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# *Beyond the Paradox: Religion, Family and Modernity in Contemporary Bangladesh*

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## **Abstract**

This paper reflects on the apparent ‘paradox’ of a contemporary Bangladesh that appears both ‘more modern’ and ‘more Islamic’, focusing on changes in the family (and the gender and generational orders that it embodies) as a central locus of anxiety and contestation. The paper begins with theory, how the paradox is framed by classical social science expectations of religious decline and how this has been contested by contemporary writers who describe specifically modern forms of piety. It then turns to Bangladesh, where highly publicized symbolic oppositions between ‘religion’ and ‘development’ contrast sharply with people’s pragmatic accommodation of development goods in everyday life. Analysis of religious references in interview data reveal the co-existence of very different understandings: a more traditional view of religion as embedded in the moral order; and a more modern deliberate cultivation of a religious life. They also reveal how many of the uses which people make of religion are not specifically religious: to conjure a moral universe, to mark what is important to them, to say things about themselves. The final section returns to theory, reflecting on how this is informed by the findings from Bangladesh, and suggesting that the importance of the private and personal as a site for governance offers a further dimension of why the supposed ‘paradox’ of a religious modernity may not be so paradoxical after all.

## **Introduction**

The family itself is a religion for us.  
(shongshartaeci to amader ekta dharmā)<sup>1</sup>

For most of its history Bangladesh has been a by-word for poverty and underdevelopment. Recently, however, this has changed. The

<sup>1</sup> Jahanara Begum—40a Mm (see footnote 12 for key to codes regarding quotations from interviews).

'litaney of grim statistics'<sup>2</sup> of Bangladesh's twentieth-century profile is giving way to a cautious heralding as development success. In 2006–2007 annual growth in GDP was recorded as 6.5 per cent.<sup>3</sup> Dhaka is transformed from a sleepy backwater in the mid 1980s to a megalopolis of some 7 million people,<sup>4</sup> with the characteristic extremes of slums and shopping malls, traffic jams and pollution, dust-filled factories and high rise universities. New roads, electrification and mobile telephones connect once remote villages into the nation state and global market. Brick kilns are everywhere, producing the hardcore on which construction depends in a country built on Himalayan silt. The contradictions of economic growth, won through the ruthless exploitation of people and natural environment, are mirrored in the political sphere. Soldiers and armed police mark the fragility of a democratic settlement that has never seen the military far from the centre of power.

In classical social science such transformations in economy and society are expected to accompany the decline of religion. In fact, however, the predominantly Muslim identity which has been used since colonial times to score the territorial boundaries of what is now Bangladesh is receiving new emphasis. Substantial Hindu migration to India since Partition in 1947 means Muslims now make up almost 90 per cent of the population.<sup>5</sup> Although the Constitution of Bangladesh newly independent in 1971 asserted the separation of religion and politics, within a few years Islam re-emerged as part of the political lexicon. Globalization and most immediately the growth of labour migration to the Arabian Gulf has brought new money and new cultural influences in its wake. City and village landscapes are peppered with more, and more elaborate mosques; official schedules give way to accommodate prayer and fasting; more people are adopting more comprehensive forms of Islamic dress. From an overwhelming stress on the economy, therefore, there is a new register amongst commentators on Bangladesh: a focus on religion, and especially its more fundamentalist forms, addressed

<sup>2</sup> Arthur, W. and McNicholl, G. 1978. 'An analytical survey of population and development in Bangladesh'. *Population and Development Review* 4 (1):23–80.

<sup>3</sup> *Bangladesh at a Glance*. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) 2007. <http://www.bbs.gov.bd/Home.aspx> (accessed 27 December 2011).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> The 2001 Bangladesh Census figures are Muslim 89.6 per cent; Hindu 9.4 per cent; Christian 0.3 per cent; Buddhist 0.6 per cent; Others 0.15 per cent. In the 1981 Census, Muslims were 86.7 per cent, Hindus 12.1 per cent.

primarily as an issue of politics.<sup>6</sup> This contrasts sharply with more established views on Islam in Bengal, which emphasize its syncretism and malleability, its grounding in Sufi thought and long co-residence with Hindu neighbours giving many different and localized traditions of practice and belief.<sup>7</sup>

This paper interrogates the sense of paradox evoked by a contemporary Bangladesh characterized as at once 'more modern' and 'more Islamic'. In place of public politics, however, it relates this to discussion of the family and everyday living. The focus on family is not random, but reflects its centrality to the social order, and thus to people's expressed anxieties about social change. Family in Bangladesh is the core institution for the delivery of welfare and social control; for the performance of gender and age-based roles and responsibilities; and stands as a microcosm for the wellbeing of society as a whole. As such it plays a central part in the construction of the moral order, which is also commonly expressed in religious terms.<sup>8</sup> This ties religion and the family closely together: since both ground and symbolize the moral order, changes in either will have implications for the other. As argued below, these relations are also emphasized and re-cast by the contradictory dynamics of modernity, which are re-structuring both family and religion in contemporary Bangladesh.

<sup>6</sup> Seabrook, J. (2002). *Freedom Unfinished: Fundamentalism and Popular Resistance in Bangladesh Today*. Zed Books; Riaz, Ai. (2008). *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh. A Complex Web*. London: Routledge; Datta, S. (2008). 'Islamic Militancy in Bangladesh: The Threat from Within', *South Asia: Journal of South Asia*, 30 (1), pp. 145–170; Karlekar, H. (2005). *Bangladesh: The Next Afghanistan?* Sage.

<sup>7</sup> Ahmed, R. (1981). *The Bengal Muslims, 1871–1906: A Quest of Identity*. Delhi: OUP; Maloney, C., Aziz, A. and Sarkar, P. C. (1981). *Beliefs and Fertility in Bangladesh*. Bangladesh: International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research (ICDDR,B); Abecassis, D. (1990). *Identity, Islam and Human Development in Rural Bangladesh*. Dhaka: University Press Limited; Banu, UAB, R. A. (1992). *Islam in Bangladesh*. Leiden: E. J. Brill; Uddin, S. M. 2006. *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity, and Language in an Islamic Nation*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

<sup>8</sup> The closeness of these ties are underlined by the fact that 'dharma', the term derived from Sanskrit which is commonly translated as 'religion' in Bangladesh and northern India, is also used to describe the cultural grounding of this moral order, providing a foundational logic which structures the family along with all social institutions, including, but not limited to, those identified more particularly as 'religious'. For more detailed discussion see a companion paper, 'Religion, politics and the moral order in Bangladesh', J. Devine and S. C. White, (2009) Religions and Development Working Paper 40, University of Birmingham. Discussion with Joe Devine has been of great significance in preparing this paper, and special thanks are due to him as a supportive and stimulating colleague.

The paper begins with theory. This has two aspects. First, how the 'paradox' is framed by the historical experience of Europe and how it has been critiqued by some contemporary scholars of Islamic societies. Second, how changes in the structure and ideology of family offer parallels to the shifts observed in religion and how these have a common basis in modernist constructions of 'public' versus 'private' spheres. The paper then turns to Bangladesh, where highly publicized symbolic oppositions between 'religion' and 'development' contrast sharply with people's pragmatic incorporation of development goods in everyday life. Analysis of religious references in interviews reveal the co-existence of very different understandings: a more traditional view of religion as embedded in the moral order; and a more modern deliberate cultivation of a religious life. They also problematize the emphasis of recent commentators on fundamentalist forms of belief, as they reveal the many different ways that people use religious references: to conjure a moral universe, to mark what is important to them, to say things about themselves. The final section returns to theory, reflecting on how this is informed by the findings from Bangladesh, and suggesting that the importance of the private and personal as a site for governance offers a further dimension of why the supposed 'paradox' of a religious modernity may not be so paradoxical after all.

