Secularism and Faith-inspired Development: Understanding Contestation and Collaboration
November 22, 2014

Background:

The Speakers’ Forum on Religion and Development in Bangladesh was launched on Saturday, November 22, 2014 in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The topic for the inaugural event, “Secularism and Faith-inspired Development: Understanding Contestation and Collaboration,” focused on the critical issues around secularism and religious pluralism. The aim was to promote dialogue pertinent to effective and equitable approaches to development. Featured speakers offered international, regional, and local perspectives on different approaches to secularism and included Georgetown University’s Jose Casanova, Rajeev Bhargava of the Centre for Developing Societies, and BRAC University’s Samia Huq. Video from this event and other Speakers’ Forums can be found at the World Faiths Development Dialogue website.

The Speakers’ Forum series is a joint initiative of the World Faiths Development Dialogue, Georgetown University’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, and BRAC University’s Department of Economics and Social Sciences. The Forum involves a series of day-long events organized around critical social issues and development challenges. Topics also highlight areas where religious leaders or institutions play significant roles or where a fuller understanding of religious dimensions can enrich development work and policy.

The forums offer a non-politicized space for constructive dialogue on the real and potential contributions of faith-inspired actors to critical development topics, with a view towards deepening the national conversation on religion more broadly. They draw on experience and expertise of scholars and development practitioners from local, regional, and international contexts, thus providing points of comparison and opportunities for mutual learning. They will cultivate a global network of dialogue and collaboration on shared challenges. Easing tensions around religious roles in public affairs and exploring ways forward on divisive and deadlocked social issues are core objectives.

1 http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/subprojects/country-mapping-bangladesh
**Introduction:**

Professor **Syed M. Hashemi**, chair of BRAC University’s Department of Economics and Social Sciences, opened the event, emphasizing that religion is a critical consideration for development practitioners because “faith plays such an important part in man’s everyday life...Rituals, faith, religion form the cultural context” of Bangladesh. Bangladesh’s rich secularist tradition, strongly associated with the nationalist movement, emerged and was refined in opposition to the religious rhetoric of the Pakistani state. As a result, the nationalist movement “failed to articulate a vision of secularism that transcended that opposition and could take on a positive agenda.” He notes that a disconnect regarding religion between the leftists and the broader population can still be seen today in mainstream development approaches in Bangladesh. Hashemi observed that many in the development community view religiosity as oppositional to modernity and development, and in so doing have failed to understand the critical role that religion plays in the lives of many Bangladeshis. The Speakers’ Forum, he noted, provides a unique opportunity for a wide audience to discuss and debate the role of religious and secular ideas in shaping the future of the nation.

Professor **Katherine Marshall**, the executive director of the World Faiths Development Dialogue, in her opening remarks noted that “ignoring religious elements and issues is a big mistake...If you ignore religious actors you're missing a large part of the development scene.” She pointed to rising awareness of the vital connections between religion and development around the world; that institutions ranging from different parts of the United Nations system to the US Agency for International Development are beginning to address these blind spots. She drew attention to the fact that religious actors bring ethical issues to the forefront in forceful ways, including issues that the technocratic discourse of development agencies can obscure.

Professor Marshall introduced the collaboration between WFDD and BRAC University, which includes a research component, alongside the Speakers Forum Series. Bangladesh was chosen by WFDD for a country-level mapping of faith-inspired development because of its active development sector, the central role of faith in society, as well as recognition of the growing forces of globalization and their impact on the country. She argued that despite the fact that secularism has been seen as central to Bangladeshi national identity, part of history and reflecting understandings of the state’s ethical obligations to the least among its citizens, its significance for policy had not involved the kind of thoughtful discussion that it deserved.

**Syed Saad Andeleeb**, vice chancellor of BRAC University, introduced the speakers for the morning session and welcomed the panel. He hoped that this effort would be part of BRAC University’s wider effort to become a research-focused university that could engage equally in knowledge production and knowledge dissemination.
Morning Session:

Jose Casanova, professor in the Department of Sociology at Georgetown University, Washington, DC, suggested that we are in the midst of a dramatic change in our understanding of religion and secularism that has intellectual, political and practical implications for countries around the world. Before the 1970s, there was a widespread view that religion would lose its public relevance in the face of rapid modernization of societies. The year 1979 was a critical turning point that challenged this narrative through four crucial developments: 1) the Islamic revolution in Iran, 2) the visit of the Pope to Poland which sparked the Solidarity Movement and contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union, 3) the revolution in Nicaragua based on a movement arising from Liberation Theology, and 4) the emergence of the electoral Christian right in the United States. Casanova noted that “since then, no one can ignore the role of religion” in world affairs. However, despite the increased role of religion in public life, the concept of ‘secularism’ went largely unquestioned and scholars only began to probe the topic about 15 years ago, beginning with Talal Assad and his Formations of the Secular. Cassanova emphasized that everyone has a role in the construction of the ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ and pointed to the rootedness of these concepts in a particular time, place, and culture.

