

Introduction to Religious Studies in South Asia: The Dhaka Initiative

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Abstract: This special issue of the *Bangladesh e-journal of Sociology* is 'special' in that it is comprised not of sociological research articles as such but of presentations made in seminars on religion in Bengal sponsored by a pioneering initiative in comparative academic study of religion, the Department of World Religions and Culture in the University of Dhaka. The new department has served as focal point and catalyst for intensified interest in religious phenomena in relationship to diverse aspects of culture, society and politics by scholars in other departments of the university, not least Sociology, History and Philosophy. This introductory essay addresses the striking disparity between the obvious prominence of religious aspects in human life, individual and collective, in South Asian countries and the virtual exclusion of comparative academic study of religion (i.e., world religions) from most South Asian universities. Several reasons are identified, but the main focus here is on the severe tension between secularist and communalist / fundamentalist mentalities and interests that are salient throughout the region. The emergence and distinctive character of the new Department of World Religions and Culture and its related Centre for Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue are here viewed as reflecting the relatively balanced manageable tension between secularist and Islamist advocates in a largely non-ideological and generally tolerant Muslim-majority Bangladeshi population.

Background

This issue of the *Bangladesh e-journal of Sociology* is special in a special way. It is not a collection of sociological papers as such, though there are several that either discuss sociological study of religion directly or address social aspects of topics in the history of religion in Bengal. Rather it is a sampling of essays emerging from a pioneering academic venture in Bangladesh, namely the University of Dhaka's Department of World Religions and Culture, the only such department in Bangladesh and almost unique in all of South Asia. At the outset, let me thank the university's Department of Sociology and its distinguished Professor A.K.M. Saaduddin for the crucial support they have been extending to this academic venture and also acknowledge the Bangladesh Sociological Society and its *Bangladesh e-journal of Sociology*, its Editor-in-Chief, Professor Nazrul Islam, and his editorial team for making their journal available to inform readers about this significant Bangladeshi initiative, now but one decade old. With such collaboration by scholars from within the university and beyond and thanks to the heroic dedication of department's founding chairman, Professor Kazi Nurul Islam, the University of Dhaka has the potential to produce the kind of inter-disciplinary research and to stimulate the kind of creative thinking

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and teaching about religion that could make it a leader in this crucial but neglected field throughout South Asia.

The articles that follow in this issue arise from a series of weekly seminars sponsored by that new Department of World Religions and Culture in which scholars from several disciplines plus experts from beyond the university participated along with the host department's own staff. The objective of those seminars and of this special issue of the *Bangladesh e-journal of Sociology* is to create momentum for study and research on religion in Bangladesh and throughout the South Asia region. This can best be done by engaging scholars in appropriate disciplines, including sociology, to apply those disciplines plus their own insights and experience to study and research on aspects of religion, individual and social. Those introductory seminars, like the essays herein, concentrated primarily on religion in the Bengal region for two basic reasons. One is the ready access scholars in the Bengal have to relevant sources, historical and contemporary, and their capacity to utilize them effectively thanks to their knowledge of relevant languages and the ability to conduct field research relatively close to home. The other is the potential contribution such study and research could make to resolving religion-related problems and stimulating more constructive and creative understanding of religion so as to enhance the quality of human life here and now in Bangladesh and in adjacent West Bengal. A secondary benefit of more and better scholarship on religion and religion-related issues in the Bengal region, if done by Bangladeshi scholars, is that they could begin to overcome ignorance and misconceptions globally about religion in Bangladesh due to the glaring lack of research in that field till now by scholars, foreign and local.

For various reasons, some quite obvious, some not so, there has been across South Asia an extreme reluctance of scholars and universities in the area to address religious phenomena directly or the religious aspects of psychological, cultural, social and political life in any depth. So, before introducing the essays that constitute this special issue of the *Bangladesh e-journal of Sociology* I would like to address what seems to me a troubling anomaly, namely the striking disparity between the prominence of religious factors in personal and collective life of so much of the population of South Asian countries and the extreme rarity of study and research explicitly on religion in the universities of those same countries. This anomalous disparity has recently become a subject of concern to a number of scholars within South Asia as well as to some elsewhere who focus their own scholarship on religion in South Asia.² The better part of this introductory essay therefore deals with this issue with special reference to Bangladesh and the University of Dhaka. It draws heavily from my presentation made to the 20th Quinquennial Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, held at the University of Toronto in August 2010.

