Making Pluralism Possible: The Promise and Challenge of Religious Peacebuilding in Bangladesh

BACKGROUND
The third Speakers Forum on Religion and Development in Bangladesh took place in Dhaka, Bangladesh on October 3, 2015. The topic, “Making Pluralism Possible: The Promise and Challenge of Religious Peacebuilding in Bangladesh” focused on exploring and understanding communal violence in Bangladesh, which has spiked to levels not seen in over 30 years. Though many recognize the critical role religion plays in social tensions and conflict in Bangladesh, the country has seen limited efforts to bolster religious peacebuilding. In this context, there is a need for a nuanced examination of the religious dimensions of communal violence in Bangladesh, and an exploration of the ways in which religious communities and leaders can be better engaged to counter intolerance and promote peace. Featuring local and regional scholars and practitioners, this Forum incorporates diverse perspectives and experiences and offered points of comparison, aimed at better understanding and addressing communal violence and religious intolerance.

Making Pluralism Possible: The Promise and Challenge of Religious Peacebuilding
The event was a daylong discussion held at Dhaka University by and organized by World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD), BRAC University’s Department of Economics and Social Sciences, and Dhaka University’s Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue. The day was divided into three panels: Panel One: The roots and religious dimensions of conflict in South Asia, Panel Two: Examining religious conflict in Bangladesh today, Panel Three: Religious peacebuilding in Bangladesh: What’s working and what more is needed. A session was convened the following day at BRAC University, which allowed a group of 30 students to engage with and pose questions to the assembled international scholars and practitioners.

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 daylong 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.
OPENING REMARKS

The Speakers’ Forum on Religion and Development in Bangladesh, “Making Pluralism Possible: The Promise and Challenge of Religious Peacebuilding in South Asia,” was opened with an address by Professor AAMS Arefin Siddique, Vice Chancellor of Dhaka University, and followed by opening remarks by Professor Katherine Marshall, executive director of the World Faiths Development Dialogue and senior fellow at the Georgetown University Berkley Center, Dr. Mahbub Hossan, chairperson of BRAC University Department of Economics and Social Sciences, and Dr. Fazrin Huda, director of the Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue at Dhaka University.

Professor Arefin Siddique, opened the day long Forum with a recitation from Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore’s God in the World. Tagore’s vision of an all-pervading God, he said, illustrated Bangladesh’s long commitment to interreligious harmony. He appreciated the students who had read from the Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Christian Holy Scriptures at the start of the program, noting that this common practice demonstrates the continued commitment to pluralism as a central national value. He emphasized that while Bangladesh’s constitution guarantees rights for all, irrespective of religion, caste, culture, or language, it is necessary nonetheless to fight the exclusivist proclivities within religious communities and work to build a culture of dialogue. He suggested that we are at a critical historical juncture not only in Bangladesh, but worldwide, facing issues such as terrorism, social injustice, and inter and intra-religious conflict. Many of these conflicts involve the misuse of religious teachings for sectarian and fanatical purposes. The professor concluded on a optimistic note, hoping that the Forum would inspire fruitful dialogue, but also contribute to sound strategic policy that would help renew commitment to religious pluralism in Bangladesh.

Besides providing some background and context to the Speakers’ Forum series, Professor Katherine Marshall, in her opening remarks, highlighted the increasing attention given to countering violent extremism throughout the development community. Intellectuals and development practitioners alike have been caught by surprise by the recent wave of extremist violence and the closely related refugee crisis. These issues have tended to overshadow discussion of the new sustainable development goals in the UN system and elsewhere. Peace is a central precondition for development, but it can never be taken for granted: it must be consciously and continuously built. Religion is strongly linked (albeit in complex ways) to much recent violence, but religious leaders and institutions can also be an essential part of the solution. Peace is a core principle and ultimate aspiration of every world religion. While the issues at the Forum focused on South and Southeast Asia, the experiences and insights could have broad implications for countries around the world that are grappling with similar issues.

Dr. Mahbub Hossan acknowledged that differences in religious belief and scriptural interpretation can become a source of conflict, with differences often carrying over into political disputes. These conflicts can have grave repercussions for economic growth and development progress; the Philippines, where he worked for 15 years, is a prominent example. The Muslim region of Mindanao saw a long and bloody insurgency and is now a pocket of extreme poverty in an increasingly prosperous nation. This, he suggested, is the cost of ignoring religious harmony. For Bangladesh, at this critical juncture, there is a great need to learn from countries in the region and around the world that have experienced and addressed religious conflict. He commended the
unique work being undertaken by WFDD and BRAC University at the intersection of religion and development. Given recent events, expanding research in this area is vital to the future of Bangladesh. He hoped the forum would not only help advance the knowledge of those present, but also have a broader impact in inspiring others to take up efforts that promote peace.

