that 'in an effort to degrade and discredit the Bible you have resorted to the use of ridicule and vulgar language.... We who esteem the Holy Bible find it offensive. This undignified behaviour is unbecoming.'¹⁰⁵ 'Defenders of the Faith' called for an end to 'the nuisance of Ahmed Deedat unless he voluntarily banished himself to Saudi Arabia.' It called on Christians to boycott Muslim-owned businesses.¹⁰⁶ Yousuf Deedat was quoted as saying that wealthy Saudis would be financing a major offensive against Christianity and Judaism, which would include television adverts and free distribution of books and tapes. He reminded people that the new constitution gave South Africans 'freedom of expression,' including religious propaganda: 'It is a war, a religious war – a *jihad*, if you like.' Paddy Kearney of Diakonia 'regretted that the IPCI's only interest was attack rather than dialogue.' Martin Stenberg, the KwaZulu Natal Council of Jewry, said that religious conflict should be 'abhorred.... Ahmed Deedat is a very difficult man, and we in the Jewish community are concerned about his sentiments.'¹⁰⁷

In July 1995, Hindus were again angered when a video *Oh! You Hindus Awake* surfaced. Deedat denied having anything to do with it when he met Ram Maharaj, chairman of the United Hindu Front. Hindus were shocked when it subsequently emerged that he was behind the video. Pat Poovaligam commented that Deedat had succeeded in doing something that nobody else could – eradicate linguistic sectionalism among Hindus.¹⁰⁸ Instead of placating Hindus, the IPCI placed an advert in the local press calling on those who objected to the tape to debate with Deedat and warned that until the challenge was accepted, the IPCI would continue to issue the tape.¹⁰⁹ When the Indian Consulate refused Deedat's application for a visa in February 1996, he placed a full-page advertisement in *Post* accusing the Indian government of religious discrimination.¹¹⁰ To add fuel to the fire, when Louis Farrkhan, leader of the Black nationalist Muslim group in the USA, the Nation of Islam, visited Durban in February 1996, he described his visit as that of a 'son visiting his father.'¹¹¹

Muslims too condemned Deedat. ICSA damned the 'despicable conduct' of offending Hindus, and called on the IPCI to propagate Islam with 'dignity and grace,' and put its resources towards alleviating 'national priorities' like poverty, hunger, crime, and unemployment.¹¹² Twenty-nine Muslim organisations¹¹³ convened a public meeting on 11 December 1995 to discuss the 'Quranic and Prophetic Method of Propagating Islam.' Muslim and Hindu leaders shared the platform to show solidarity.¹¹⁴ Muslim speakers emphasised that Islam forbade the besmirching of other religions. Mawlana Makki of the Grey Street Mosque warned that 'as we are living in harmony in a non-Muslim country, I wouldn't like to see the problems of India and Pakistan imported here.'¹¹⁵ Mouhammed Iqbal Sayed, in his capacity as chairperson of the Organisation for Civic Rights, applied unsuccessfully to ban the video. Minister of Home Affairs, Mangosuthu Buthezi, rejected the application in May 1996 on the grounds that it was in accordance with the country's interim constitution.¹¹⁶

Old foe Mohammed Makki and journalist Alan Dunn made important observations. Makki wrote that ‘the Deedats do not represent the Muslim community. No mandate was ever given to them. The role was thrust upon Deedat by himself and the newspapers who have constantly granted him interviews and published them. This publicity has created in the minds of thousands of readers the false idea that Deedat speaks for the entire Muslim community.’¹¹⁷ Dunn, reporter for *Natal on Saturday*, felt that Deedat’s tactics were ‘a lure to combat, nothing less. At this time of nation building, we should be ... building on common ground, not highlighting separate camps and erecting barbed-wire barricades around them’. Dunn perceptively remarked that Deedat’s strategy was sinister: newspaper cuttings of irate Jews and Christians ‘articulating their fury at the IPCI would be ideal to unlock more Arab donations by creating the impression the South Africa’s Muslims were under threat.’¹¹⁸