² The state of religious studies in South Asia has been addressed in several recent professional gatherings: Rethinking Religion in India Conferences I & II (New Delhi, January 2008, January 2009); Workshop on Academic Study of Religion in India (Visva-Bharati, February 2008); American Academy of Religion Annual Meetings (2008, 2009, 2010); Global Congress on World Religions after September 11-An Asian Perspective (Jamia Millia Islamia, January 2009); Conference on Interface Between East and West: Multiculturalism and Identity (Jadavpur, June 2009); Consultation on Prospects for Dialogue and Religious Studies in South Asian Universities (Dhaka, March 2010); 20th Quinquennial Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (Toronto, August 2010).

The disparity between the prominence of religion in South Asian life and its absence from university studies

There is a striking disparity between the richness of human phenomena in the South Asia region that may be deemed religious and the paucity of departments, centers or even programs for academic (as distinguished from confessional) study of religion in South Asian universities.³ There are, of course Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Sikh and Christian institutions where confessional (i.e., from the perspective of a particular faith commitment) study and practice of a favored religious way of life is fostered. There is also considerable good quality study and research on particular religious texts, movements, institutions and systems of thought conducted in departments and programs of history, philosophy, the social sciences in some leading South Asian universities, especially in India.⁴ But in such discipline-specific contexts the distinctively religious aspects of subjects of study or research are at risk of being marginalized theoretically or treated dismissively. Even when commendable treatment on religion is done in such discipline-specific contexts, the basic question still presents itself with force: why is there so very little academic study of religion as such on a comparative / pluralist basis, when other disciplines developed in the West have been successfully transplanted in South Asian academic soil?

Partial answers to the recurring question: Why?

Western origin

Thus far, numerous factors have been proposed as contributing to the disparity. Among these, one possible factor is that academic study of religion is not pertinent to South Asia because it first crystallized as a distinct field of scholarship in Europe in relation to particular late nineteenth-century European religio-cultural and political circumstances. (Sharpe, 1975) But the mere fact of European origin need not prevent a type of scholarly or intellectual endeavor from transplanting itself and flourishing in South Asia or elsewhere as have English language, law and political institutions, ideologies, scientific theories and diverse academic disciplines. Why not academic study of religion? Obviously there is no dominant Christian theological-institutional foil against which academic religious studies might have emerged and

³ The main university loci for academic study of religion in South Asia that I am aware of are: Visva-Bharati's Department of Philosophy and Religion (Santiniketan, West Bengal); Punjabi University's Guru Gobind Singh Department of Religious Studies (Patiala); Banaras Hindu University's Department of Philosophy and Religion (since 1990, when Philosophy was merged with Indian Philosophy and Religion); University of Madras's cluster of small Departments of Christian Studies, Jainology, Saiva Siddhantaand Vaisnavism; and a Centre for Islamic Studies (Chennai); Jamia Millia Islamia's Centre for the Study of Comparative Religions and Civilizations (New Delhi); Jadavpur University's brand new Centre for Religion and Society in its Department of Sociology (Kolkata); Department of Comparative Religion and Social Harmony in Eastern University of Sri Lanka; Department of World Religions and Culture, University of Dhaka.

⁴ The South Asian section of Alles, 2008 by Rowena Robinson indicates that while a great deal of research publication on religion in India has been done by scholars based in or hailing from South Asia, almost all is done within such disciplines as history, anthropology, sociology and political science, virtually none by scholars of religion as such.

defined itself in India, Bangladesh or elsewhere in South Asia as was the case in nineteenth-century Europe. But, if one thinks in terms of the more generalized, flexible and critical conceptions of 'religion' or 'religious' and other categories as used in contemporary religious studies,⁵ it should not be difficult to identify powerful Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and Sikh religious establishments in different parts of South Asia that are analogous to the Christian religious establishment in Europe. These might well have been, and in some cases demonstrably are, in tension with pluralistic non-confessional study and research on religion, i.e., with academic study of religion. The precise forms of such non-confessional religious study as might have emerged, or may be emerging or may yet emerge, in South Asia need not be clones of their Western analogue (which indeed itself continues to transform). We should expect that to the extent that academic study of religion does take root in South Asia it will not only distinguish itself from any received Western tradition but also develop varying forms reflecting varying systems of religio-cultural and political dominance within different parts and populations of South Asia. But where are they?