**Dr. Fazrin Huda** hoped that this Forum would provide space to discuss religious pluralism in South Asia in an open and nuanced way, and provide concrete proposals to address mounting religiously inspired conflict. Much conflict in Bangladesh is associated with the use and abuse of religion by political groups. She contrasted recent violence with Bengal’s long and rich history of pluralism and religious harmony, rooted in Sufi syncretism and universalist Hindu sects. She pointed to themes of religious harmony and universal brotherhood in the works of Bengali poets such as Abdul Hakim and Fakir Lalon. The pluralistic Bengali identity that such figures helped to create was strongly asserted during the Liberation War, in opposition to Pakistani Muslim identity. Bangladesh, she argued, must renew its commitment to religious pluralism and ensure that all faith communities have equal rights and treatment. Though religious intolerance is on the rise, ultimately love and compassion are more powerful that hatred and self-interest. Dr. Huda concluded by stating that pluralism requires an active commitment to dialogue, but that dialogue is more than simply exchange; it should involve a deep reflection on one’s own beliefs and convictions and the ways in which we view and treat others.

**Panel 1: “The Roots and Religious Dimensions of Conflict in South Asia”**

This panel explored the roots of communal violence and religious intolerance in South Asia and provided a conceptual framing to help put current unrest in Bangladesh into a broader historically informed narrative.

**Dr. Deepali Bhanot** (University of Delhi, India) asserted at the outset that she sees the people of South Asia, who represent an incredibly diverse range of faiths, as peace-loving people. The constitutional commitment to secularism and equal respect to all religions is just the latest in a longstanding commitment to religious harmony, stretching back to figures like Emperor Ashoka and Akbar the Great. Nonetheless, recent years have seen increasingly ugly communal violence, the seeds of which were sown at various times by those looking to increase their own power. This is seen clearly in the divide and rule approach taken during the British colonial period. Particularly in the wake of the 1857 Indian rebellion the British actively sought social wedges that could be used to divide Hindus and Muslims as well as vertical division by caste and class. Politicians have continued this strategy using religious symbols to stir passions and turn communities against one another for political advantage. Increased migration is another new phenomenon to consider when examining communal conflict. Migrants who come from within and outside India often form insular communities in growing urban areas and increasingly view neighbors with suspicion. This has challenged the tradition of “Atithi Devo Bhav”, which states that the guest should be treated as God. Notions of masculinity also play roles in conflict. Men are taught to kill and die for the honor of family and community and this notion has driven many young men into militancy. Conversely, women have often taken up peacebuilding in the aftermath of violence, but their contributions are little recognized.

Dr. Bhanot emphasized that distorted history and narratives can be dangerous instruments that is used by sectarian groups to play different communities against each other. This is especially true in narratives of violence that occurred during the 1947 Partition, which have kept wounds
festering and act as a barrier to trust. In this context a small incident can provide the spark that leads to a communal riot. The telling of history is an important part of work for peace. The media has a similar responsibility to highlight stories of peace as well as those of conflict. Stories of conflict predominate because these stories are provocative and sell papers, but they can also inflame anger and feed the cycle of violence.

Ishan Ali-Fauzi (Center for the Study of Religion and Democracy, Indonesia) explored the historical dimensions of conflict, drawing examples from his native Indonesia. Some social division can be traced to the colonial period, including Muslim-Christian violence in Southeastern Indonesia. The anti-Christian violence occurring now on Java, on the other hand, is a more recent development related to a new wave of evangelical Christianity. Likewise, intra-Muslim violence, such as that targeting the Ahmadiyya, which is some of the most deadly religious violence now occurring in Indonesia, is a newer phenomenon. He noted that Indonesia is well known for its tolerant version of Islam, sometimes called ‘smiling Islam,’ but it is challenging to understand fully how far it was the authoritarian regime that in fact imposed and enforced this brand of Islam. Democratization has meant that communities need to seek new and innovative ways to resolve disputes peacefully.

Several recent developments have contributed to increased intolerance and conflict in Indonesian society. Exclusionary state policies have played a large role, as has decentralization, which has contributed to the growth of religious and sectarian politics at the local level. In a discussion of intolerance, he made it a point to note the difference between tolerant and intolerant behavior and tolerant and intolerant attitudes. He bears this important distinction in mind when, for example, he designs surveys on the attitudes and actions of Islamic leaders. Security sector reform is vitally needed. Ali-Fauzi’s organization is working actively to address the important media roles in stoking tensions. by engaging them to tell positive stories about the roles religious leaders play in peacebuilding efforts.