Before proceeding, an important caveat should be noted. There is a danger that in concentrating primarily on Muslims, this paper reinforces the current characterization of Bangladesh as a 'Muslim nation'. To balance this, it is important to stress that there continues to be religious diversity in Bangladesh. Moves to 'purify' Islamic observance notwithstanding, there is still considerable crossover between religious traditions in practice, especially when seeking healing. However, there is no doubt that inter-religious relations are becoming more communalized: while it was common for Muslims to attend Hindu religious celebrations a generation ago, this is now more rarely observed.

The research on which this paper draws took place in two villages, one in Dinajpur district, north-west Bangladesh and one in Manikganj district, near Dhaka, central Bangladesh. An initial study in 2006 was followed by further research in Dinajpur in 2008.<sup>9</sup> For the most

<sup>9</sup> The logic behind this selection of villages was to capture a contrast in distance from the hub of development/modernity in Bangladesh, the capital city, Dhaka. This was relevant to the larger study within which the data presented in this paper were

part, the interviews did not ask specifically about religion, but rather sought to explore more broadly changing patterns in the construction of marriage, family and identity.<sup>10</sup> In most cases the paper thus draws on religious references which arose naturally during conversation, rather than in response to a specific prompt. The interviews involved 70 respondents comprising a cross-section of Muslims and Hindus of different wealth categories and a small group of non-Bengali 'Adivasis'.<sup>11</sup> A classification code has been assigned to each individual, identifying them in basic terms by sex, religion, and a very basic economic distinction—'rich', 'middle', poor.<sup>12</sup>

### Dismantling the paradox

The sense of paradox that surrounds states like Bangladesh being characterized at once by advancing globalized capitalism and the increased visibility of Islam derives from the European path to modernity. The first aspect of this is secularization. From the

gathered, but no clear patterns by site could be identified in the much more limited sample and focus of attention here.

<sup>10</sup> The 2006 research was conducted under the ESRC Research Group Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD), University of Bath, 2002–2007. The support of the ESRC is gratefully acknowledged. The 2008 study and analysis of this data has been carried out under the Research Programme Consortium in Religion and Development led by the University of Birmingham, 2005–2010, funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for the benefit of developing countries. The views expressed are not necessarily those of DFID. The interviews were conducted by members of the WeD Bangladesh team, following profiles which I designed. Particular thanks are due to M. Hasan Ashraf, Nasrin Sultana, Suborna Camelia, Taifur Rahman, and Tahmina Ahmed.

<sup>11</sup> The 2006 research involved 58 respondents from couples in which husband and wife were interviewed separately and 10 single elderly life histories. From the 2008 research this paper draws on one individual case history; eight focus groups and one extended case study focused on religion and family life. All the interviewees were drawn from the wider WeD sample and thus had already completed a general household questionnaire.

<sup>12</sup> The case studies are coded as follows. The number after the initials of the name shows the district and couple number. The small letter shows sex—a for female, b for male. The next capital letter shows religion, 'M' for Muslim or 'H' for Hindu. The final letter provides a very rough economic categorization: 'r' for rich, 'm' for middle, 'p' for poor, based on a mix of occupational and asset status, and self-classification. The case study respondent profile is as follows: Manikganj total 33: 7 Hindu, 26 Muslim; 7 rich, 11 middle, 15 poor; Dinajpur: total 35: 4 Hindu, 29 Muslim, 2 Santal (Adivasi); 4 rich, 22 middle, 9 poor. Focus groups were organized separately by age and gender. The sample was chosen to cover a range of criteria, and not intended to be representative of the villages as a whole, either by wealth or religion.

Enlightenment onwards into the drive towards industrialization came a massive increase in the complexity of the division of labour, establishing, for example, separate professions, academic disciplines, and institutions of law, market and state. Religious institutions similarly became more specialized, and more removed from the centres of power to their own separate—and more peripheral—sphere. Whilst some countries have established the state as strictly secular, in many there remains some role for religious actors and institutions in official space. Even there, however, the sphere of influence has been re-defined. Religion has become a ‘matter of conscience’, concerned with issues of values and beliefs, something associated predominantly with the personal rather than public sphere. Early theorists of modernity thus famously expected that religion would disappear altogether, part of the ‘childhood of humankind’, of an ‘enchanted’ worldview overtaken by an evolutionary process of scientific progress and bureaucratic rationalization. Against such expectations, the current prominence of religion particularly in some forms of nationalist politics appears paradoxical: a riddle which some scholars suggest is solved by the moral emptiness of modernity, which people turn to religion to fill.<sup>13</sup>

The second aspect of the framing of this ‘paradox’ relates to Islam in particular and the way it has been rendered as the ‘other’ of modernity. Evident in gross forms such as Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ theory,<sup>14</sup> this process of ‘othering’ is an essential part of the constitution of the modern. Grossberg puts it like this:

The modern constitutes its own identity by differentiating itself from another (usually tradition as a temporal other or spatial others transformed into temporal others).<sup>15</sup>

As Said has shown in *Orientalism*,<sup>16</sup> Islam and Islamic societies offer a paradigmatic case of this ‘other’, being associated with the exotic, erotic, quixotic and barbaric. This has cast a long shadow, particularly

<sup>13</sup> Thomas, S. M. (2004). *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Politics*. New York: Palgrave/Macmillan.

<sup>14</sup> Huntington, S. P. (1993). ‘The Clash of Civilizations?’, *Foreign Affairs* 72 (3): 22–49, Summer.

<sup>15</sup> Grossberg, L. (1996) ‘Identity and cultural studies: is that all there is?’ In Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (eds), *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage, pp. 87–107, especially p. 93.

<sup>16</sup> Said, E. (1985). *Orientalism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

for those forms of Islam that are seen as politically hostile to the West. Thus Lara Deeb argues:

Despite a plethora of literature about Islamism and modern(ities), less has been written about how Islamists and pious Muslims themselves grapple with what it means to be modern, without assuming the nature of the links between modern-ness and the West. Instead, much of this work has held Islamism to be either a cultural resistance to a Western modernity, or only selectively modern. Both these perspectives generally work from that historicist understanding of modernity as based in the West, with Islamists either written outside that universalizing project or allowed within its technological, but not its cultural, spaces.<sup>17</sup>

Reacting to similar issues Mahmood argues that Islamism and liberal secularity are closely interwoven, through ‘historically shifting, ambiguous, and unpredictable encounters’.<sup>18</sup> Deeb slices through the supposed oppositions as she describes ‘an enchanted modern’ amongst the Islamists she studied in Shi’a Lebanon. She proposes:

rather than view Islamists as necessarily engaged in a struggle with modernity, we can instead view spiritual progress as a potential aspect of the modern.<sup>19</sup>

A final thread that unravels the ‘paradox’ is drawn from within the European experience itself. The secularization that shifted religious institutions in Europe from centre stage was associated not simply with a move from one category to another, but rather with the *constitution* of public/private difference as a key organizing principle of modern society.<sup>20</sup> Critical to this construction of the ‘private sphere’, of course, is its identification with the family. While this positioning of the family has become so foundational that it appears ‘natural’, it is important to remember that it is anything but. As any anthropological textbook will show, in pre-modern society family—or ‘kinship’—typically provides the accepted basis for wide-reaching structures of social, economic and political organization. Feminist scholarship has also pointed out

<sup>17</sup> Deeb, L. (2006). *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi’a Lebanon*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> Mahmood, Saba. (2005). *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton University Press, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> Engels, Frederick. (2004), (1884). *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. Australia: Resistance Books.



the important articulations between public 'production' and private 'reproduction'.<sup>21</sup>

With the constitution of the private sphere come new narratives of the person, which offer new discursive resources with respect to religion and family and to the way relations between them are conceived. For the family, changes in the material structures of living together are accompanied by shifts in ideologies of love and care. Evidence from around the world suggests (more individualist) discourses of love, passion, choice and romance are increasingly challenging earlier narratives of (social or collective) duty, obligation and honour.<sup>22</sup> Discourses of individual responsibility and choice similarly re-calibrate the orientation of religion from the collective and taken for granted to a matter of reflective cultivation; from inherited affiliation to chosen identity and personal conviction.