Novelty and attendant lack of educational resources

Another possible explanation for the paucity of religious studies in South Asian universities is that it is too novel a way of studying religion to have become well enough known in South Asia to create a demand for it.⁶ Accordingly, there is scarcity of suitable textbooks and other educational resources, to say nothing of trained scholars, for teaching the subject in the region. That there are extreme shortages of suitable instructional materials and teachers for academic study of religion in South Asia is painfully obvious and such shortages pose huge obstacles, especially for those whose English is weak or non-existent. But novelty has not prevented other types of study and research from being espoused rapidly by South Asian academics and related educational resources developed; why then not academic study of religion?

Disparity between Western and South Asian cultural mentalities and languages

Compounding the difficulty of extending academic religious study to South Asia is the Euro-American cultural particularity of so much of its scholarly literature and the mentality animating it.⁷ The fact that the vast bulk of scholarly publications in the field so far are in English or European languages obviously presents a major challenge, especially for students and teachers beyond the most elite universities. (O'Connell, 2009b) To the extent that categories and sentiments integral to Western-originated religious

⁵ To anachronistically and anomalously define 'religion' as a particular type of nineteenth century Protestant denomination would be arbitrary and unhelpful, though there are those who persist in doing so.

⁶ Even in the United States, for instance, it was only from the 1960s, following a Supreme Court decision that pluralistic or comparative study of religion in public schools would not constitute 'establishment' of a religion, that the burgeoning of religious studies departments in government-supported schools took place.

⁷ Elsewhere I have argued that within the several major religio-cultural traditions of India [and all the more so for South Asia as a whole], there is a considerable wealth of conceptual and symbolic resources that could be tapped to develop variants of academic study of religion more authentically congenial to the peoples of South Asian region. Tapping into these resources could also render more cosmopolitan (i.e., more sensitive to the diversity of human religious phenomena) academic study of religion at the global level, as to some extent is being done but not sufficiently as yet. (O'Connell, 2008)

studies may be alien to or dissonant with South Asian cultural mentalities, the challenge of reading or translating becomes daunting and the results harder to assimilate. Likewise, the absence of fundamental categories, symbols and sensibilities integral to South Asians' conceptions of religion and culture can render even an otherwise well-translated Western religious studies text disappointing for what it fails to convey. This problem of cultural disparity may be growing less severe as scholarship on religion become more sensitive to non-Western cultures as more non-Western scholars enter the field, but there is still a long way to go.

Emergent South Asian approaches to comparative religious studies?

One might claim, however, that there has already emerged from India at least one ostensibly non-confessional approach to comparative academic study of religion. I am referring to the work of the late Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and others who from the perspective of Indian philosophy address a number of issues integral to comparative religious thought: ontology, language, symbolism, ethics, religious consciousness and experience etc. Their work is, I think, deserving of serious consideration as an alternative approach (or at least a significant contribution toward such an approach) to the reflective or philosophical dimension of religious studies. This approach may be open to criticism, however, for alleged Neo-Vedanta confessional bias and the arguably uncritical assumptions that historical particularities and dogmatic claims to religious authority indicate an inferior level of religious experience and philosophic insight when compared with Upanishadic monism or absolutism. Whatever its merits and limitations, this Indian philosophic approach to comparative study of religious thought seems not (or not yet) to have established itself as an alternative pattern for academic study of religion even within India.