Dr. Syed Anwar Husain (Dhaka University, Bangladesh) argued that even though much has been written about conflict in South Asia, and the roots of the conflict have been largely identified, solutions still elude us. Communal conflict has claimed countless lives in South Asia, and unresolved conflicts have seen the region become a catalyst for conflict internationally. Inter-country and intra-country conflict must be distinguished, but there are multiple linkages between the two contexts in South Asia. Inter-country conflict is often rooted in geopolitical and geo-economic factors (explored in detail in Stanley Wolpert’s The Roots of Confrontation in South Asia) Dr. Husain emphasized the “unwelcome ramifications of de-colonization” related to the delineation of borders between India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh along religious lines. This history has contributed to an “us vs them” mentality largely rooted in religious identity. SAARC and other bodies of regional cooperation are challenged to help move beyond these oppositional identities and to promote communal harmony, a goal that is more important now than ever.

Religion, more specifically the distortion and politicization of religion, often plays a significant role in internal or intra-country conflict. Religion is a “double-edged sword,” that can be used to connect human beings in mutual protection and understanding, but also can be distorted to inspire hatred, mistrust, and blind extremism. There is ample evidence that religion can be utilized as a tool of conflict resolution – on condition that the interfaith dialogue is creative, well-informed, and action-oriented.
Al Haj U Aye Lwin (Islamic Centre of Myanmar) cited the rise of globalization and the reactionary rise of nationalism and protectionism as a key driver of conflict, providing vivid examples from Myanmar. Lwin emphasized that Myanmar has long been a pluralistic society: multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, and multi-religious. During the anti-colonial struggle in Myanmar, nationalism was a source of unity, as “others were made into brothers” in the common cause of independence. Only when nationalism began to be exploited for political gain in internal politics did conflict around social divisions arise. He suggested that religion was politically hijacked during the 2010 elections, an event meant to mark a new democratic chapter in the country’s history. In the nationalist political discourse since then, fear has been used to rally political support with Islam portrayed as the primary threat to Burmese Buddhist national identity.

Islam is regularly portrayed in international media in a very negative light, Lwin argued. This media alarmism has made Muslims an “easy target” for fearmongering. Distorted and revisionist historical narratives play roles, notably those about the decline of Buddhism in the Indian subcontinent, particularly in Bangladesh where Buddhism flourished during the Pala Dynasty (8th-12th centuries). The new narrative suggests that Islam violently wiped out Buddhism, stoking fears that the same could happen in Myanmar. An upcoming “victory rally” sponsored by the Buddhist ultra-nationalist group known as Ma Ba Tha (Patriotic Association of Myanmar) will celebrate the passage of so called “Protection of Race and Religion Laws,” which include statutes requiring women to register marriages in advance if they intend to marry a non-Buddhist. In contrast, Lwin reported that there are citizens from many faiths standing up and speaking out against growing religious intolerance, including many Buddhists monks who believe this has tainted the image of Buddhism. These are the silent majority in Myanmar and they need to be encouraged to speak out.

Lwin took up the critical issue Rohingya Muslims, a term that is now taboo in Myanmar. There is a great need for Bangladesh and Myanmar to work closely together to dispel the rumors and misinformation that feed this crisis. The narrative in Myanmar is that Rohingyas are in fact Bengalis, forced into Rakhine state as a result of the population explosion in Bangladesh. This narrative must be corrected, but beyond this there is a need to recognize that Muslims in Myanmar are not only Rohingyas, but come from many ethnic communities and can be found throughout the country. Lwin praised efforts to support pluralism undertaken by Bangladesh, which he said are an example for others to follow. He concluded with an old Myanmar proverb “it takes two hands to clap,” suggesting that increased collaboration and cooperation between Bangladesh and Myanmar is critical to ensure peace and religious harmony can flourish in the region.

The discussant, Dr. Kazi Nurul Islam of Dhaka University, offered his remarks on the panelists’ presentations. He shared Dr. Bhanot’s assessment of the situation in India: despite India’s strong commitment to secularism, discrimination along religious lines still persists. He gave the example of the 2005 Indian Supreme Court verdict that defined Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism as sects of Hinduism rather than independent religions, calling upon India to change its constitution to ensure that those faiths are legally independent. Nuanced and critical writing of history is vital to ensure it does not enflame sectarian tensions.

Questions from the audience touched on issues ranging from understanding and defining pluralism as a concept, to the role of atheists and non-believers in promoting religious harmony,
and questions over whether we should be striving for religious tolerance or religious understanding.