If the public sphere is the realm of power, being located in the private might mean exclusion from political influence on the one hand, or liberation from political control on the other. Such arguments have been applied to both religion and the family. Two considerations, however, suggest that this needs reconsidering. In the first place, the politics of identity have brought supposedly 'private' attributes (such as gender or sexuality) into the grammar of public claims-making.<sup>23</sup> Secondly, following Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1981) the private sphere has been analysed not as an arena of personal freedom, but rather as itself a site for the ever more invasive extension of power and governance. Modernity, in this reading, has not brought sexual liberation, but rather constructed sexuality as a site of power, in which a 'polymorphous incitement to discourse' requires individuals to construct ever more detailed

<sup>21</sup> Edholm, F., Harris, O. and Young, K. (1977). 'Conceptualizing women', *Critique of Anthropology* 3 (9/10):101–130.

<sup>22</sup> Mahmood (2005), *The Politics of Piety*. See also e.g. on Bedouin people in Egypt, Abu Lughod, Lila. 1990. 'The romance of resistance: tracing transformations of power through Bedouin women'. *American Ethnologist* 17(1):41–55; on Korea, Kendall, L. (1996). *Getting Married in Korea. Of Gender, Morality and Modernity*. Berkeley/London: University of California Press; on Andalusia, Spain, Collier, J. F. (1997). *From Duty to Desire: Remaking families in a Spanish village*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; on Lebanon, Joseph, S. (ed.) (1999). *Intimate Selving in Arab Families: Gender, Self and Identity*. Syracuse University Press; on Nepal, Ahearn, Laura M. 2001. *Invitations to Love: Literacy, Love Letters, and Social Change in Nepal*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; and on Kerala, Osella, F. and Osella, C. (2008). 'Islamism and social reform in Kerala, South India'. *Modern Asian Studies*. 42(2–3): 259–281, March.

<sup>23</sup> See for example, Fraser, N. (1997) *Justice Interruptus. Critical Reflections on the 'Post-Socialist' Condition*. London: Routledge.

narratives of the self. Nikolas Rose pursues this line further as he seeks to explore power not as commonly imagined a *constraint* on subjectivity, but rather how it *constitutes* subjectivity and individuals ‘free to choose’.<sup>24</sup> Individuals are encouraged to take responsibility for their own wellbeing, seeking for their personal fulfilment the goals or activities that are institutionally or socially valued.<sup>25</sup> For Rose, as a result, ‘life has become a skilled performance’<sup>26</sup> in which the promise of perfectibility through technical control comes at the cost that ‘the self becomes the target of a reflexive objectifying gaze’—with each person one’s own sternest critic.<sup>27</sup> Although secular in tone, this phrase has strong resonance with Saba Mahmood’s description of the goal of the Islamist mosque movement in Egypt as the cultivation of the ‘pious self’.<sup>28</sup> A word of caution is in order here. To point out similarity is not to imply identity. The religious idiom of submission is very different to that of technical control. Also there are many forms in which modern selves may appear, bearing the marks of the cultural resources on which they draw as well as the social and political context in which they emerge.<sup>29</sup> Drawing attention to the ‘politics of the personal’ in this way, however, clearly suggests that the articulation of religion in the public sphere may not be so surprising as some commentators would lead us to believe.

### Symbolic oppositions

The persistence in Bangladesh of mass poverty, continued reliance on low capitalized physical labour, endemic corruption in public service and market practice, recurrent military involvement in politics and the fragility of the rule of law, clearly make it very far from the textbook account of a modern society characterized by a faith in progress; industrial production and a market economy; and political institutions

<sup>24</sup> Rose, N. (1989). *Governing the Soul. The Shaping of the Private Self*. London: Routledge.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 208.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 238.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 239.

<sup>28</sup> This resonance is not coincidental, of course: Mahmood draws heavily on Foucauldian analysis in presenting her study.

<sup>29</sup> Haniffa, F. (2008). ‘Piety as politics amongst Muslim women in contemporary Sri Lanka’. *Modern Asian Studies* 42(2–3): 347–375, March.

regulated through bureaucratic rationality and democratic politics.<sup>30</sup> What it does however exemplify is modernity in post-colonial mode. As Stuart Hall describes:

...the transition to 'post-colonial' is characterised by independence from direct colonial rule, the formation of new nation states, forms of economic development dominated by the growth of indigenous capital and their relations of neo-colonial dependency on the developed capitalist world, and the politics which arise from emergence of powerful local elites managing the contradictory effects of under-development. Just as significant, it is characterised by the persistence of many of the effects of colonisation, but at the same time their displacement from the coloniser/colonised axis to their internalisation within the decolonised society itself.<sup>31</sup>

The need for a unifying ideology to manage the contradictions of post-colonial modernity is without doubt part of the reason that successive governments in Bangladesh have turned to religion to bolster their legitimacy. But 'religion' can also serve as an idiom through which struggles to define the social order are expressed. In Bangladesh the 1990s thus saw a series of major public symbolic conflicts, in the shape of 'fundamentalist' attacks on Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and fatwas, mostly against 'immorality', especially of poor women, and some against the gender work of NGOs.<sup>32</sup> Both sides extracted maximum value from these events, posing them as confrontations between on the one hand obscurantist religion and 'the mullahs' against the NGOs as women's advocates and harbingers of modernity; and on the other hand religion as upholder of morality and authenticity, against the NGOs as agents of imperialism.<sup>33</sup> As many commentators have said, these symbolic

<sup>30</sup> Giddens, A. (1998). *Conversations with Anthony Giddens: Making Sense of Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

<sup>31</sup> Hall, Stuart. 1996. 'When was the "post-colonial"? Thinking at the Limit'. pp. 242–260, in Chambers, Iain and Curti, Lidia (eds) *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*. London: Routledge.

<sup>32</sup> Between January 1993 and December 1996 more than 60 fatwas were recorded in Bangladesh as reported by Ain O Salish Kendro in Shehabuddin, Elora (1999). 'Contesting the Illicit: Gender and the Politics of Fatwas in Bangladesh'. *Signs*, Vol. 24, No. 4, Institutions, Regulation, and Social Control (Summer), pp. 1011–1044. In a great victory for feminist organization, the highest court in Bangladesh declared all fatwas illegal in 2000, see Karim, Lamia. (2004). 'Democratizing Bangladesh: State, NGOs, and Militant Islam'. *Cultural Dynamics* 16 (2/3):291–311, p. 303.

<sup>33</sup> Naher, A. (2005). *Gender, Religion and Development in Rural Bangladesh*. University of Heidelberg: unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. For further discussion see Shehabuddin, Elora. (2008). *Reshaping the Holy: Democracy, Development and Muslim Women in Bangladesh*. New York: Columbia University Press.

clashes also served as a means of settling much more local and personal scores.