It may also be asked if in Bangladesh from within the Department of World Religions and Culture, which began a decade ago and has since added a Centre for Interfaith and Inter-cultural Dialogue, there may be emerging a distinctively Bangladeshi or more broadly South Asian approach to academic study of religion, an approach that attempts to balance critical research with engaged dialogue. To this question I return later in this essay. We may also note here that 2010 has seen the launching of a Centre for Study of Society and Religion within the Department of Sociology in Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India in conjunction with the Swedish-sponsored International Forum for the Study of Religion and Society (IFSSR). This Centre and the IFSSR, like the Dhaka University's Department and Centre, aspires to combine critical academic work with advocacy of religion for peace and harmony.⁸ Both the Dhaka and the Jadavpur initiatives involve some foreign collaboration, it may be noted: Dhaka in a minor way (and only after it was already in operation) by the seasonal volunteered services of a retired scholar from the

⁸ The title of the most recent [11-13 December 2010] Jadavpur conference: Religious Coexistence and Tolerance: Challenging Borders in a Global Context. "It aims at bringing together scholars from various parts of the world to discuss the issue of how to promote religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence in a global context. Imagined and real borders challenge processes of cooperation and mutual understanding among various religious communities leading to conflicts, terror and anarchy." <http://www.ifssr.net/Conferences> (accessed 6 November 2010).

University of Toronto, Canada; Jadavpur in a major way through institutional collaboration with the University of Gothenburg, Sweden at its inception.

Precedent of colonial British educational policy

One of the most basic historical reasons for delayed development of religious studies in South Asian universities is British colonial educational policy. The pattern-setting public universities and curricula established in 1857 simply did not include religious studies. This conformed to the basic British policy of keeping 'hands off' sensitive religio-cultural matters and in any event the premier universities were established before the new 'comparative religion' or 'science of religion' was developed in Europe. A precedent was set, however, and, like so many other precedents set in colonial British India (which embraced present-day Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and smaller South Asian states), has been followed long after independence in 1947. But this answer avoids the nagging question: why with the dawning of independence in 1947 and the opportunity to express long-suppressed cultural aspirations should the exclusion of religious study from academia be so rigidly maintained in South Asian countries in which religion was and still is so salient an aspect of life?

Another answer to the 'why' question: tensions between religio-political communalists / fundamentalists and secularists in South Asia

In the remainder of these remarks I'll address one more major factor, though not necessarily *the* major factor, stunting the development of academic study of religion in universities in South Asia even after independence. That factor is persistent tension, not infrequently expressed as hostile polarization and violence, between politically mobilized religio-cultural communalist interests on the one hand and politically mobilized elite secularist interests on the other.

India. In India, right from independence in 1947, the secularist elite, relatively small in number but strongly committed and influentially positioned inside and outside the Congress party, the Government of India and higher education, systematically discouraged expressions of interest in religion in the public arena, including public education. In more recent decades, a powerful religio-political Hindu communal resurgence has intensified secularist concern lest initiatives for religion in education provide opportunities for Hindu communalism.⁹ For their part, the advocates of *Hindutva* (Hinduness) or Hindu *jagaran* (awakening) have exhibited hostility toward rather than commitment to even-handed treatment of non-Hindus or to empathetic study of their religious traditions. Indian Muslims for most of the period since

⁹The recent proposal of Chief Minister Modi of Gujarat (widely held responsible for abetting massacres of Muslims in Gujarat) to open a Centre for Religious Studies in M.S. University in Ahmedabad (Express News Service Posted online: Saturday, Jan 16, 2010 at 0150 hrs) is likely to raise such suspicions not only by Indian secularists but by anyone genuinely supportive of academic study of religion.

independence have tended to be defensive and inward-looking. With the exception of a minority of secular intellectuals, they have remained quiet while more conservative *ulema* of the Deoband school or the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami would speak for them, thus not fostering a milieu conducive to comparative academic study of religion.