Katherine Marshall (moderator) noted in conclusion that religious identities and beliefs have a special capacity to stir passions, explaining why religion is so often manipulated in politics. Sectarian conflict has emerged as a distinct issue of the modern age, as people and ideas travel with increasing ease. Individuals find themselves confronted by different faith communities that they then must engage with and understand. This is complicated by new freedoms, in many contexts, that allow individuals to change or reject their religious traditions. In this dynamic context appreciating the roles of religion in conflict and peacebuilding is vitally important.

Panel 2: “Conflict in Bangladesh and the Region: Examining Ground Realities”

This panel explored recent violence and communal conflict in Bangladesh and the perception that intolerance is rising. How are religious communities affected and how do they respond?

Syed Zain al-Mahmood (Wall Street Journal) moderator for the panel, gave a brief overview of recent violence linked to religion. He noted that a Japanese national had just been shot dead in Rampur in northern Bangladesh – a killing with many similarities to the murder of an Italian aid worker in Dhaka a week before. Islamic State (IS) has claimed both attacks.

Al-Mahmood traced the recent spate of communal violence in Bangladesh to September 2012, when mobs in and around Ramu and Cox’s Bazaar looted and burned Buddhist temples, monasteries, and houses. This incident was sparked by an image of a desecrated Qur’an posted to an account with a Buddhist surname. This event, he suggested, demonstrated not only the dangers and unpredictability of communal violence, but also the role that social media can play in an increasingly connected world, where potentially incendiary words or images can be shared worldwide instantly. Following Ramu, further violence was seen around the heavily disputed 2013 elections and the International Crimes Tribunal trials, under which many Islamist politicians were prosecuted with many sentenced to death for their roles in war crimes during the 1971 Liberation War. Minority religious communities were targeted and temples and homes burned. The lines between politically and religiously motivated violence are blurred, and many attacks target minority religious communities because they are easily identified as supporters of the ruling Awami League. These events represent a significant shift, as communal riots have long been a rarity in Bangladesh as compared to other parts of South Asia.

The Shahbag protests, which saw large numbers of young people protesting against the influence of religion on society and for maximum sentencing in the ICT trials, put the religious-secular divide in Bangladesh into sharp focus. The events set off a series of protests and counter-protests and drew hundreds of thousands into the streets, illustrating the increasing polarization of Bangladeshi society. In the wake of Shahbag, newly formed extremist groups have assassinated several prominent secular and atheist bloggers, a disconcerting trend which is continuing. These new groups have links to international terrorist organizations and can make use of the resources and support from these networks. The government’s response, Al-mahmood argued, has primarily consisted of tactical operations; while this is important, a focus on counter-radicalization strategies is essential: “This is also a clash of ideas”, and we need to find a way to address the frustrations of the youth, because “hearts and minds cannot be ignored.”
The priority is to explore the causes of increased tensions, identify key actors, and craft effective peacebuilding solutions that build on what already exists. However, while looking for solutions, we should not lose sight of the positive: Bangladesh stands in sharp contrast to lynchings that have taken place in India and the treatment of Rohingya in Myanmar. Bangladesh has earned its reputation as an open and pluralist Muslim majority nation. Al-mahmood spoke of the pride he feels when he hears the bells of the nation’s largest Hindu temple, Dhakeshwari, ring while Muslims are on their way to pray or in watching Buddhists and Muslims worship alongside one another.

**Dr. Meghna Guhathakurna** (Research Initiatives, Bangladesh) explored some of the systemic dimensions of religion and power and the impact of conflict on marginalized ethnic and religious communities. Religion and politics have long been intertwined in South Asia, so recent developments in Bangladesh are not entirely new phenomena. Bangladesh inherited traditions of using religion in politics and state discourse. Highlighting these historical dynamics, particularly the creation of artificial and oppositional social dichotomies, can help to better understand the manipulation of religion in local power politics and its role in social conflict today.

Dr. Guhathakurna explored conflict at the grassroots level in Bangladesh, highlighting her organization’s participatory action research with marginalized communities across Bangladesh. Systemic persecution against minority communities is primarily manifested through land grabbing. This can involve the land of religious temples and even cemeteries and cremation grounds. This type of religious conflict does not fit neatly into the narrative of the religious-secular divide or the broader international rise of religious extremism; they relate to the use of religion as a tool in local power politics.

Dr. Guhathakurna also works with Arakanese Muslim refugees, who have fled anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar. Her organization was warned before going into the camps that the refugees were very conservative Muslims and that many held secessionist sentiments. Meeting them, however, she found most simply wanted to return to Myanmar in peace and to enjoy the rights of citizenship and protection of the government. The Rohingya were used as scapegoats after the anti-Buddhist Ramu violence and this kind of othering and villainizing, which has long been part of state discourse, prevents Bangladeshis from uncovering and addressing the real drivers of conflict.