From the late 1980s, Deedat while respected abroad, was increasingly ostracised from local Muslims. Zulekha Mayat, who had a long association with Deedat, recalled an incident when she and Deedat, separately, travelled to Dubai. While she had to go through lengthy customs procedures and look for a taxi, a limousine pulled up and whisked him away. No customs, no carrying baggage, no formalities. It was then that she realised that with funds flowing in from abroad, Deedat no longer needed his local supporters. ‘And when you don’t need people they don’t need you,’ she observed.¹¹⁹

“The Centre Falls Apart”

The 1990s marked a shift in the fortunes of the IPCI as trustees became embroiled in legal strife. Deedat’s troubles began when fellow-trustee Yusuf Ally started legal proceedings on 1 October 1991 to establish what had happened to donations totalling R360,000 from Saudi benefactors for the publication of Qurans. Ally alleged that the money was deposited in an illegally operated account in Jeddah and that Deedat was trying to sell a property (Minolta House) to finance the publication.¹²⁰ Deedat denied these accusations. Sixteen Saudis issued a joint statement supporting him: ‘We have always given you our funds to use as you see fit and not the IPCI. The decision on how to spend the money is left to you. We want your grace to expel these troublemakers and members that go against your wishes.... We have read that this enemy of Islam hired a non-Muslim lawyer to oppose you. What kind of Muslim is this man?’¹²¹

The Master of the Supreme Court (MSC), Lester Basson, decided on 29 October 1991 to probe the allegations.¹²² Ally successfully obtained a court interdict on 9 December 1991 to prevent the sale of Minolta House.¹²³ On 30 March 1992 Justice Howard ruled that Minolta House could not be sold or transferred without the sanction of two-thirds of trustees.¹²⁴ In June, Natal Attorney-General Mike Imber requested the Office for Serious Economic Offences (OSEO) to investigate Ally’s allegations that the IPCI held an illegal foreign account.¹²⁵ The Master also appointed auditing firm *Coopers Theron Du Toit* and attorney Andries Geyser to probe the allegations. Their report prompted him to summon Deedat and Agjee for questioning on 14 July.¹²⁶ On 10 July, Deedat and Agjee started legal proceedings in their individual capacities to prevent the Master from questioning them.¹²⁷ On 14 July, a day after the Master received notice of the court action, IPCI offices and Deedat’s home in Verulam were raided by OSEO. There were rumours, however, that OSEO was prevented from probing Deedat further because of pressure from the Department of Foreign Affairs which was seeking to forge economic ties with the Middle East.¹²⁸

The Supreme Court ruled in December 1992 that the Master could intervene in the affairs of the IPCI. Deedat challenged this on the grounds that non-Muslim trustees could not reasonably be expected to administer the propagation of Islam because they could not take part in essentially religious decisions and that their appointment would impact negatively on fundraising. Attorney-General Imber ruled the appointment lawful on 21 December, but the

IPCI obtained an order restraining them from carrying out the duties of trustees until the matter was resolved in court.¹²⁹

Deedat went on a propaganda offensive. He sent a two-page letter to the Embassies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates accusing Ally of conniving against him to take over the IPCI. He also published a pamphlet titled 'No Qurans! Why? Can Yusuf Ally and his son answer these Questions?' He appealed to Muslims to pray for 'for their change of heart this Ramadan, Insha Allah!' In August 1993, the Attorney-General announced that there was insufficient evidence to prosecute Deedat.¹³⁰

The matter between Deedat and the Master continued in Pietermaritzburg in August 1995. While the Master wanted to remove the trustees, auditors Coopers and Partners reported that since the Swaggart debate funding from Saudi Arabia formed the backbone of the IPCI's assets and that income would decline with Deedat's removal. Deedat, on the other hand, could easily attract existing foreign donors to a new organisation. The Master expressed concern whether trustees were 'fit and proper persons' to act in that capacity because of their differences, and evidence of 'dishonesty,' 'gross inefficiency,' and 'breach of fiduciary duties.'¹³¹

