

How to Launch and Develop the Academic Study of Religion in South Asia:

Does the University of Dhaka Provide a Model?

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For diverse reasons discussed in a plenary panel of the first of the cluster of “Rethinking Religion in India”, the academic study of religion as an explicit subject of study and research till now has been institutionalized at very few universities in India or elsewhere in South Asia. Visva-Bharati and Banaras Hindu University have had combined departments of Philosophy and Religion for many decades and Punjabi University (Patiala) launched its Guru Gobind Singh Department of Religious Studies in 1967. The University of Madras has small departments or chairs in Christianity, Jainology, Vaisnavism and Islam, though not in religion as such. Jamila Millia Islamia has a Centre for the Study of Comparative Religions and Civilizations which, though not yet a department, offers undergraduate, post-graduate and doctoral courses in Comparative Religion and barely a week from now will be hosting a major academic congress on ‘Religion after 9/11’.

Looking east across the border we find that in Bangladesh it was only a decade ago (1998) that a major university, the University of Dhaka, launched that country’s first Department of World Religions, offering first M.A, followed by M.Phil. and then undergraduate Honours programs and within the past year opened a Centre for Interfaith and Inter-cultural Dialogue. The sudden emergence and rapid growth of this

department with its new centre is all the more striking in view of the deeply seated polarization in Bangladeshi politics and academia between those committed to secularism and those demanding establishment of a fundamentalist conception of Islam. What we propose to do in this workshop is hear how this Dhaka initiative came into being and how it is faring and ask in what respects, if at all, it might serve as something of a model for universities elsewhere in South Asia that might consider launching programs, centers or full departments for the study of religion.

The core of the workshop consists of three brief presentations. One is by a foreign scholar outlining what in the course of half a dozen annual visits there he has observed of the influence of the enviroing secular-Islamist tensions in Bangladesh on the study of religion in the University of Dhaka. The next is by the founding chair of that university's Department of World Religions and founding director of its new centre for dialogue, explaining why and how these two pioneering entities could come into existence in the manner and form that they have. The third is a work-in-progress report by the current chair of that department, identifying what policies and procedures she finds to be working well and what frustrations must still be grappled with. Scholars from other South Asian universities where religion is being taught or researched upon through whatever department or discipline will be encouraged to respond to the Dhaka experience from their respective vantage points. Out of the pooled experiences and mutual critiques it may be hoped that insights and guidelines conducive to development of academic study of religion in India, Bangladesh and elsewhere in South Asia may emerge.

Presentation 1

The “Secular” and the “Religious”: Implications for the Academic Study of Religion in Bangladesh

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As spelled out at some length by a special panel in the 2008 conference on ‘Rethinking Religion in India’, the issues, theoretical and practical, of highest priority for academic study of religion in India and elsewhere in South Asia do not necessarily coincide with those in the West. That holds true likewise when we consider the category ‘secular’, again in theoretical as well as practical terms, in relation to academic study of religion. While there has been for some time no little reflection and debate on the relation of the ‘secular’ to the ‘religious’ (especially when construed as ‘secularism’ vs. ‘fundamentalism’) in South Asia as pertinent in politics, there has been relatively little attention given to how these categories and the phenomena they attempt to conceptualize impact upon teaching and research about religion as is done and may yet be done in India, Bangladesh and elsewhere in South Asia. This paper (prepared from the perspective of an annual academic visitor) sketches how ‘secular’ in relation to ‘religious’ (including the much narrower ‘secularism vs. fundamentalism’ debate) as understood in Bangladesh impinges upon nascent academic study of religion in that country, in particular at the University of Dhaka.

How and Why the University of Dhaka Established a Department of World Religions and a Center for Interfaith and Inter-cultural Dialogue'

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Though all the religions of the world teach love, preach sympathy for others and encourage man to exercise utmost self-restraint and at their most profound level have been a source of highest good of mankind, the world today is torn by conflicts, enmity and religious hatred. In this predicament a lasting and peaceful society is impossible if different faiths are not understood in their proper perspectives. Again, there was a time when various religions, precisely because of their convictions, were unable to cooperate and were even antagonistic to each other. But the time has changed to a great extent. Now religions, in spite of historic differences, must seek to unite all men for the attainment of world peace.

All these prompted a teacher of the University of Dhaka to embark upon a study of Indian religions at Banaras Hindu University, Judeo – Christian traditions at Birmingham University and Far Eastern religious traditions at Kokusikan University and Tokyo University. After coming back to Bangladesh, he submitted a proposal to the university authority for establishing a Department of World Religions.

Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country, known as a country of inter-religious harmony. As the pioneer university of the country the University of Dhaka has played many historic roles. Quite consistent with its previous history, the university established a Department of World Religions in 1998 with an end in view to promote inter-religious and inter-cultural understanding and also to prepare young men and women to become enlightened citizens of the world.

Again, within a decade, the university authority was convinced that there was a time when we could live in isolation, but today we are forced to live in one world. In fact we

are increasingly living in a global village. Today we live in multicultural and multi-religious societies. Because of the tremendous advancement of communication systems and fantastic development of electronic media, no country can remain religiously and culturally isolated. The university authority was also convinced that it is high time that people of different cultural and religious backgrounds work hand in hand to transform the planet earth from a discordant house to a harmonious home. Unless people of diverse faiths and cultural backgrounds come closer, the fanatics and racists will gain the upper hand, political opportunists will exploit the situation and this will lead to the breakdown of the moral fiber of human society. Furthermore, in today's world either we go for dialogue or we will face sure confrontation and destruction. Indeed inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue is not an option but a vital need of the hour. And that is why the University of Dhaka played another pioneering role in establishing the Center for Inter-Religious and Inter-Cultural Dialogue in the beginning of 2008. The programs of the Center are part of the academic activities of the Department of World Religions.