Pakistan. The founding father of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, himself a decidedly secular individual, died a year after 1947 independence and with him died his ideal of Pakistan as a tolerant, pluralist, constitutionally secular Muslim-majority state. While the more secular elites have so far resisted turning Pakistan into a contemporary instance of a shariah-bound Islamic state, they have not been able to prevent more traditionalist and fundamentalist Muslims from exerting more and more influence over state and society. With virtually all Hindus and Sikhs having fled from West Pakistan in 1947 and the few remaining Christians there ever at risk, with unstable civilian governments alternating with unpopular military regimes, with Ahmadiyya Muslims being massacred by fundamentalist Muslims, (West) Pakistan clearly has not provided an environment favorable to comparative academic study of religion.¹⁰

In East Pakistan, however, the balance between Islamists and secularists has been more even and, apart from the extremely bitter 1971 struggle for Bangladeshi independence, the tensions between them generally have been less virulent than in (West) Pakistan. Most Hindus in what became East Pakistan initially chose to stay there in 1947 and Hindus, reinforced by small but vocal Christian and Buddhist communities, continue to form a not insignificant, though shrinking, minority of the population (from ca. 20% in 1947 to ca. 10% at present). The bulk of the East Pakistani / Bangladeshi, population, moreover, while self-consciously Muslim, is neither politically Islamist nor ideologically secularist. There are, however, strongly committed and well organized Islamist organizations which run the gamut from the politically sophisticated Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh political party through other Islamist parties and a medley of traditionalist orthodox groups to clandestine terrorist networks. On the other hand, there is also an articulate body of committed secularists, themselves mostly Muslims, dispersed among small leftist political parties, the currently ruling Awami League, NGOs, academia, journalism, literary and artistic circles. Widespread corruption and the politicizing of public institutions has not spared the public universities in Bangladesh, where there is a pervasive sense of malaise, misdirection and insecurity, not a very nurturing milieu in which to expect academic study of religion or scholarship of any sort to flourish. Yet there did emerge ten years ago a Department of World Religions (currently World Religions and Culture) in the University of Dhaka, the premier public university in Bangladesh. (O'Connell, 2009)

The Department of World Religions and Culture in the University of Dhaka

¹⁰ The former head of the prestigious Agha Khan University based in Pakistan, Shams Kassim-Lakha, in the Q & A session following his University of Toronto lecture on 11 December 2009, when asked about religious studies in that university, replied that it was too sensitive a matter to be attempted there.

The emergence of the Department of World Religions in the University of Dhaka (hereafter DU) was something of an anomaly. There was no precedent for it in Bangladesh, nor in erstwhile East Pakistan. Like its older Indian counterparts, DU was founded in colonial India following British patterns of academia and without any department for comparative or academic study of religion.¹¹ Launching the new department was due overwhelmingly to the unstinting conviction, persistence and personal diplomacy of Professor of Philosophy Kazi Nurul Islam with the support of some like-minded colleagues within the faculty of DU. After a decade-long campaign, the university authorities agreed to establish a miniscule Department of Comparative Religion in the Faculty of Arts. But that nomenclature brought out opposition from two quarters: those Muslims who insisted that Islam was simply incomparable and those Hindus who feared negative comparison of their religion by the Muslim scholars who would dominate the department. Nonetheless, with its name tactfully changed to World Religions (since modified to World Religions and Culture), the new department was launched in 1999 initially to teach M.A. students. After two years, an M. Phil. program was added and a few years later a four-year Honours (i.e., undergraduate) program. The department is authorized to offer the Ph. D., though till now only one candidate may have completed a doctoral program. (World Religions and Culture, website) Recently a Centre for Inter-faith and Intercultural Dialogue was established in conjunction with the department, again thanks to the efforts of Professor Kazi Nurul Islam. In formal and quantitative terms the Department of World Religions and Culture in DU has shown remarkable growth in the space of a decade, but in practice its hasty expansion and future development are somewhat problematic.

Departmental ethos: authentic religion everywhere is peaceful; religious scholarship and dialogue go hand in hand

Thanks to the tireless exhortations of the founding chairman, there is a widespread conviction among students and staff—a departmental ethos, if you will—that genuine religion is humane and tolerant and an influence for peace; and that intolerance and violence in the name of religion are in fact falsifications of religion, be it Muslim, Hindu, Christian or religion of whatever other sort.¹² Interfaith dialogue is integral to the vision of world religions of the department's founder as reflected in the department's mission statement:

Though all religions of the world teach love, preach sympathy for others and encourage man to exercise utmost self-restraint and have most profoundly been a source of inspiration for the highest good of mankind, the world today is torn by

¹¹ If the University of Calcutta was modeled after the University of London as primarily an examining and research university overseeing numerous colleges, the University of Dhaka was modeled after the University of Oxford as a residential teaching university, with some faculty members living as tutors in residential 'halls' (with grounds spacious enough to be Oxford colleges).