Before this matter could proceed further, shortly after returning from Australia and following a critical meeting of trustees, Deedat, then aged seventy-eight, suffered a massive stroke on 3 May 1996.¹³² One of the Bin-la-Din brothers flew to Durban and arranged for his transfer to the King Faisal Specialist Hospital in Saudi Arabia in a luxurious medical army G3 Saudia Medivax jet with a team of six doctors and nurses supplied by King Fahd's son Sultan Abdul Aziz. Yousuf, typically, told reporters that the Arabs regarded it as the 'mother of all honours to care for my father, who in their eyes is regarded as a soldier of Islam.'¹³³ The Deedats were welcomed in Riyadh by Saudi officials and the South African mission.¹³⁴ By the end of July, Deedat was able to communicate via a computer imported from the USA by Prince Sultan Bin Abdul Aziz.¹³⁵ Diplomats, lawyers, scholars, teachers, and students visited in large numbers.

South African president Mandela sent greetings of goodwill on 11 October 1996 through Dr. Samuel Motseunyawe, South Africa's first fully-fledged ambassador to Saudi Arabia. The ambassador told *Riyadh Daily* that Deedat 'was special as he is highly respected, not only in South Africa, but in the world, for his dedication and hard work in the preaching of Islam during the past 50 years.' Deedat presented him with a thumb-printed copy of his book *The Choice*.¹³⁶

The legal battle between the Master and Deedat came to an end in October 1996 when the Bloemfontein Appellate Division ruled in the Master's favour. IPCI trustees had to lodge a deposit with the Supreme Court for the 'due and faithful performance of their duties as trustees;' accountants BDO Spencer Stewart were tasked with implementing controls to ensure proper financial administration; and the IPCI was to pay R270,000 in legal costs. The Master failed to have the trustees removed from office.¹³⁷ Trustees Naushad Hoosen, Yusuf Ally, and Mahomed Khan brought an action in May 1997 to prevent Yousuf Deedat's wife Yasmin from acting as trustee on behalf of Deedat. Deedat's advocate, Leona Theron, argued that he continued to play an active role after signing over power of attorney to her and that the Bill of Rights forbade discrimination on grounds of disability. Judge Magied dismissed the application with costs.¹³⁸

The Supreme Court overturned the ruling in July 1999 on the grounds that the Trust Deed did not provide for an individual trustee (Deedat) to abdicate his functions in favour of a non-trustee (Yasmin). The importance of the personal attributes of trustees was underscored by the fact that co-founders appointed themselves trustees for life. The self-perpetuating nature of the trust enabled them, on the death or resignation of one of their members, to appoint

someone with similar cultural and spiritual values.¹³⁹ Declaration of the power-of-attorney as null and void led to an irate Yousuf Deedat resigning as trustee of the IPCI.

The Master immediately applied for Deedat's removal from the Trust due to his 'overwhelming physical incapacity'.¹⁴⁰ Justice Kenneth Mthiyane and other court officials visited Deedat at his Verulam home and reported at the end of August 1999 that his physical incapacity, while 'sad and peculiar,' made it difficult for him to perform the functions of a trustee as contemplated by the Act and that he should be removed. This brought to an end a trial that had cost R6 million and ended Deedat's control of the IPCI.

One of the first acts of the new Trust was to burn thousands of booklets, and DVDs that attacked other religions. This included *From Hinduism to Islam*. Ram Maharaj, president of the South African Hindu Dharma Sabha, remarked that this act 'contributed substantially towards creating harmony and understanding between Hindus and Muslims. We bear no ill will towards the Muslim community.'¹⁴¹ Deedat was bedridden at his north coast home for most of the next decade. He was in command of his mental faculties and held conversations by blinking his eyelids at an alphabet board to form words and construct sentences. All through this period missionaries continued to visit him in an attempt to convert him to Christianity.¹⁴² He died at his Verulam home on 8 August 2005.