High profile events hotly debated in the national press were only the most prominent examples of a whole series of more minor disputes that ricocheted across the country. Ainoon Naher states that in the area she studied<sup>34</sup> ‘one of the most significant accusations’ against the NGOs was that they were seeking to break up the traditional family order through targeting women in their development programmes, dominant amongst which is the supply of microcredit.<sup>35</sup> Thus in a large annual religious meeting (*waz*) it was claimed that the Grameen Bank, a major provider of loans to village women in Bangladesh, taught women to chant:

Shami boro na sir<sup>36</sup> boro?            Is husband greater, or ‘sir’ greater?  
Sir boro, sir boro.                        ‘Sir’ is greater, ‘Sir’ is greater.<sup>37</sup>

This same allegation, extended to NGOs in general, was reported by a focus group of elderly men in our research. While there is little doubt that its substance is false, it is interesting to muse on its structure. The alleged chant does not run: ‘Who is greater, husband or wife?’ The perceived issue is not therefore the empowerment of women, but the replacement of *domestic* patriarchy by *development* patriarchy—or the local by the global; or the (Islamic) universal by the (Western? modern? secular?) particular, depending on one’s point of view. A second chant reported by Naher reinforces this:

Shamir kotha shunbo na            We won’t listen to our husbands  
Grameen Bank charbo na            We won’t leave the Grameen Bank<sup>38</sup>

In our research, the second chant reported took a rather different line, widening the sense of a shift in the moral order:

Shami boro na taka boro?            Is husband greater, or money greater?

This links into a broader set of associations over the increased centrality of money and its challenge to the moral order which were a recurrent theme in group discussions, especially amongst older men. These include a rise in demand for consumer consumption,

<sup>34</sup> ‘Jiri’, in Chittagong district, South East Bangladesh, 1996–1998, with short follow-up visits in 1999 and 2001.

<sup>35</sup> Naher, *Gender, Religion and Development* p. 151.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Sir’ refers to a Grameen Bank worker.

<sup>37</sup> Naher, *Gender, Religion and Development*, p. 152, my translation.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

the paradigmatic case of which takes a feminized form—saris and cosmetics. The responsibility of husbands and fathers to provide for their families is seen to be strained by increasing expectations of both quantity and quality from wives and children, who a generation ago would have been happy with whatever he brought home. They also include competition between husband and wife over control over money and marital tension and conflict when loans have to be repaid. There is also a class aspect to this. Since it is mainly poorer people who rely on NGO loans, there is a paternalistic concern that they will be led into debt and ultimately left even poorer than before. The moral ambiguity of the NGOs which present the most evident material form of the alien forces which underlie such changes is encapsulated in the following description:

NGOs never listen to any defaulter. They will take tin off the roof or seize a cow if the client fails to pay. They know only money. This is nothing but an interest business [elderly male focus group].

In a rural Muslim context, terming NGOs ‘interest businesses’ places them triply outside the moral community: first for taking interest which is seen as *haram*, unclean by Islamic law; second for being a business when they make claims to being a humanitarian or social welfare organization; and third for conducting a relationship on de-personalized terms, under which a loan must be repaid whatever hardship this causes to the borrower, so violating any notion of a moral economy.

Such highly moralized terms are not, however, the only way that NGOs and their loans appear in local narratives. In marked contrast to the focus group discussions, the individual interviews depict NGO credit in much more pragmatic terms, as providing one option amongst the many that people mobilize to make ends meet in difficult times. Here, instead of undermining ‘the family’, loans appear instead as an important means which families use to get by. People therefore talked of taking NGO loans to help them run the family; to pay a bribe to get a son a job; to pay dowries; to pay for a house; being wasted by a husband; being shared with sons; enabling a widow to support herself; and to buy clothes for Eid. What is striking in these accounts is how very much within the everyday are the options the NGOs provide and how seamless is the articulation between the ‘moral community’ of personalized lending amongst family and neighbours and the loans taken from NGOs, such that one is frequently used alongside or to repay the other.

An intriguing footnote to this high profile confrontation between ‘religion’ and ‘development’ is the way that some changes have *not* attracted a specifically religious condemnation. The employment of women in garment factories has arguably constituted a more fundamental challenge to purdah<sup>39</sup> norms and the gender division of labour than has NGO-based credit which is frequently passed on to household men.<sup>40</sup> There is certainly a lot of grumbling about the garments factories, and women who work there face criticism on grounds of morality. But they have not attracted the fatwas and religion-identified attacks that the NGOs have. This confirms that the substance of the NGO-‘Mullah’ confrontation lay indeed in the symbolic, or political, capital that each side could derive from it, rather than this signifying any more structural antagonism between ‘Islam’ and the expansion of women’s economic activity.

### Family and the moral order

A sense of moral order and one’s relationship to it pervades all of the interviews, across gender, class, age, ethnic and religious differences. Views differ on how far ‘what is’ tallies with ‘what should be’ and the details of how it should work in practice, but at the heart is the notion of right relationships and of the importance of being in the right place. In expressing this sense of order people at times make an explicit religious reference, and at other times do not. In contrast to the modernist identification of religion with a distinct area of life, for most of our respondents this sense of order is simply part of what is taken for granted, the everyday, not something privatized or set apart. In classic Weberian terms, this is an ‘enchanted’ worldview. Geography is marked by sacred or dangerous places, the graveyard that must be walked around or the forest where spirits live. Most famous, of course, are the notions of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ that govern women’s mobility and scope for activity in the purdah idiom shared—though with some differences in practice—between Muslim and Hindu. Time

<sup>39</sup> ‘Purdah’, literally ‘curtain’, refers to the norm of female seclusion. This cultural orientation is common to both Hindus and Muslims in northern India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, though norms for its practice have always varied. See e.g., Papanek, H. and Minault, G. (eds) *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia*. Columbia, Missouri: South Asia Books’.

<sup>40</sup> Goetz, A. M. and Sen Gupta, R. (1996). ‘Who takes the credit? Gender, power and loan use in rural Bangladesh’ *World Development* 24:1: 45–83.

too—the rhythm of days, of the seasons, of the years, and the cycle of an individual life—is elaborated in sacred as well as in practical ways. The moral order is seen to be written in nature, society and religion. Thus to get married is at once a good thing, a fulfilment of nature, a social responsibility and a religious duty. To get children married well is a primary responsibility of parental guardianship and the focus of major personal and cultural anxiety. The arrangement and celebration of marriage is a collective enterprise, in which Allah or the gods are honoured and bonds of kinship and community are animated and extended, well beyond the individual couple involved.<sup>41</sup>

In ideal terms at least, conformity with the moral order extends even to the level of emotions. At a discursive level, if not necessarily at the level of actual experience, ‘what is’ thus elides with ‘what should be’. Statements like the following are common:

Parents love all their children equally.  
This is the command of God as well.<sup>42</sup>

The love of a husband for a wife is unique, as is women’s love for their husbands. All women feel tenderness for their husbands. This has come from God, it cannot be questioned.<sup>43</sup>

Where things do not just come naturally, however, religion may be brought in with society to ensure proper behaviour:

It is also in religion that a girl has to obey her husband as the guardian. ... All sacrifices have to be made for the husband. The girl whose husband is not happy with her will not get people’s appreciation nor anything in the life after death.<sup>44</sup>

Amidst this view of the moral order as given and beyond question, there is also the sense of something very different going on. As elsewhere in the world, Bangladesh is experiencing considerable challenge by gender and generation, in both material arrangements and social norms of authority, respect, deference, or proper behaviour between older and younger, men and women. The cultural norm of a joint family household, in which married sons and their families live together in their father’s house, is being gradually eroded, as more

<sup>41</sup> A fuller discussion of how marriage and family relations are changing in Bangladesh and its implication for gender and generational relations will be presented in a companion paper drawn from the same research project (forthcoming).

<sup>42</sup> Osman Ali—7b Mm.

<sup>43</sup> Latefa—o8a Mr.