**Principal Sukomal Barua** (Asian Conference Religions for Peace, Bangladesh) emphasized the great tradition of religious pluralism for which Bangladesh has long been renowned. Nonetheless, there have been growing cases of violence and conflict around religion. Platforms such as this Forum can encourage those from diverse backgrounds to come together and explore ways to collaborate on shared goals. We find ourselves in a diverse yet increasingly interconnected world and must strive for “unity in diversity” to find solutions to our common problems. If we work to build bridges between cultures and religions and ensure that these are crossings that allow for exchange “in both directions”, we can engender greater understanding and ease tensions. Animosity, hatred, and violence cannot be addressed by more animosity, hatred, and violence; interventions must be of a positive nature. Civil society plays important roles in addressing conflict, but more unity and integration is needed. Leaders within Bangladesh’s active civil society must bring thoughtfulness, creativity and dedication to this complex and growing challenge.
Dr. Benedict D’Rozario (Caritas Bangladesh) argued that the condition of minorities in any country is directly related to its respect for basic human rights. Ensuring that these rights are respected is a critical component of peacebuilding. Bangladesh has seen a steady and worrying rise in radicalism that are part of regional and international trends. In recent years, religious minorities have been targeted for violence, property theft, and forcible conversion. The unrest has caused many, especially those with money, skills and education, to flee the country. The response of the government and police forces during periods of violence has been praiseworthy; D’Rozario believes that they acted “timely and appropriately to restore peace and harmony.” Such incidents have, however, left a significant challenge, starting with the need to collect information to have a full picture of what happened and to inform efforts to prevent future violence.

Caritas, with 6,000 staff working in more than 200 upazillas, attempts to mainstream interreligious dialogue and conflict resolution across all of its programs. It creates forums in which local people can work together collaboratively to discuss and resolve problems. Caritas also builds capacity in traditional mediation and arbitration methods that allow local people to bypass expensive and lengthy litigation in the local court system. Dr D’Rozario feels that these efforts have been successful, noting that areas where Caritas is running programs saw markedly less violence or no violence all during periods of unrest.

Dr. D’Rozario reminded the audience that we are all part of a community and the social is inseparable component of one’s own nature. To truly understand others it is important to place oneself on the same level. This is critical in addressing common misperceptions that can lead to mistrust and social tension. We must create more opportunities for interaction and exchange to help us “move from sympathy to empathy.” The only way that we will be able to create a peaceful and harmonious Bangladesh is to listen to the people on the ground, to understand their perspectives, experiences, and needs. Despite recent unrest, the situation of religious minorities in Bangladesh today is better than it was in the immediate past. Dr. D’Rozario is hopeful that it will continue to improve in the years to come. He is encouraged to see so many meetings like this one, dedicated to improving understanding and cooperation across religious lines.

The discussant, Professor KAM Saaduddin (Dhaka University, Bangladesh) observed that conflict is unfortunately a universal reality throughout the world, and that religious conflict in particular has spanned millennia. He praised the assessment of the current context by the panelists, but drew attention to the important but under-discussed intra-religious dimensions of conflict. Without ignoring the critical influence of the US military-industrial complex, Professor Saaduddin suggested that IS represents one of the most serious threats to peace in the world today. In many ways this is an intra-religious struggle over the heart and true meaning of Islam. The killing only hours earlier of a Japanese citizen, the second claimed by IS in Bangladesh, demonstrates how this global challenge is exacerbating pre-existing tensions in the country. A historical perspective is much needed to understand and address conflict in Bangladesh.

Syed Zain Al-mahmood concluded suggesting that when we talk about the rise of violent extremism in Bangladesh, we are really talking about a “clash of ideas.” It is impossible to defeat an idea with a security response alone; you must have an idea that is even more powerful. It is when people feel they do not have a stake in the system, that extremist messages can take root.
This illustrates the critical importance of a participatory democracy that can foster an involved and dedicated citizenry.


This panel explored the scope, approach, and effectiveness of current religious peacebuilding efforts in Bangladesh, and discussed what might be learned from successful programs from around the region.