Conclusions

What are we to make of Deedat, who left his job as a furniture salesman to enter the field of religious polemics? While his life, like any other, was full of contradictions and ambiguities, there was a central thread. From the very beginning he seems to have been driven by a duty to confront missionaries, whom he saw as an extension of colonialism. He once argued that the West was 'brainwashing our children in such a manner that they are feeling inferior. The missionary, who knocks on your door, is militant. No matter what smiling face he comes with, he knows in his heart that he is better than you, otherwise he wouldn't dare knock on your door to tell you that you are going to hell.... This means the giver is superior to the taker.'¹⁴³ Deedat was not loathe to enter "enemy territory", challenging leading Christian evangelicals and scholars on their interpretation of biblical and scriptural precepts and teachings. He was the master of the polemic, often shocking [mainly Muslim] audiences with the crassness of language and then seducing them with the power of his oratory, his knowledge of the Bible and his sheer commitment to the "cause".

His beginnings were humble. Before the petro-dollars he sold goats and sheep at As-Salaam, worked hard and lived a frugal life. The fact that he endured these conditions underscores his commitment. While his methods changed over time, as his stage got bigger and new forms of media became available, he would continue to pursue this with great vigour irrespective of whom he upset. While he had many opponents, millions of others came to regard him as the "hero of our time". Initially support for him in South Africa can be explained as a reaction to White / Christian hegemony. Deedat's "victories" in debates with white opponents were seen as a victory of black over white in apartheid South Africa. In Muslims majority countries, support for Deedat must be looked at in the context of continued Western economic and political domination. Many informants expressed the idea that he taught them to 'speak up for yourself and damn the consequences.' If Islam was under attack then it needed a defender. The stage in a sense was set for Ahmed Deedat. His years of self-study combined to his love of the podium, 'gift of the gab,' and fearlessness were part of his attraction to so many. Deedat's debates and lectures should not be divorced from their political-historical circumstances. Silencing the Church was considered essential to undermine both Christianity and the racist political order. If Deedat's intention was to restore the confidence of rank and file Muslims then, for a period, he succeeded. But in looking at Deedat's legacy we should not simply think of resistance in a rather narrow anti-apartheid context. He saw his mission as part of a larger resistance to Christianity as an extension of colonialism, and to ignore this is to miss an important part of the story

In terms of his organisational skills, many of the IPCI projects, failed because of personality, infrastructure, and human resources shortcomings. Without a proper succession system, the IPCI degenerated into a family empire with disputes around personalities. He failed to distinguish between himself and the IPCI. He was the organisation. Loss of support for the IPCI locally can be attributed to its failure to adapt as the social, historical and political context changed. As South Africa moved towards racial democracy and tolerance, and Muslims became more educated, many became embarrassed by Deedat's antics. Coupled with this was a mushrooming of competitor local organisations. It could be argued that the continuity in Deedat's mission was also his undoing. The IPCI constantly attacked the "weaknesses" of other faiths instead of articulating the positives of Islam. Little remains as lasting legacy of Deedat's contribution, aside from As-Salaam, which changed orientation after his departure, and the IPCI buildings, which have either been sold or are becoming derelict even as demand for his works remain strong.

How Deedat is interpreted depends to a large extent on one's own worldview. Increasingly in the post-9/11 world of a "Clash of Civilisations", with its concern about the source of anti-Western sentiments and interfaith forums in the West, the interpretation of Deedat is not only about religious beliefs but also about politics, as if the two could ever be separated. Many are concerned with Deedat's "resurgence" as his message is construed as sinister and dangerous. Ridgeon, for example, writes that his works are being 'recycled to a brand new British Muslim constituency [which] is exposed to his malicious new disinformations.... the wounded pride of living in a post-colonial world within the continuing hegemony of western culture, some dignity can at least be preserved by claiming moral and religious superiority.'¹⁴⁴ For Farid Esack, 'many Muslims feel that Deedat's multitude of ... videotapes have told us all that there is to be told about the other, and we are comfortable with that.... When questions surface about the ... importance of labels to a God whom we believe sees beyond labels and looks at the hearts of people, instead of pursuing these questions, we hasten back and seek refuge in "the known." We order another of those Deedat tapes.'¹⁴⁵ This brand of polemics is seen as a major deterrent in pursuit of inter-faith tolerance and dialogue, and acceptance of a variety of "truth claims". And yet for many, like Zubair Usman at the beginning of this paper, Deedat's message remains important because of its promise of certainty.