<sup>44</sup> Osman Ali—17b Mm.

separate ('nuclear') households become the norm. In the larger study of 1500 households of which this research forms a part, 62.5 per cent were nuclear in structure. This continues a long term trend: village-level research undertaken in the 1960s and 1970s already reports at least half the households being nuclear in structure.<sup>45</sup> Narratives here concern a growing emphasis on the marital relationship; the increasing involvement of young people themselves in choosing their own marriage partners; and material anxieties about care and support in old age. These raise a more general anxiety that the moral order may be breaking down: the rise of action motivated by personal desire rather than by conformity with social rules; an increase of 'greed' or selfishness; and claims of rising inter-personal conflict. The aspect of 'moral panic' attending these issues may exaggerate the extent of change: the figure of 'love marriage', for example, appears as a kind of folk devil standing for disorder incarnate, but such marriages are actually relatively rare in our data. This notwithstanding, it is clear that marriages are taking place later than they were, and social acceptance seems to have now shifted to accepting that young people meet before marriage, rather than the previous model of sight unseen. There is difference in the detail of what people consider the form of 'right relationships'—whether the roles of husbands and wives should be more or less differentiated; or the significance of romantic love in marriage. Such changes at the household level reflect a whole range of factors: new technologies, greater integration into market and state, migration and urbanization, more education, a rapid decline in fertility, and increased diversity of employment, including a marked expansion of opportunities for economic activity for women.

Discourses of the moral order thus identify it in apparently contradictory ways: as given and inalienable, under profound threat, or open to accommodation in the way it is realized on a day-to-day basis and what is appropriate in 'modern times'. References to religious authority provide one resource which people draw on in establishing these positions, and the ways these references are made themselves suggest more 'modern' and 'traditional' ways in which religion is being construed.

<sup>45</sup> Bertocci, P. 1970. *Elusive Villages: Social Structure and Community Organization in Rural East Pakistan*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Michigan State University; Cain, M. T. 1978. 'The Household Life Cycle and Economic Mobility in Rural Bangladesh'. *Population and Development Review*, 4(3): 421–438; Aziz, K. M. A. 1979. *Kinship in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh.



Discussions regarding women working 'outside' offer a clear example of this. Traditionally, the purdah norms governing Bengali society have held that women should not 'go out' to work. This is part of a broader set of norms which prize the associations between women and the home on the one hand, and disdain 'outside' (manual) work even for men on the other. In practice poor women who have no male labour on which they can rely have always had to work outside, and this has been recognized in society as legitimate (though not desirable). Over the past 20 years, however, rates of women's economic activity have rapidly increased, through a combination of the push factors of household poverty and rising expectations of consumption on the one hand, and the pull factors of mushrooming garment factories, micro-credit schemes, and female-coded white collar jobs in health and education on the other.

It is important not to imply that all discussion of women's outside work invoked a transcendental frame of reference. In the majority of cases it was described in predominantly pragmatic terms. However, some people did draw on religious tradition, text, or local custom, in describing their views, and even where these were not explicitly mentioned, they were clearly within the rubric that people recognized as the legitimate framework of reference for such discussions. Although no questions were asked about religion in the 2006 interviews on marriage and the family, virtually all respondents made at least one religious reference. At one level this is simply cultural habit. More deeply, however, it suggests a kind of traffic between the different levels that Appadurai<sup>46</sup> identifies, as he describes how people's aspirations are nested within 'wider ethical and metaphysical ideas which derive from larger cultural norms'.

The most obviously 'traditional' reference that people made in discussing women's work was to the goddess Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth. Reflecting the common fund of imagery born of many years of co-residence in Bengal, such references were common to Muslim as well as Hindu women. Associated with thrift, order, wealth and fertility, Lakshmi offers an idealization of wifehood and celebration of women's place in the home as the foundation of wellbeing. In all of the references we recorded, she was therefore

<sup>46</sup> Appadurai, A. (2004) 'The capacity to aspire: Culture and the terms of recognition'. In V. Rao and M. Walton (eds), *Culture and Public Action*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 59–84.

invoked by people critical of the current trends. This remark by Purnima<sup>47</sup> a poor, elderly Hindu woman, is typical:

Since my younger daughter has gone out to work the *Lakshmi* of her house has also left.

A more nuanced view links the notion of a divine order with a particular spatial, cultural and class location. Thus Sadeka<sup>48</sup> staunchly defended the view that men should work outside and women maintain the house and family, seeing this as what God had determined. She continued to explain that while in other countries women might do any kind of work this was not the tradition of Bangladesh. However, she also went on to qualify this further: educated women like herself, she said, could go wherever they liked and mix with ‘outsider’ men. It is women in the village who needed to observe the rules more strictly. Although a village dweller herself, this clearly indexes ‘village women’ as other—simpler, poorer, less capable of good judgement.<sup>49</sup> However, she also makes clear within this is a pragmatic judgement about village society, and women’s vulnerability within it to conservative social censure.

Some people also drew on religion in ways that clearly resonate with the ‘cultivation of the pious self’. Here religion does not appear in the classic modernist formulation as something set apart, but rather as interwoven with and giving meaning to other aspects of daily living. This is evident in the following quotation from Ayesha Begum:

As a wife I do the work in my husband’s household. I cook food, sweep house, read the Holy Qur’an and pray, rear hens and ducks and grow vegetables. I never join in gossip or tell tales about others. I never act like a spy. I serve my husband. All these are my duties as a wife. I follow my husband’s command.<sup>50</sup>

Although less common, this self-consciousness about the religious grounding of everyday behaviour was also expressed by men. Her husband, Abdul Karim put it like this:

An ideal father has to have a clean personality, he has to stay away from bad things [alcohol, women], he has to create an environment free of arguing for the children, and he must lead a lifestyle based on Islam. The father has

<sup>47</sup> 19a Hp.

<sup>48</sup> 014a2.

<sup>49</sup> See also Pigg, S. L. (1992) ‘Inventing Social Categories through Place: Social Representations and Development in Nepal’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34(3):491–513.

<sup>50</sup> 12a Mm.

to maintain his *pardah* by wearing a *panjabi* [long shirt] and a *tupi* [Islamic cap].<sup>51</sup>

This more modernist, self-conscious way of being religious is also evident in some people's frequent references to the coming of judgement. That people will face judgement after death for the way they have lived is of course an established part of Islamic doctrine. However, this has received renewed emphasis in contemporary revivalist teaching, making it a much more common figure within everyday speech than was the case a generation ago. This comes together with the more traditional sense that the proper ordering of relationships relates not only to the here and now, but critically to transitions from this life to the next. Gender plays an important part in this, as sons are important to carry on the lineage, to celebrate the funeral rites and to ensure you pass on in ways that set your soul free. Monsur Ali, a poor Muslim man, expresses a conventional view in which such ritual concerns are vitally intertwined with the everyday of love and material provisioning in the family:

When I became the father of my first child I was most pleased. Then I understood why my father loved us so much. Children are most precious to people, and when my first child was a son, I was so pleased. Everyone has hopes for both male and female children, because the feeling for a male and a female child is different. As sons will earn money to feed their father, so the daughter will love her mother most. If there are no sons the lineage cannot be continued, there is no one to bury [me] when I die and no one is there to pray for the father. When I die, I won't be able to pray to Allah, so my sons will pray for me.<sup>52</sup>

By contrast, Shanti,<sup>53</sup> a middle class Hindu woman, presents a decidedly modern reflection on the brevity of life. After five years of marriage, she said, she was reluctant to have a child. Given that 'life lasts two days' it was enough to lead a happy conjugal life with just husband and wife enjoying as a couple all the good things this world has to offer. However, later in the interview she discussed the social stigma that she experienced being labelled infertile, her grief at having a miscarriage and the many treatments she underwent before eventually giving birth to her daughter. Of all our respondents, Shanti and her husband were the most thoroughly modern and liberal in their attitudes. They were far from secular, however, each having a guru

<sup>51</sup> 12b Mm.

<sup>52</sup> 4b Mp.

<sup>53</sup> 01a mH.

whose guidance they relied on. As this suggests, revivalist movements were evident amongst the Hindu communities, as well as the Muslim.