**Dr. Samia Huq** (Moderator, BRAC University, Bangladesh) observed that the long history and legacy of interfaith harmony in Bangladesh is much cited in rhetoric. Though often idealized, it is borne out in history, as rulers from Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim faith traditions ruled in the delta and largely accommodated religious otherness. The colonial era brought with it a sharp break that saw the rise of a new form of identity politics. The era also saw the rise of new reform and revival movements in response to colonialism that led to more orthodoxy and insularity in faith communities. These tensions carried over after independence, through Partition and the Liberation War. And they remain unresolved today. Conflict can be seen from this systemic level, but we must keep in mind how conflict remains wrapped up in the “minutia of daily life” in Bangladesh. This includes interactions amongst neighbors and inside households. The day’s panels give us a good base with which to think critically about how conflicts arise and are sustained. The final panel will explore efforts to resolve them.

**Dr. Sayed Abdullah al Maruf** (Dhaka University, Bangladesh) highlighted Bangladesh’s important global role as the world’s third largest Muslim country. Bangladesh has a reputation as a ‘moderate’ Muslim nation, though he took issue with the use of this term: a Muslim is simply a Muslim; only those who misunderstand or intentionally manipulative Islamic teachings could be considered radical or extremist. The intra-religious dynamics among Muslim communities in Bangladesh need to be better understood: how are these communities influenced by external political ideologies? We are not, he emphasized, isolated.

The Qur’an is a great resource and foundation for interfaith efforts within the Muslim community, but more efforts are needed to communicate this scriptural basis more widely. Several passages deal with the common origin of mankind and the imperative to treat others with compassion, kindness, and understanding. “If I am a true Muslim,” he said, “I will not persecute others for what they believe.” He critiqued the Western media for perpetuating misconceptions about Islam, which hampers peacebuilding efforts in Bangladesh and worldwide. If someone commits terrorism out of ignorance of the teachings of Islam, the media still refers to the perpetrator as a “Muslim extremist.”

Dr. Maruf offered a success story that highlights how Muslim religious leaders have mobilized on behalf of peace efforts. In 2005 Jamaat-ul-Majahideen Bangladesh detonated more that 500 bombs across the country. After these attacks the imams of roughly 300,000 mosques addressed their congregations following Friday Jummah prayer, calling on them to reject terrorism. He called this a hugely influential stand, which played a large role in the fact that no major terrorist attack has occurred in Bangladesh since. While many imams can be engaged in peacebuilding efforts through the government’s Islamic Foundation, there is a need to reach out to the leaders of Sufi *tariqaa* as the vast majority of Muslims in Bangladesh are followers of a Sufi *pir*. 
Peacebuilding efforts much be broad based and engage the full diversity of religious leaders in the country.

**Mozgan Bahar** (Baha’i Office for the Advancement of Women, Bangladesh) suggested that religion has been a primary force in social progress and human development for millennia, inspiring love, compassion, and sacrifice to serve the greater interest of their communities and societies. The moral codes of all great civilizations have been rooted at some level in religious teachings. At the same time religion has often been misused to turn people against one another. Given the role religion has played in ongoing strife, it is the responsibility of the world’s religious leaders to raise their voices against hatred, violations of human rights, and terrorism. The Baha’i in Bangladesh have long been active in peacebuilding efforts, which are rooted in their belief in the oneness of God and the shared foundations of all world religions. Baha’i’s come from and often maintain strong contacts in various religious communities.

Bahar laid out the four core peacebuilding activities that Baha’i communities undertake around the world including in Bangladesh: 1) **devotional gatherings**: many Baha’is invite friends, colleagues, and neighbors of different faiths to their home to pray and discuss religious teachings, 2) **moral education**: Baha’is feel moral education of youth is often underemphasized and have developed an interactive curriculum that discoures prejudice, promotes unity, and instills a responsibility to society 3) **youth training**: Baha’i’s view youth (ages 11-15), as a critical demographic and work to foster potential and encourage positive engagement with society and community, and 4) **thematic courses**, aimed at adults, that revolve around themes like social unity, cooperation, and non-confrontation, but also act as discussion groups. For these activities to be effective, there must also be systematic reflection on what does and doesn’t work. Activities are assessed every three months and adapted according to feedback, which acts as a “cycle of growth.”

Bahar emphasized that these activities are open to both Baha’is and non-Baha’i’s; they believe even labeling someone Baha’i or non-Baha’i “is like putting up fences.” In order to foster further peacebuilding, more events such as this Speakers’ Forum are necessary at the grassroots level. Religious leaders from all faiths should be encouraged to hold their own interfaith outreach to build bridges and challenge misconceptions. She concluded by touching on the issue of gender, stating that Baha’i view men and women as two wings of the same bird. No peace is possible without equal participation of women.