¹² His zealous commitment to world religions scholarship and interfaith dialogue redeems a pledge to his dying father to do something effective to reduce communal hostility between Muslims and Hindus, a commitment he tirelessly strives to share with his students and colleagues.

conflicts, enmity and religious hatred. In this predicament a peaceful society is impossible unless people belonging to different faiths understand each other better. (DU World Religions and Culture, website)

Accordingly, in 2008, a second institutional initiative by Professor Kazi Nurul Islam was brought to fruition, namely a Centre for Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue attached to the DU Department of World Religions and Culture.¹³ His zealous advocacy of interfaith dialogue for mutual respect and peace provides a certain élan, a sense of purpose, to the department. In the process it tends to instill a departmental view or ethos, based on axioms that 'true religion' is 'religion for peace' and that all genuine religion is based on similar benign humane principles. These are edifying views, no doubt. But there may be a downside if they are assumed uncritically and without qualifications. There is a risk that students' and even teachers' perceptiveness of complexities and ambiguities may be dulled or inhibited. There may develop a tendency to rely on platitudes rather than reasoned, evidence-based arguments and conclusions, to confuse research with edification and advocacy. I do not mean to say that dialogue necessarily undermines rigorous academic study and research on religion. It need not. Indeed at its best participation in dialogue implies listening to and speaking with others respectfully and attentively. This should enhance one's sensitivity to the religious meaning, feelings and intentions of others, which is fundamental to scholarship on religion as the late Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1959) so forcefully contended. But to negotiate an optimal marriage of dialogue and scholarship without diminishing either party is not without its challenges.

Assertions of the peaceful character of authentic religion and of the underlying similarity of all true religion may well be entertained as hypotheses to be tested against the evidence of human religious history or as noble ideals to strive for. But to take them as uncritically as axioms would be to introduce an element of dogmatism into the domain of academic study, teaching and research on religion. This, I would argue, would be a mistake. There is much to be learned about human religious behavior (peaceful and not so peaceful, 'authentic' and 'inauthentic') and its institutional functioning (its uses as well as abuses) from research employing historical, social scientific, psychological and other critical disciplinary theories and methods. Such research should remain open to acknowledging whatever evidence presents itself, however positive or negative that evidence may be vis-à-vis one's hypotheses, assumptions or ideals.

¹³ "Today, throughout the world, many scholars feel that there are two options before us: Either we opt for dialogue, or we face sure confrontation and destruction." (Islam, 2008) In addition to local and national activities, this Centre hosts an annual international conference on religion for peace. The 2nd International Conference on Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue-2010 (Nov. 27-29, 2010) lists among its joint sponsors the Bangladesh National Commission for UNESCO (BNCU) and the Ministry of Education, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and among dignitaries attending: the Minister of Information and Culture, Minister and Secretary of Education and State Minister of Religious Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Among other speakers are academics, religious representatives and peace advocates from the U.S.A., India, Australia, Iran, Italy, Japan, Nepal and Bangladesh.

Scope and warrant for religious studies provided by secularist vs. communalist / fundamentalist tension