The concern with life beyond death is most obviously individual—people being held to account for their own actions—but it can also be profoundly relational. Hasina Mondol shows this, as she describes how the ritual significance of sons can also work against you:

I have a great regret about my children that because of them I will not prevail on judgement day. My sons do not pray and that's why I will not pass on the judgement day, because I will have to bear responsibility for them. The responsibility for the daughters is over after their marriage. Now their husbands are responsible. But the sons are still mine.<sup>54</sup>

With such a small sample it is hazardous to make strong claims of representative differences. However, higher levels of religious practice were evident amongst women than men, and religious education—to secure a reliable moral grounding—was particularly valued for women. In addition, it was in general older people who were more observant, and this was indeed seen as something of an entitlement of old age. They explained this not as a mark of their being more traditionally-minded, but rather to do with their life circumstances. They had more time on their hands as the younger generation had taken over the major household responsibilities; and they were closer to death, and therefore more concerned about the judgement that was to come.

People also use religious language and imagery as a form of emphasis. References to prayer and rituals offer a way to signal what really matters—health, having children, a good marriage, the children's future. Petitioning Allah or seeking spiritual help also mark deep desire or times of trouble. General statements about the way things are offer a means for people to say things about themselves. In the following section I explore some dimensions of this, beginning with what constitutes a classical indicator of modernity: how people make sense of what happens, in terms of their own efforts, fate, or providence.

### **Fate, God, effort, achievement**

In her study of the different ways that Muslims in Bangladesh follow their faith, Banu uses people's reliance on fate or confidence in their

<sup>54</sup> 18a Mm.

own agency as an indicator of how modernized or traditional they are.<sup>55</sup> Although I recognize the logic of this, I found that there was a general acceptance, across Hindu and Muslim, rich and poor, men and women of the need to make an effort oneself, within the context of an overall moral order, in which outcomes were ultimately within the scope of God's final authority or gift. The strongest version of this was stated by the husband of Shanti, who, as mentioned earlier, while modernist in outlook, was also very serious about his religion:

Your actions determine your fate  
(kormo bhaggo niyontron kore)<sup>56</sup>

An older Muslim woman unable to work through ill-health put it more bitterly:

Will I get anything for just calling God's name?<sup>57</sup>

Although our numbers are small, this was one area where a clear division could be seen by class. It was predominantly the poor who saw what happened as due to fate. The middle class were most likely to refer instead to effort. The (much smaller number) who attributed outcomes to choice or reasoning were exclusively drawn from the middle class or rich. While one might read this in terms of wealthier people being more modern, it is perhaps explained more directly by differences in wealth having a material effect on people's ability to influence what happens to them.

In addition to differences in who says what, there are clear differences in the contexts in which people speak. The mix of material and spiritual, own action and trust in God as ultimate power is very evident in areas of high anxiety. In relation to infertility, for example, as elsewhere in the globe, people reported trying an eclectic mix of all remedies available: formal and folk medicines, spiritual healers, religious offerings, prayer, and rituals.<sup>58</sup> After long stories of trial, trauma and expense, in the end, people put the outcome down to God. This is true whatever the outcome. If they got a child: 'God gave God's gift'. If not: 'We await the grace of God'.

<sup>55</sup> See Banu, *Islam in Bangladesh*, pp. 58–59. As she states (p. 59), in Bangladesh this is usually expressed through the concepts of *tadbir* (planning) and *takdir* (fate). These terms are also discussed by Maloney *et al.*, (1981). *Beliefs and Fertility in Bangladesh*.

<sup>56</sup> Dhirendronath—o1b Hm.

<sup>57</sup> Maleka o11a—Mm.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Inhorn, M. C. (2003). *Local Babies, Global Science: Gender, Religion, and In Vitro Fertilization in Egypt*. London: Routledge.

A number of things may be going on here. At one level they are signalling real limits to their control. With respect to infertility, there is of course an established discourse of children being God's gift. In addition, even with the best infertility treatment available, there is a randomness to it, and a high rate of failure, which leaves space for an extra-scientific explanation of results. This is all the more the case with the level of treatment that the people involved in this research could gain access to. Medical treatment more generally in Bangladesh is an uncertain affair, again reinforcing the tendency to turn to spiritual sources of help in crisis times that are found the world over. In both cases, people seeking treatment typically suffer a serious deficit of information, and are making decisions on the basis of far from perfect knowledge. At another level, however, they are signalling their humility and conformity with the moral order. Through statements that Allah is holding all, or that they are in God's hands, people identify themselves as satisfied, or at least accepting and having made their peace with their situation:

The way God keeps me, it is good.<sup>59</sup>

However one might strive to improve one's situation—and there is the clear sense that this is the correct thing to do—ultimately this attitude of acceptance of what is given is seen in Bangladesh as a critical indicator of maturity and virtue.

There is an interesting pattern here with references to fate. The import of references to God or fate are very similar at this point—they signal acceptance of one's situation. But all the references to fate relate to a negative situation, those to God (also) to a positive one. Sometimes this shift is even made within the same statement. Latefa<sup>60</sup> thus attributes to fate the fact that she never had a son. She then talks about how unhappy she was with her mother-in-law's regime, and how much happier she is now she is in charge of cooking, and can use a big pot which enables her to be generous. The positive change she attributes to God and says that she is thankful and happy now with God's blessings.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Kamla—012a Mp.

<sup>60</sup> 08a Mr.

<sup>61</sup> I am not sure why this might be—it could be in part that the emotion of thankfulness requires a personal object?

Stating one's reliance on God is also a way that people indicate the absence of support from anyone else and a general sense of insecurity. Widows are particularly vulnerable to this:

Whenever she feels alone or needs anything she goes to her brother's or sister's house to talk to them and tell them what she needs. She feels very uncertain since her husband died and prays to God for everything to be OK. Everything depends on God now.<sup>62</sup>

Religious references can thus offer a legitimate means for a lament or even complaint, in a discursive context which discourages drawing direct attention to oneself and valorizes acceptance and adjustment.<sup>63</sup> This avoidance of talking directly about oneself is evident in many of the ways people talk in Bangladesh. Engaging the listener with rhetorical questions is one example by which speakers render 'common knowledge' what they are wanting to say. Another is to make a general or even proverbial comment 'a woman's life!' in a way that refers to but does not state explicitly one's own situation. Veena Das describes for Punjab how this may be rendered even more indirect by being apparently addressed to no one, but deliberately set up so that it may be 'overheard'.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, the structure of Bengali itself favours indirect constructions of speech, with the passive voice used frequently where an active construction would be used in English.<sup>65</sup> While indirect speech is not limited to women, this discursive avoidance of claiming direct attention is clearly highly gendered. The added value of religious references is clear—one shields oneself with pious conformity at the same time as one exposes oneself in complaint.

### Politics of religion

The play between different understandings of religion is very evident in the moves of reformist Islam to use the family to capture and re-shape the social or political order. Here I consider two main forms of

<sup>62</sup> Anjumon Bewa—015a Mp.

<sup>63</sup> Wilce, J. M. Jr (1998). 'The pragmatics of "madness": performance analysis of a Bangladeshi woman's "aberrant" lament'. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 22:1–54.

<sup>64</sup> Das, Veena (2000). 'The act of witnessing: violence, poisonous knowledge, and subjectivity', pp. 205–241, especially p. 220, in *Violence and Subjectivity* (eds) V. Das, A. Kleinman, M. Ramphela, and P. Reynolds. Berkeley/Oxford: University of California Press.

<sup>65</sup> Thus love 'strikes' one (*maya lage*) and sickness 'happens' to one (*osukh hoyecche*).

reformist Islam in Bangladesh: the political party, Jamaat-e-Islami,<sup>66</sup> and the pietist movement, the Tablighi Jamaat.<sup>67</sup> The data so far have been presented in quite a generalized way, individual statements of many different individuals drawn together to present a composite image of continuities and change. This section concentrates instead on one individual, Amma Huzur,<sup>68</sup> a middle aged, lower middle class rural woman, who is closely associated with the Tablighi Jamaat. Concentrating the focus in this way allows us to explore in a little more depth both what she says about gender and Islam and how this translates into practical terms in her life. I have chosen to focus on her specifically because of all our respondents, it was she who came closest to Mahmood's notion of someone dedicated to cultivating the 'pious self', and thus at the heart of the theoretical paradox which this paper seeks to address.