**Mawlana Abdul Awwal Khan Chowdury** (Ahmadiyya Jamaat, Bangladesh) spoke with great optimism about the potential of peacebuilding in Bangladesh, evidenced by the experience of the Ahmadiyya. Humanitarian and charitable efforts have provided Ahmadiyya important forums for inter and intra-faith exchange. Ahmadiyya-run medical dispensaries and clean water distribution efforts draw many Hindus and non-Ahmadiyya Muslims and have allowed them to challenge misconceptions about their community. Chowdury highlighted regular interfaith events sponsored by the Ahmadiyya and stressed that in such discussions there will be disagreements, sometimes on very substantive points of both faith and politics, but that these should not preclude such efforts. In his experience, if approached with honesty and sincerity, respectful disagreements can even increase mutual trust and respect.

Their community met a heartening response during the troubled times the Ahmadiyya experienced during the mid-2000s. There were 36 attacks or attempted attacks on the Ahmadiyya
instigated by “reactionary imams” between 2003 and 2006. During this time Hindus, Christians, non-Ahmadiyya Muslims and agnostics joined hands to physically shield Ahmadiyya Mosques. He thanked several of those present including Dr. Kazi Nurual Islam and Dr. Syed Anwar Hossain, as well as Holy Cross Father Richard Timm and Rosaline D’Costa, who were among the first to come to the Ahmadiyya headquarters after the attacks and offer their support. Chowdury said this gesture represents the true spirit and zeal of the Bengali nation.

Pluralism needs to be promoted through education, particularly on the inclusive teachings of Islam, “keeping the social and cultural context of Bengal in view.” As radicalism and fanaticism is being promoted in the name of Islam, it is necessary to counter it by better educating the people on the true teachings of Islam. With a final comment he suggested moving beyond the term tolerance and instead focus on the goal of “harmonious coexistence.”

**Kelly Saner-Harvey** (Mennonite Central Committee, Bangladesh) outlined the various approaches to peacebuilding that MCC has been developing over the past decade in Bangladesh and the insights gained from these efforts. He focused particularly on the Payra project, which builds peacebuilding skills though trainings with key organizations, and their peacebuilders network and peace resource center. Much of the academic discourse on conflict takes a broad and international perspective rooted in political science, law, and sociology. This perspective often informs the approaches of international NGOs, but very often leaves out voices of ordinary Bangladeshis. To address this, MCC has tried to privilege insights from the grassroots level. The daily violence experienced by local people can be rooted in politics, but much more often more is related to family disputes including over dowry, community shaming, corruption, or unscrupulous businesses taking advantage of the vulnerable. When we listen to these stories of everyday violence, it can complicate national-level narratives on the religious and political roots of violence.

At its most basic level, peacebuilding is about identifying and addressing the causes of injustice that perpetuate violence and conflict on the ground. Quoting Quaker peace activist Adam Curle, he suggested that peacebuilding starts by transforming individual lives and this extends ultimately to communities. It can’t stop there, however, but must “exert pressure upwards” and hold government officials accountable, even, non-violently, speaking truth to power. In Bangladesh power dynamics that marginalize minorities, women, and adivasi communities are central conditions that perpetuate conflict at the grassroots level. Western development actors, in particular, must be aware of their own roles in structural violence including sexism, racism, neocolonialism, corporate capitalism, and punitive and shaming systems of justice. These factors can unknowingly inform the actions of those with the best intentions and we must work carefully to uncover their influence.

Saner-Harvey explored the potential of religion as both a cause of conflict and inspiration for peacebuilding. Rarely is violence solely motivated by religion in Bangladesh. However, its power to motivate people on behalf of other causes should not be underestimated. We need to ask difficult questions about how violence is manifested in our faith communities and what resources faiths offer to address it. Conflicts that involve religion often stem from a need to regain a sense of identity and belonging in the face of insecurity, cycles of trauma, and corruption of power. Significantly, these are often the very things religious teachings are intended to address and repair. As such, religion can and should be an essential part of the
peacebuilding process. There are powerful tools in all faiths for peacebuilding including interpretations that emphasize peace, justice, nonviolence and gender equity.

Saner-Harvey pointed to revered Bengali thinkers and poets like Tagore and Lalun who were greatly inspired by their religious traditions, but created cultural expressions that transcend religious divisions and anchor Bangladeshi identity. Bangladesh has diverse and beautiful expressions of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity that should be an integral part of the peacebuilding discourse. He suggested that religion teachings help us privilege a long-term perspective that aims to cultivate a culture of peace and justice rather than focus on high profile gains in the short term. Funding constraints push many groups to demonstrate change quickly so that long-term engagement with individual communities gets overlooked. Quoting Martin Luther King Jr., he observed that “peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice” and that peacebuilding does not end with the ceasefire, that is when the real work begins.