Professor Casanova emphasized that states have taken different approaches to secularism, with very “different models of managing and regulating religious pluralism in society.” Scholars, however, “are only now in the beginning of the process of developing systematic comparative studies of the different types of secularism around the world.” He pointed to two different types of secular political systems, one emerging in France and the other in the United States after their respective revolutions. The French model sought to take religion entirely out of the public sphere in order to mitigate its potentially negative effects. It was an attempt to create a political sphere that is homogenous in its secularity, which was articulated in reference to the religiously homogenous nature of European states at the time. However, models based on homogeneity “keep us from building the kinds of state we need to build for all of us to live in peace,” particularly given the forces of globalization, which preclude isolated homogenous societies. In the United States, in contrast, there was a great diversity of religious sects and never any official state religion. In order to protect that religious pluralism, the secularism that developed in the United States was focused on denying privilege to any particular religious sect and promoting the free exercise and the flourishing of all religious traditions.

Professor Casanova took the example of the Catholic Church’s struggles to incorporate a pluralist model, and explored the relevance of this experience for the Muslim world. For 200 years, the Church rejected the principles of human rights and religious freedom as heretical, and this began to change only around the time of the Second Vatican Council. Several key documents are important to understanding this transition. Dignitatis Humanae recognized the right of every person to search for their own truth, acknowledging that the Catholic Church can no longer be a state church that imposes its view upon society. This recognition transformed the Catholic Church into a church of civil society with the right to participate in the public sphere, but no more rights than any other religious or secular actor. The Church also, through Nostra Aetate, recognized the truth inherent in all religious traditions and their value for all of humanity. Professor Casanova noted that this is a process that Islam is currently going through, although in Islam the process has proved much more complex as there is no religious hierarchy that can articulate religious positions on behalf of all Muslims.
Rajeev Bhargava of the Centre for Developing Societies highlighted India’s experience with secularism, which, in his view, is a necessary response to the power dynamics that result from religious diversity. He suggested that diversity must be understood as not only between religions, but also within religions. The core beliefs and practices of every religion have always been interpreted in multiple ways, with groups that coalesce around these different interpretations. In India, some groups have always been excluded from mainstream religious practices and have had to develop their own, which are often devalued by others. He gave the example of dalits (untouchables) and women, who historically were not allowed to enter Hindu temples. In societies with inter- or intra-religious diversity, there is always some potential for oppression, discrimination, and marginalization between groups. To this point, Bhargava argued, there is need to develop a model of secularism that promotes respect for religion and religious pluralism, but also limits dynamics which produce inequalities, injustices, and unfreedoms.

Inter- and intra-religious oppression have been linked in the Indian context. The tensions between Hindus and Muslims that followed Indian independence caused each religion to present an increasingly united front to its opponent, which necessitated a suppression of internal dissent that halted processes of internal reform. These dynamics contributed to the perpetuation of social discrimination and minority marginalization within religious traditions. India’s leaders were presented with the choice between a robustly Hindu-centered state and a secular state, opting for the latter because of the need to address these internal religious dynamics and in order to promote human rights and social freedoms. Bhargava stressed that the forces that seek to perpetuate inter- and intra-religious oppression still actively contest India’s secular character, which, he suggested, remains fragile.

Bhargava sketched out a vision for a secular society. Citizens should be able to identify and have emotional empathy with the state: “a state should not be called such that [citizens] feel they are not part of it, that they are deprived of their own identity; that their own identity and that of the state are divergent”. If the state is Hindu, Muslims may feel excluded and therefore refuse to give their full loyalty to it. It is therefore important, he argued, that all can “identify themselves in ways that do not go against the self-identification of those individuals and groups who are part and parcel of the state.” He went on to suggest that religious rights should not just be the right to choose one’s own religion, but also “the right to reject one’s religion, the right to criticize one’s religion...and the right to embrace multiple religions.” These conditions are not achievable in the model of secularism that focuses only on ‘separation of church and state’ and that is common in most western nations, but only in a system that promotes what he called “principled distance,” where the state engages with religion by promoting religious freedom and pluralism, but also pushing back against practices that violate basic human dignity.

Professor Samia Huq, assistant professor at BRAC University, gave a historical overview of secularism in Bangladesh. Secularism in the Bangladeshi context represented a vision that departed from the communalism of Partition and the hegemonic application of Islam by the Pakistani state. “With the aim of transcending the intolerance of the past, secularism became an imprint on the nation right at its birth.” Secularism became a part of statecraft, and integral to this project was the banning of religious political parties. These bans had two justifications: to curtail the activities of Jamaat-e-Islami due to its collaboration with the Pakistani military, but also more broadly to ensure the protection of individual religious freedoms.