Just as the figure of Lakshmi places women at the heart of the family and the home, so the Tabligh and the Jamaat share a view that women's religiosity is critical to the spiritual wellbeing of the family. Despite a considerable degree of shared theology, however, their styles and approaches are very different, such that there is considerable conflict between them. In simple terms, the Tabligh feel the Jamaat have sold out religion to politics; and the Jamaat feel the Tabligh are self-centred, self-indulgent, unwilling to take on the social responsibility of ordering society. Whilst this opposition between them is keenly felt there is, nonetheless, recognition that ultimately their efforts may pull in the same direction.

This general picture is reflected in the local context of our research. Amma Huzur's hostility to the Jamaat-e-Islami is keen, not least because she has been personally attacked by them for moving around

<sup>66</sup> The *Jamaat-e-Islami* is the main Islamist political party in Bangladesh. Out of favour after liberation for having supported Pakistan, the *Jamaat-e-Islami* party re-entered politics as an active and visible participant in 1990, forming a ruling coalition with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party after the 1991 election.

<sup>67</sup> The Tablighi Jamaat is a worldwide pietist movement of religious revival, typically stated to have begun in 1927. At its core is the call to revival of the inner life and personal purification, which is often delivered through missionary tours undertaken by its members. For more information see Metcalf, B. (1998). 'Islam and women. The case of the tablighi Jamaat', in *Appropriating Gender: Women's Agency, the State and Politicized Religion in South Asia*. (Zones of Religion) (eds) Amrita Basu and Patricia Jeffrey. London: Routledge; and Metcalf, B. (2003). 'Travellers' Tales in the Tablighi Jamaat'. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 588, Islam: Enduring Myths and Changing Realities (July), pp. 136–148.

<sup>68</sup> 'Amma Huzur' is an honorific title. The quotes given here are drawn from two extended interviews which took place in her home. 50a Mm.



too freely, and because they have frequently tried to colonize her work for more directly political ends. Despite this, she grudgingly admits that 'both of us are working on the same road':

The Jamaat-i-Islami people are trying to establish law of Quran as state law. They want to see honest people as social leader. We do not have any argument with that vision.

A Jamaati activist concurred with this. Having expressed his distaste for the Tabligh, and the major criticisms he has of them, he went on to say:

But in other ways, it helps us a lot for the national election. They are trying to spread Islamic values in every ladder of the society and not participating in the national politics. When the election time comes, we will take the benefit of their activity. Village people or town people if they become more and more pious, it is better for Islam. People will think about us before they give their votes.

The Ja'amat do not, however, rely solely on the Tabligh to lay their foundations in society, they also work directly to mobilize an Islamist community. Maimuna Huq describes one instance of this: reading sessions of the Jamaat affiliated female students' organization, the Bangladesh Islamic Chattri Sangstha which offer:

a practice-oriented Islam—where deliberation amid participants, facilitated by the wide circulation of sermons on tape cassette and unfolding against a background of shared moral sensibilities, is integral to the cultivation of an everyday, embodied subjection to orthodox Islamic norms.<sup>69</sup>

This would seem an almost textbook example of what Foucault or Rose describe, a modernist, even liberational idiom of learning and open discussion, which enables the enrolment of the students within particular structures of power.

As Foucault himself would caution, however, it is a mistake to assume that power runs only one way. Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi (1903–1979), the founder of Jamaat-i-Islam, propounded a heavily patriarchal reading of the moral order, in which women should remain strictly within the home and at all times under male authority. Practical politics have made this a difficult line to hold. Jamaat was the first organization to grant membership to women as individuals

<sup>69</sup> Huq, Maimuna. (2008). 'Reading the Qur'an in Bangladesh: The Politics of "Belief" Among Islamist Women'. *Modern Asian Studies* 42(2–3): 457–488, March, p. 46.

on the basis of the Qur'an and Hadith, obliging them to preach its ideology to their families and even disobey their male guardians if the men commanded them to sin against Allah.<sup>70</sup> From a position of limiting women's political participation to the right to vote, Maududi even supported a female candidate<sup>71</sup> in Pakistan's January 1965 presidential elections as the lesser evil compared with Ayub Khan's martial law regime.<sup>72</sup> This pre-figures the Bangladeshi Jamaat's participation in the Bangladesh National Party government headed by Begum Zia—again, a woman leader there by virtue of her dynastic credentials. Shehabuddin notes that in Bangladesh the Jamaat's interest in women voters means that:

Saidi [a popular Jamaat speaker] goes to great lengths to reassure women that Islam is supportive of their rights, that Islam has made women winners, not losers.<sup>73</sup>

In common with the Islamic piety movement more broadly, Amma Huzur's speech is quite different from that of most other respondents, involving frequent use of specifically Islamic (Arabic) terms in place of alternative Bengali ones.<sup>74</sup> She is steeped in Islamic texts, having learnt several religious instruction manuals off by heart, and her discourse is suffused both with explicit religious references and with the mission she sees 'to make the disorderly society ordered'. Amma Huzur holds weekly meetings with village women to 'remind them about religion' and organizes larger meetings on a monthly and annual basis. She also travels to lead meetings in other villages when invited to do so. She has established a '*talim*' house in the village, where women can meet regularly for prayer and religious instruction. Gender and family relations constitute a recurring theme in her preaching and instruction:

Generally, village women do not follow the rule of Islam in their lives. They have become the *member* of the Union Parishad [local government]. They are

<sup>70</sup> Ahmad, I. (2008). 'Cracks in the "Mightiest Fortress": Jamaat-e-Islami's Changing Discourse on Women'. *Modern Asian Studies*, Volume 42, Special Double Issue 2–3, March 2008, pp. 549–575.

<sup>71</sup> The candidate was Fatimah Jinnah, sister of Muhammed Ali Jinnah, the most prominent leader of the movement for Pakistan.

<sup>72</sup> Shehabuddin, E. (2008). 'Jamaat-i-Islami in Bangladesh: Women, Democracy and the Transformation of Islamist Politics'. *Modern Asian Studies* 42(2–3):577–603, March.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 600–601.

<sup>74</sup> See also Haniffa (2008). 'Piety as Politics'.

going to the district court house alone. They do not think why unhappiness has occurred in the world. They do not know the right way to live. They do not bend their heads in front of their husbands. They do not keep *pardah*. In the past amongst Muslims, husband feared the wife and the wife feared the husband. They had mutual respect for each other. Nowadays, wives are quarrelling with their husbands face to face. Doing such deeds is strictly forbidden in Islam. Through doing these things wives are ruining their *akherat* (life after death) entirely.

On first impressions, her line is conventional and strongly patriarchal. Women are offending by engaging in politics and the law, and in doing so unaccompanied, and in not observing *pardah*. In the later part, however, it is interesting how she emphasizes disharmony and loss of respect, rather than an offence against gender hierarchy. What is lost is married couples' *mutual* fear and respect and the ability to handle differences courteously. For Amma Huzur, the way to restore the moral order is to re-ignite piety and orthodox religious practice. Women hold the key to this:

If we can make a mother pious then she will be able to raise her children accordingly. A mother is the centre of a family and the first teacher of the children.

Even if a husband is bad, through her piety she may be able to reform him, and bring him back to Islam. She also suggests that piety will bring husband and wife closer together:

A husband cannot beat a pious wife so easily. . . . When a wife starts praying *namaz*, it softens her husband's mind towards her.