Effective approaches to transforming family and community conflict depend critically on sustained efforts at multiple levels with key actors, for example, equipping teachers and Union Parishad members with skills to deal with community disputes and providing peace lessons in schools that expose youth to concepts of justice, appropriate use of power, listening skills, and self worth. Obstacles to peacebuilding include the social and culturally constructed walls that prevent collaboration between potential peacebuilders: NGOs may not feel comfortable reaching out to imams, student groups may not trust politicians, and political groups cannot work across party lines. He stressed that the most ineffective approaches in peacebuilding try to change the other rather than empowering them. Often international actors do not realize that the solutions they advocate are rooted in their own perspective about what is true, fair, or just. As a result these efforts can be met with resistance and frustration. It is important to approach peacebuilding with humility and transparency, seeking to understand the worldview of others and speak sensitively and respectfully. Taking the time to build relationships in communities is vital if peacebuilding is to be successful.

Dr. Father Tapan D’Rozario (Dhaka University, Bangladesh), as discussant noted that despite the economic growth Bangladesh is now experiencing we must not lose sight of peace as a goal. He was encouraged that the Speakers Forum provided a new platform that allowed local and international actors to put issues of peacebuilding in the foreground and to share insights. The theme of engaging women and youth in peacebuilding has special importance as they are often ignored in mainstream peace efforts. He called on religious leaders with their great influence in Bangladeshi society to join peace efforts and emphasize core religious values of social justice, human rights, and respect for other religions. Events such as this one, where individuals from different backgrounds sit together listen and learn from each other, are a powerful demonstration that pluralism is possible, and it is by working together that we may reach our goal of peace.

The session ended with a lively question answer segment. In response to a question on the responsibility of religious leaders to speak out more vocally on issues of violence particularly, which involve the corruption of religious teachings, Dr. Maruf suggested that many religious leaders fear violent repercussions if they speak out publicly, particularly over television. Questions were posed about the possibility of removing Islam as the state religion of Bangladesh, which provoked differing views. In response to question asking whether a world where religious teachings were followed perfectly would be free of conflict, Kelly Sanner-
Harvey gave his view that conflict “is a natural part of life…. But it is how we deal with conflict that is important.”

Closing Remarks

**Professor Katherine Marshall** offered sincere thanks to the individuals from WFDD, BRAC University, and Dhaka University who made this Speakers’ Forum possible. She then touched on the complexities that the Forum drew out, but also its role in highlighting the contributions and different views of people from across Bangladeshi society, which demonstrated the value and necessity of bringing such discussions into the open.

She asked the audience to leave with five questions in mind that require further exploration and discussion:

1) What does religion have to do with conflict today? This is a question posed worldwide with countless contradictory answers offered. It is a question intertwined with economic, social justice, demographic, and geographic issues. What are meaningful answers for Bangladesh?

2) What is the meaning of pluralism? Is it the “unity in diversity” ideal that is often discussed in Bangladesh? Bangladeshi society is diverse and dynamic. How do we engage with legacies, histories, memories, and narratives that continue to be passed on?

3) How do we think about the relationship between religion and politics? The politicization of religion, and the “religionization” of politics is central to discussions of conflict in Bangladesh and throughout the world. We need better responses to this interaction.

4) How can we address the ambivalence and uncertainty around conflict in Bangladesh? It is at once a country of interfaith harmony and a conflict-prone zone. We need a better understanding of this situation, where the tensions are, and how to manage new and emerging forms of conflict.

5) How might we establish better peacebuilding networks in Bangladesh? There are many examples of peacebuilding work being done in Bangladesh, but there is little sense that it has the status and depth that is seen in other places. How can we bring together networks of people working in this area to discuss insights and approaches?

She concluded with her heartfelt thanks to all in attendance for their engagement, patience, and interest through the daylong event.

**Dr. Syed Saad Andeleeb**, (vice chancellor BRAC University), concluded the Speakers’ Forum.

He left the audience with two observations:

1) Conflict is the result of many factors, not just one. Violence may be seen as religiously inspired, but it really occurs at the confluence of many other factors that may be political or economic. Peacebuilders need to be much more comprehensive in conceptualizing conflict if a solution is to be found.

2) It is at most ten percent of the world’s population that drives conflict; the rest either are peaceful or neutral. Peacemakers should focus on this small group, talk to them and try hard and sincerely to discern their motivation.

Dr. Andeleeb thanked Georgetown University for inspiring BRAC University to push its research capacity forward. Comprehensive understanding of social problems, he said, can really
only be brought about through research. He appreciated the collaboration and engagement demonstrated by the Forum: this kind of engagement is critical to helping Bangladesh solve some of its most intractable problems.

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