Huq noted that the writers of Bangladesh’s constitution translated secularism as “religious neutrality” and understood it to mean “a state free of religious biases, where individual religious freedoms would be preserved.” Secularism was “fashioned as a unifying, transcending anchor of the
national identity.” However, by overemphasizing Bengali language and culture in the construction of the secular state, this left the indigenous population disenfranchised, and upset some who interpreted this as a denial of the ‘Muslim-ness’ of the Bengali. However, reformers including Abul Hashem, founding director of the Islamic Academy (later the Islamic Foundation), attempted to forward Muslim-ness as a “corollary and not a substitute” for the culture of Pakistanis. He and others, such as Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, focused on universal principles that promoted religious coexistence and theologically grounded approaches to social justice.

Professor Huq argued that the narrowly centering debates around secularism on the banning of religious political parties has prevented the emergence of a vibrant discourse on the nature and meaning of religion for society. There was “very little thinking on how Muslims as a majority would continue to engage with Islam and simultaneously create a tolerant and plural polity.” New regimes that came to power lifted the ban on religious parties and also enacted reformulations of the constitution. Many saw these changes as contributing to a rise in problematic religious forces. More recently, attempts to restore secularism have become a key part of the Awami League’s platform, and they have begun to police Islamic groups and gatherings heavily. The removal of Islamic political parties is seen once again as the central element in restoring secularism. However, she argues that accepting a European view of secularism as an acontextual liberal political theory would be a mistake, Bangladeshi secularism must be rooted in the nation’s particular history with communalism and involve a dialogue with diverse theological interpretations, including Sufi thought. The forces of modernization, including education and mass literacy, have created a population that is interested in engaging in questions of religion, and such discussions play a prominent role in popular media. This context creates a a vital need to support a fuller and more informed dialogue around secularism.

Discussants Riaz Khan, professor in the Department of English and Humanities and Dean of Student Affairs BRAC University, and Hossain Zillur Rahman, founder and chair of Power and Participation Research Center, closed the morning session by articulating some unifying themes and remaining questions: forces of globalization and transnationalism have complicated notions of secularism and religious pluralism which have long been negotiated vis-à-vis the state. Further, they emphasized the need to appreciate the full diversity of religious thought and expression in discussions of secularism.
Afternoon Sessions and Roundtable Discussions:

The afternoon featured two panels, organized as roundtable discussions with audience members, which aimed to connect some of the concepts and narratives from the morning session to the practical realities of development practitioners in Bangladesh. These discussions centered on how ‘secular’ and ‘faith-based’ approaches to development are defined and articulated and how these approaches play out in interactions with community members.

The first panel featured Joyanta Adhikari, executive director, Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB), Atul Sarker, director of Development Projects, Caritas, Faruq Hasan Mallick, senior advisor at the Haqqani Mission Bangladesh, and Swami Sthiratmanada, assistant secretary of the Ramakrishna Mission. Panelists emphasized the rootedness of notions of charity and service in their faith traditions, which inspire and inform their approaches to development. Some noted, however, that this ‘values based approach’ to development is often misunderstood by the wider community due to concerns over religious conversion. They discussed a vision for development that sought to ensure “all of God’s creation can live in peace and harmony,” which was the manner in which Joyanta Adhikari framed secularism. All noted that they viewed contributing to interfaith understanding an essential aspect of their work, with examples of the interfaith Lenten Campaign undertaken by Caritas or the belief in the “oneness of the holy rivers” central to Ramakrishna Mission’s social perspective. They noted how a respect of all religious traditions necessitated a ‘secular’ approach that ensures no discrimination on the basis of religion in their programs.

The second panel featured Rokeya Kabir, executive director, Bangladesh Nari Progoti Sangha, Faustina Pereira, director of the Human Rights and Legal Aid Services, BRAC, and Binayak Sen, research director, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies. Panelists noted that a robust national commitment to secularism is essential to ensure continued gains in many areas of development, particularly around women’s empowerment. They cautioned, however, that a “blind pursuit of modernity” that includes a rigid vision of secularism can be as dangerous as “blind faith”. Secularism can be seen as exclusionary and there is a need among those espousing secular perspectives to act with more humility in interactions with religious actors. Secularism alone is not sufficient in the goal to achieve social harmony because it only addresses horizontal inequality and does not take on vertical inequality (disparities in wealth and power), an issue that many religious traditions directly address. All noted a significant need to critically examine multiple approaches to secularism and the ways in which understandings of secularism have and will continue to be constructed with reference to Bangladesh’s social and historical context.