There is of course nothing new in placing the burden for either family virtue or family piety on women. Looking more deeply into her *practice*, however, Amma Huzur's overall profile is rather more ambiguous than her words suggest. In the face of marital unhappiness, Amma Huzur has found in holding *talim* meetings not only personal fulfilment, but also a legitimate way to spend time away from home. While not being able to effect complete reform, she has brought her husband to the Tabligh and managed to curb some of the worst excesses of lasciviousness, rudeness and violence. After a previous broken marriage Islam has offered a means of social rehabilitation. Her piety, coupled with her hard work in improving the economic situation of the family, has earned her the reputation of a good wife and mother. The meetings seem also at times to constitute a site of resistance, where women gather to share information that their men would rather it be kept at home, and even the basis for collective

action to defend a member's interests. While Amma Huzur positions herself as the voice of tradition, therefore, she seems in many ways to be a thoroughly modern figure, autonomous and entrepreneurial, self-cultivating in identity, and evangelical in her project to rectify the self.

### Conclusion

The founding fathers of social science expected that as societies became more modern, religion would decline. In fact, in Bangladesh as elsewhere, substantial economic, social and political change has been accompanied by religion becoming more, rather than less, emphasized. This paper focuses on discussions of gender and the family in Bangladesh to explore this apparent paradox.

Doing research on any subject involves the danger of distortion, and this is certainly the case with religion. The first danger is of exaggerating its significance. While for some amongst our respondents religion provided a habitual preoccupation, for most, proper religious observance was something they said they wanted but failed to achieve, usually because they had too much work to get on with. The noise surrounding symbolic oppositions between 'religion' and 'development' belie their pragmatic accommodation in everyday life. In addition, as described above, by no means all use of religious language says something specifically 'religious'. People use religious references to emphasize what is important to them; to position themselves as thankful, or at least in a state of (socially sanctioned) adjustment to or acceptance of the way things are; or to signal the limits of their own power, sometimes indicating humility, but at other times hopelessness, alienation or complaint. Finally, what appears to be religious may simply reflect a certain cultural style. Thus Islamic dress may be simply fashion, going on pilgrimage simply an outing with friends.<sup>75</sup>

The second issue is what is understood by religion. Even taking religion as a subject in itself carries the danger of imagining it in a distinctly modern way as a 'set apart' arena of practices and beliefs. This paper argues that, on the contrary, the predominant understanding of religion in Bangladesh is as part of the taken-for-granted moral order. This co-exists with a more modern way of

<sup>75</sup> Farzana Haniffa, (2009), pers. comm.

viewing religion, as requiring reflective cultivation. The size of our sample cautions against generalization, but more than gender, age, location, or religion, it seemed to be class and education that made a difference to the way people talked about religion, with educated middle income or wealthy people much more likely than the poor to attribute outcomes to their own agency, and to talk about religion in self-conscious, 'modern', terms. It is important, however, not to jump too quickly into confirming conventional assumptions about the 'backward' poor and modernizing elites. While some people more often identify religion as a settled, background factor within the broader moral order, and others more often as a self-conscious set of precepts, many individuals and even statements combine aspects of both. In addition, even the more self-conscious statements did not identify religion as something private or removed, but a self-conscious set of rules for life, intimately entwined with everyday conduct and relationships. While this might suggest simply a society in transition, I suspect it indicates not the gradual replacement of religion as embedded in the moral order to a more specific set of precepts, but rather continued traffic between everyday behaviour and the negotiation of cultural and religious norms. Linear narratives of modernity notwithstanding, such mixtures and unstable settlements between 'traditional' and 'modern' elements may be more the norm than the exception. Thus in her discussion of race and modernity, Ann Laura Stoler comments that what is interesting:

is not so much modern racism's break with earlier forms, but rather the discursive *bricolage* whereby an older discourse of race is 'recovered', modified, 'encased', and 'encrusted' in new forms.<sup>76</sup>

The notion of 'discursive *bricolage*' seems to fit well the mix of traditional and modern, Hindu and Muslim, folk Bengali and textual religion which make up the set of religious resources on which people draw to negotiate the challenges of changing gender and generational relations in contemporary Bangladesh. The politics of how people use these resources are also indeterminate. 'New', more textual approaches may at times be used to reinforce custom, and at other times to question it. Thus, while both Hindus and Muslims re-iterated the common saying that 'heaven lies under the feet of the husband', some remarked that the Islamic verse in fact states that 'heaven

<sup>76</sup> Stoler, A. L. (1996). *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*. Durham/London: Duke University Press, p. 61.

lies under the feet of the mother'.<sup>77</sup> On the one hand more liberal people used religious text to argue against the exclusion of girls from education or employment. On the other hand it was used to argue for stricter patriarchal controls, or to denounce some customs long established in Islam as locally practised, causing trauma and division amongst Muslims in the name of new claims to orthodoxy, and indeed counterclaims, from those who interpreted the text differently.<sup>78</sup>

The increasing incorporation of Bangladesh within globalized capitalism has generated significant changes in the organization of economy and society, bringing major challenges to the established moral order and how it codifies proper relationships by gender and generation. This simultaneously reshapes the character of religion and sparks a much broader process of moral questioning, in which people turn to religion—amongst other resources—for guidance. While narratives of modernity tend to read history in a linear way, therefore, there is much to be said for viewing it more cyclically. Although the form that each has taken is clearly distinct, this would see the current 'resurgence' of religion in Bangladesh in the context of historical precedents such as the Brahmo Samaj Hindu reform movement which arose in response to the accelerated economic, social and political change that was colonial Bengal. This is supported by the Osellas' argument that Islamic revivalist movements in South Asia are relatively common, and are generated through local dynamics, even if they articulate with global currents for reform.<sup>79</sup> Further afield, analogies might be seen in the rise of Methodism and evangelicalism in industrializing Britain<sup>80</sup> or Hobsbawm and Ranger's arguments that times of rapid change call out 'the invention of tradition' to provide a sense of reassurance and stability.<sup>81</sup> Whilst this paper has emphasized talk and culture, this is clearly only a partial perspective on a much larger whole in which political economy plays the major role.

<sup>77</sup> This is a frequently quoted hadith, one of the sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>78</sup> A specific custom mentioned, for example, was the making of sweets and bread on the night of Shab-e-bharat (night of freedom), which had been declared *haram* (forbidden) by followers of the neo-Orthodox Mohammedi sect.

<sup>79</sup> Osella, Filippo and Caroline. (2008). 'Islamism and social reform in Kerala, South India'. *Modern Asian Studies*. 42(2–3): 259–281, March.

<sup>80</sup> See e.g. E. P. Thompson. (1963). *The Making of the English Working Class*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

<sup>81</sup> Hobsbawm, E. and Ranger, T. (1983). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

There is one further dynamic which may contribute to the re-emphasis on religion in the development of modernity. As noted above, classical studies of religion and modernity see structural changes in the economy and society as bringing with them a dynamic towards secularization, which displaces religious institutions from the undisputed centre of social and political organization. While this by no means removes religion from the public sphere, it does re-define its sphere of influence, to identify it as primarily a personal matter, associated with life-cycle events and the cognitive/affective area of beliefs, emotions and values. So far, so familiar. What is less commonly recognized, however, is that just as modernity reassigns religion to the personal sphere, so it also constitutes 'the personal' as a primary arena of governance, discipline, and satisfaction. The shift in structures of family life, and the ways people are investing different meaning in their relationships, is another dimension of this. What appears from one point of view to be the *marginalization* of religion, thus brings with it simultaneously a *re-discovery* of and *re-emphasis* upon it, along with other aspects of the personal and the self. From being a taken-for-granted part of the way things are, religion thus becomes a focus in itself, something that must be known, studied, disputed, cultivated and—for some at least—struggled for politically.