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⁹ The faith's was founded by Bahá'u'lláh, a Persian from Tehran who in the mid-nineteenth century claimed to be a new Messenger from God. See Shamil Jeppie, *Language, Identity, Modernity. The Arabic Study Circle of Durban* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2007), 63-76.

¹⁰ Interview, Mrs Z. Mayat, Women's Cultural Group, 6 November 2007.

¹¹ Constitution of the IPC adopted at its first AGM, 7 September 1959.

¹² interview, G.H. Agjee

¹³ Interview, G.H. Agjee.

¹⁴ Prominent early opponents included David Lukhele, a Seventh Day Adventist, on the question 'Is the Bible God's word?' at the Avalon Cinema on 13 March 1966; he debated 'Is Jesus God?' with A.W. Hamilton, Christian Minister of Kimberley, in November 1961 as well as with Cyril Simkins, Professor of Philosophy and New Testament Exegesis, Johnson Bible College, Tennessee, USA in August 1963 in Durban and Johannesburg.

¹⁵ *The Criterion* May 1961

¹⁶ Interview, G.H. Agjee.

¹⁷ <http://www.jamaat.net/stone/TheStone.html>

- ¹⁸ This section is based on Westerlund, David. 2003. "Ahmed Deedat's Theology of Religion: Apologetics Through Polemics", in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 33:3: 263-278. Deedat's "theology of religion" is covered on pages 268-270.
- ¹⁹ Kung, *Islam*, 534-35.
- ²⁰ Armstrong, *The Bible*, 222.
- ²¹ Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries*, 270.
- ²² Derek Alfred Pratt, "The Anglican Church's mission To The Mission in Cape Town," Master of Theology, Rhodes University, 1998, 199.
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- ²⁵ Haron, 'Christian-Muslim,' 426-427.
- ²⁶ Interview, Saleh Mohammed.
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- ³¹ According to the "Swoon Theory", 'Jesus was tried by the Roman Governor Pilate on the day of Preparation for the Passover at about noon (John 19: 14). Thereafter Jesus was taken to the Place of the Skull (Golgotha), carrying his own Cross. Here he was nailed in the late afternoon. The Jews did not want the body of Jesus to be left on the Cross after the Sunset because of the Jewish Sabbath -- a day of great solemnity (see John 19: 31). The fainted Jesus was thus lowered only after a few hours of his nailing. Furthermore the Roman soldiers did not break the legs of Jesus (John 19: 32). Jesus was laid down on a big stone in a new rock tomb which was in the nearby garden. A large stone was placed to cover the big entrance of that rock tomb. A disciple of Jesus named Nicodemus wrapped the nailed and fainted body of Jesus, according to the burial customs of the Jews with linen cloths containing a mixture of myrrh, aloes and spices, weighing nearly hundred pounds (see John 19: 39). Jesus awoke and walked his way out of the tomb and sat in the garden expecting his disciples to show. When Mary Magdalene came to the garden in the early morning she saw the stone had been removed from the tomb (see John 20:1). Awakened, Jesus spoke to Mary.... Since his enemies - the Jews, were not convinced that Jesus could have died on the Cross within such a short time, he withdrew from his disciples and lived the rest of his life in secret and died the natural death. The disciples, spread the word that they saw Jesus being "carried up into heaven" (Luke 24: 51) by angels. See http://www.irfi.org/articles/articles_501_550/was_jesus.htm.
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- ⁵⁸ See <http://www.wamy.co.uk/>
- ⁵⁹ *Leader*, 22 April 1985.
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