The success thus far of the DU initiative would seem to illustrate that communalist (in this case Islamist) vs. secularist tension need not necessarily prevent academic study of religion. On the contrary, such tension may be highlighted to justify the need for comparative academic study of religion. The DU initiative also may illustrate how such tension can influence the way study of religion is conceived, including its proffered partnership with dialogue. In Bangladesh sporadic harassment (with relative impunity) of non-Muslims and certain categories of Muslims (e.g., Ahmadiyyas, traditional *pirs* and their *mazar* institutions, communally marginal Baul minstrels) by unscrupulous land-grabbers or by groups seeking extra-legally to impose fundamentalist Islamic norms is frequent and flagrant enough to be appealed to as warranting both world religions study and interfaith dialogue as antidotes. It can be claimed, and with some plausibility, that genuine study of religion, one's own as well as others', will show how false are the claims of the intolerant and often violent voices of those who allegedly exploit, falsify and debase Islam (or in principle any other mode of religion) for material, political or fanatic religious gain. Moreover, where there is widespread unease over the harsh polarization of secularist and Islamist polemics, the claim that peace lies at the heart of all religion, Islamic no less than others, if only we understand religion aright, may ring true to many God-fearing Muslims and other men and women of religious faith, i.e., the vast majority of the Bangladeshi population. This too may contribute to a congenial milieu for world religions scholarship as well as interfaith dialogue.

With most Bangladeshis being of neither strongly fundamentalist nor strongly secularist mentality, there is potentially broad support for studying religion in a calm unbiased way that aspires to disclose and promote more humane and authentic expressions of religious faith. World religions teaching as practiced currently in DU does not single out the Islamic tradition as uniquely prone to intolerance but rather subjects any religious tradition to similar assessment, guided by the same harmonizing assumption that in its authentic form religious faith anywhere is humane and peace-loving. This irenic and respectful line of argument may serve to deflect or disarm opposition from potential Muslim and other staunchly religious critics. By much the same argument, secular-minded potential critics of religious study may be reassured that an even-handed empathetic approach to the plurality of religious traditions will undermine the appeal of the fanaticism and intolerance that secularists loathe and fear. One of the most pervasive of communication gaps in Bangladesh is that between secularists and Islamists. While those far to the extremes may not be willing to acknowledge any common ground for dialogue, there must be many others of less extreme secular and Islamic convictions between whom constructive dialogue would be feasible and beneficial, especially, perhaps, if facilitated by competent scholars of world religions, or so it seems to me. In the current Bangladeshi context in particular it would seem appropriate for the conception of 'interfaith dialogue' to be construed to embrace persons of secular humanist, agnostic and

even atheist convictions as well as those affirming Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist or other more explicitly religious modes of personal faith. (O'Connell, 2007)

Essays comprising this special issue of the *Bangladesh e-journal of Sociology*

The essays that follow are a representative sampling of presentations made in recent annual seminars in the DU Department of World Religions and Culture. The full list of speakers and topics in those seminars and in the March 2010 Dhaka Consultation on Religious Studies and Dialogue in South Asian Universities is given in an appendix. There have also been a number of other lectures and dialogue sessions on aspects of religion sponsored by that department or, at its initiative, by the DU Centre for Advanced Research in the Humanities. The present selection reflects the range of seminar presentations, from formal academic papers, to more speculative essays to shorter sketches of topics inviting more study and research. Four are by fulltime members of the hosting department, three by adjunct professors from sociology, philosophy and history departments respectively, one by a visiting professor of religious studies, one by an assistant professor of history, one by a former DU librarian-cum-author.

We follow this Introduction with a review essay of classical sociology of religion and guidelines for research in Bangladesh by Professor of Sociology [DU] K.A.M. Saaduddin. This is followed by a survey of the religiously plural history of the Bengal region, and modern Bangladesh in particular, with an emphasis on the tolerant aspects of that history, by Professor Kazi Nurul Islam, founding Chairman of the Department of World Religions and Culture [WRC / DU]. Professor of Sanskrit [DU] Paresh Chandra Mandal, offers a brief introductory note on Brahmanic, Jaina and Buddhist religion in Bengal from Gupta through Sena periods (fourth through twelfth centuries), with emphasis on the Brahmanic. This is followed by a more detailed survey of Buddhism in Bengal by Professor of Philosophy [DU] Niru Kumar Chakma. Professor History [DU] Abdul Momin Chowdhury reflects on the how there came to be so great a population of Muslims in central and eastern Bengal, so far removed from the Middle Eastern heartland of the Muslim tradition. Visiting Professor [DU] Joseph O'Connell [Study of Religion, University of Toronto] explores in some depth the ethical implication of Vaisnava devotion (*bhakti*) and how this contributed to socio-cultural integration of Bengal during the period of independent Sultanate rule. Assistant Professor of History [DU] Iftakhar Iqbal offers a novel ecological perspective on the Faraizi movement of the nineteenth century, which he situates conceptually between what he calls 'puritan reformist' (though others might prefer 'Wahabist') and what he, following Asim Roy (1983), calls 'syncretistic' Muslim traditions in Bengal. Assistant Professor [DU / WRC] Md. Shaikh Farid offers a brief historical sketch of the emergence and growth of the Christian tradition in the wider Bengal region and Adjunct Professor [DU / WRC] Dr. Fr. Tapan De Rozario provides a more detailed account of contemporary Christian groups and their conceptions of mission in Bangladesh proper. Assistant Professor [DU / WRC] Md. Jahangir Alam reports on a little known sector of recent Bangladeshi religious life on which he has done research, the

