Advancing the Conversation Between Science, Theology, and History in Islam: A Madrasa Discourses Project

The World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD), in collaboration with Georgetown University’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, the Centre for Peace and Justice at BRAC University, Bangladesh, and Contending Modernities’ Madrasa Discourses Project at the University of Notre Dame, held a two-day workshop entitled “Advancing the Conversation between Science, Theology, and History in Islam” on January 2-3, 2020 in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Launched in 2017, the Madrasa Discourses Project is at the forefront of efforts to equip ulama (Islamic religious readers) with the necessary tools to confidently engage pluralism, modern science, technological advances, and new philosophies. The project, led by Dr. Ebrahim Moosa, Primary Investigator and Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Notre Dame, works to revitalize Islamic education from within, retrieving resources from the Islamic tradition to prepare future ulama “who stand tall for human dignity and peace through a transformative three-year educational experience.”

The workshop was convened by Dr. Samia Huq, Associate Professor and Interim Dean, BRAC University and conducted by Professor of Islamic Studies Dr. Ebrahim Moosa, Dr. Joshua Lupo from the University of Notre Dame, and Dr. Rana Dajani from Hashemite University, Jordan. In attendance were 30 participants from diverse backgrounds and affiliations, including madrasa and non-madrasa teachers, university professors, and Islamic thought researchers. Among other notable attendees were Fadlullah Wilmot, Country Director, Muslim Aid and the Executive Director of WFDD, Professor Katherine Marshall; she made brief comments at the opening and closing of the sessions.

BACKGROUND

Islamic education institutions such as madrasas and seminaries are two of the major education providers in Bangladesh. While many madrasas follow a national curriculum that combines both Islamic and secular subject matters, a significant number of madrasas, known as Quomi madrasas, primarily teach Islamic texts only. Graduates from reformed madrasas that follow a hybrid curriculum (known as Aliya madrasas) are usually perceived with less respect by the ulamas for their perceived limited knowledge of the Islamic texts. On the other hand, the Quomi madrasa graduates are often
perceived as lacking critical skills and knowledge that can be translated and utilized in the “modern” and ever-changing world. Additionally, there are few spaces available in Bangladesh where teachers from these institutions have an opportunity to discuss the ongoing societal transformations around them, understand their roles, critically engage and reflect on some discomforts and discontents, and perhaps offer alternative solutions as they see fit.

**DAY 1: OPENING REMARKS**

In her opening remarks, Dr. Huq introduced the visiting guests and briefly talked about the scope of the current workshop and future prospects. She clearly articulated that the workshop was a pilot project and part of a research and outreach program that she leads at BRAC University, as opposed to a BRAC NGO program. This distinction was important for the workshop participants because madrasa leaders, teachers, and students have previously contested foreign-funded NGO programs, particularly BRAC NGO’s women empowerment and microfinance programs in rural Bangladesh. Professor Katherine Marshall focused on the importance of creating an open and cordial space for dialogue and discussion on critical development issues that involve religious leaders. Dr. Moosa then proceeded to introduce the Madrasa Discourse Project that he has been co-leading in India and Pakistan since 2017. He explained that the main goal of the Madrasa Discourses Project is to revitalize and reform Islamic education from within through the reading and re-reading of Islamic canonical texts as well as engaging with collaborative and interpretative exercises that involve understanding and contextualizing both traditional and modern meanings of religion and science. This workshop was an abridged version of the broader, ongoing Madrasa Discourses Project; Dr. Moosa has also conducted similar workshops previously in South Africa.

**SESSION 1-2**

The workshop started with Dr. Joshua Lupo’s presentation on the history of science and religion entitled “Science, Contingency, and the Study of Religion.” In his presentation, Dr. Lupo developed the ideas in Peter Harrison’s book, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (2015) to argue that religion and science are usually “imagined as doctrinal beliefs” in an antithetical disposition primarily in Western academia. Through a historical reading of theology and philosophy, Dr. Lupo contended that both religion and science had been ways of practicing “personal formation” in the premodern era, which does not necessarily have the same currency in the modern
demarcation between science and religion. Modern ways of understanding science are empirical and follow strict deductive methods, which are different from science in the service of personal and moral formations. Dr. Lupo highlighted the current trend of studying religion in the United States in his presentation by suggesting that scholars tend to take a “scientific approach” when studying religion where they separate themselves from the subject of the study for the sake of “objectivity.” This approach is quite the opposite of the personal formation method and results in creating distance between the object of the study and the subject themselves. Dr. Lupo conducted his session in English and Prof Moosa provided intermittent summary translations in English. The experiment proved that reading material for groups like this requires language efficiency and perhaps translations in mother-tongue languages worked best.

SESSIONS 3-4
The afternoon session was conducted by Dr. Rana Dajani via video conferencing from Jordan. Dr. Dajani drew from Nidhal Guessoum’s *Islam's Quantum Question: Reconciling Muslim Tradition and Modern Science* (2010) and challenged the apparent contradiction between Islam and evolution. She emphasized the importance of teaching evolution in the classroom. By quoting liberally from the Quran and other Islamic texts, she suggested that students should be given the freedom to question the assumptions of evolution, analyze data, and come up with their own views about it, as opposed to taking any extreme doctrinal position about the topic. Dr. Dajani conducted her presentation in Arabic only. Several participants engaged in conversation and asked questions in Arabic during the last session of the day. A hope for the future is to ensure that participants feel free to express their views on topics such as evolution in classrooms within Bangladeshi madrasas.

DAY 2: SESSIONS 1-3
The second day of the workshop primarily focused on the debates around Islamic hermeneutics and interpretative traditions. Dr. Moosa led both morning and afternoon sessions of the workshop. Based on his work in *Arabic and Islamic Hermeneutics* (2014), Dr. Moosa argued that Islamic and Arabic hermeneutics had different roles and meanings in different epochs when viewed historically. Due to their overlapping vocabularies, it is hardly possible to draw a clear distinction between older and more modern hermeneutical traditions. It is highly important to understand and identify, Dr. Moosa further maintained, that the meanings, purposes, and intentions of hermeneutics have temporal and contextual dimensions, thus are highly dynamic and transformational. His second session focused on the “Ghazalian Hermeneutic,” where he argued that humility, fostering reason, and encouraging a plurality of interpretations are three major and intersecting features of hermeneutics. Dr. Moosa conducted both sessions primarily in Arabic with occasional code-switching to Urdu and English. The second session was followed by a question and answer session where he answered some of the questions the participants had in both Arabic and Urdu.

The two-day workshop ended with Dr. Huq and Professor Katherine Marshall thanking the participants and expressing their hopes to continue the program in the following years on a larger scale.
WORKSHOP CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Overall, the workshop, as a pilot program, was successful in generating dialogue among the Bangladeshi participants and international scholars of Islamic Studies. Most of the participants requested Dr. Moosa to include Bangladesh in his three-year Madrasa Discourses Project. Dr. Moosa and Dr. Huq maintained that depending on the availability of the funding and interest from the Bangladeshi ulama community, there is a possibility that similar workshops can be arranged regularly in Bangladesh in the near future.