

### Note from the Editor

The study of religion occupies a central place in the sociological literature. All major thinkers, sociologists inclusive, have grappled with the idea of religion and its place in social life. Our first issue also looked at Max Weber and his contributions to religion. We had since planned to take out a special issue on religion, which suddenly became a reality when Professor Joseph T. O'Connell suggested the publication of the papers presented at a workshop on religion at the newly established Department of World Religions and Culture in the University of Dhaka.

The workshop, and subsequently the papers published in this issue, served a double purpose. Firstly, it fulfilled our desire to deal with religion as a special topic of discussion in an academic setting. Professor O'Connell makes the importance of such a discussion abundantly clear when he argues that in spite of so much religion around us, religion has not been dealt with in the academia in a major way in Bangladesh, indeed, in the whole of South Asia. It is a curious phenomenon, and very few of us realize this, that religion, or the critical study of religion, is almost a "taboo topic" in South Asian academic circles. Few ventures to deal with religion beyond the day to day practices; experts on religion are to be found typically among those who profess it. Critical appreciation in public is dampened by the fear of backlash. As a result, very little serious discussion exists in the literature on religion, even the universities lack courses on religion.

Secondly, Bangladesh has been a seat of major religions all through history, largely coexisting peacefully. Often, one majority religion has been replaced by another, in a succession. So that Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, the three major religions of the Sub-continent, have had their haydays in the lives of the people and the country. From rulers to the downtrodden all have been affected by one religion or the other while religion, in turn, has left its mark on the society and culture. The history of religion in Bangladesh, therefore, is probably as fascinating as the religions themselves. This feature alone makes a serious study of religion in Bangladesh a worthwhile project.

I am therefore, thrilled by the opportunity to present these studies, albeit in an introductory fashion, in a special issue of the BEJS. I would consider this as the first of many future attempts to bring religion to the forefront of academic discussion, including as courses taught in the universities. The University of Dhaka, as has been noted, in many of the following papers, has made a great contribution by opening up a Department of World Religions and Culture. It is hoped that this attempt will generate further interest in the academia of South Asia, and particularly of Bangladesh, towards the critical study of religion. Sociologists, for obvious reasons, should, and, dare I say, must, play a leading role in such endeavors.