Bahai community. Our final essay on particular religious groups in Bengalis by Assistant Professor Eva Sadia Saad, second Chairperson of the DU Department of World Religions and Culture. She provides an overview of the typical characteristics of the many Adivasi (indigenous or 'tribal' peoples) concentrated largely in the Chittagong Hill Tracts along the eastern border of Bangladesh coupled with an appeal for more study and appreciation of these peoples, whose ways of life and security, as also reported by Professor Chakma in his essay, are endangered. The final essay is a proposal by Dr. Fazlul Alam, former DU Librarian for Planning and Development and prolific author, for compiling a reference bibliography (in print and online) for research on religion in the Bengal region. An appendix lists topics and speakers in seminars on 'Academic Study of Religion', 'History of Religion in the Bengal Region' and 'Research on Religion in Bengal' and a three-day consultation, 'Prospects for Religious Studies and Dialogue in South Asian Universities' sponsored by the DU Department of World Religions.

Summary comments

Let me finish this Introduction by reiterating the striking disparity between the richness of human religious phenomena in South Asia and the scarcity of institutional bases for academic study of religion in all but a handful of South Asian universities. The factors contributing to this disparity are multiple: Western origin of religious studies, novelty and lack of resources, disparity in cultural mentalities and languages, British colonial precedent, tension between secularists and religio-political communalists. I choose to focus on the latter factor while arguing that an early predominance of secularist influence in independent India and a rapidly established Islamist predominance in West Pakistan drastically inhibited the introduction and development of academic religious studies in both those countries, more severely in the latter. In erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, however, neither secularist nor Islamist interests and mentalities have as yet gained overwhelming predominance. Given the rough balance between the two orientations and the relatively tolerant non-ideological character of the bulk of the population, there is in Bangladesh both scope and warrant for introducing world religions scholarship and interfaith / intercultural dialogue as mutually reinforcing means to mitigate what secularist-Islamist tensions do exist there. The Bangladeshi experience may suggest that in religiously plural but still Hindu-majority India, where secularist and Hindu communalist interests are now more evenly balanced than before, there may be increasing scope and warrant for developing world religions scholarship, i.e., comparative academic study of religion, for reasons analogous to those in Muslim-majority Bangladesh.

In any event, successful development of genuine academic study of religion in any department, centre or program for religious studies in a South Asian university will depend upon effective collaboration with scholars in many other disciplines and departments. In the case of the University of Dhaka its Department of World Religions and Culture is exercising the role of catalyst by inviting scholars from across the university to focus their attention on aspects of religion that can be examined from the perspectives of

their respective disciplines. The readiness of so many senior professors and promising younger scholars (as recorded in the Appendix) to apply their expertise and experience to the university's multi-disciplinary enquiry into religion is encouraging. In particular the contribution to this shared endeavor by members of the DU Department of Sociology and the *Bangladesh e-journal of Sociology* has been substantial and shows promise of stimulating sociological study and research on religion in Bangladesh and elsewhere in South Asia. May Professor Kazi Nurul Islam and his colleagues in World Religions and Culture and all those in and around the University of Dhaka who are responding to his initiatives succeed in the scholarly and humane undertaking they have embarked upon and may it have the impact for religious peace and harmony for which they so much aspire.

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