



Religions and Development Research Programme

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

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This paper reflects on how people talk about religion and the family to explore the apparent paradox of a contemporary Bangladesh that is both 'more modern' and 'more Islamic'. While questions of religion and politics have tended to dominate observers' agendas, in the everyday changes in the family (including relations between men and women and the generations) are a more central focus of anxiety and contestation over the place of religion.

The paper begins with theory: how the paradox is framed by classical social science expectations of religious decline and how it has been addressed by some contemporary writers. It then notes 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' vs 'private' spheres. This is followed by introducing the religious context of Bangladesh, the centrality of the family and some of the major challenges that modernization is presenting to its established structures. Drawing on wider research, including a series of in-depth interviews, the main section considers how notions of the family and especially the gender order are mobilized in rhetorical conflicts between 'religion' and 'development' and in moves to capture the moral order and harness it to a particular religious – or political - vision. It examines

- how people make sense of what happens, in terms of their own efforts, fate, or providence;
- how changes in gender and generational relations provoke profound anxiety about social status, material security and the broader moral order; and
- how recent symbolic confrontations between fundamentalist religion and development or women's organizations call on different understandings of religion.

Ways in which reformist Islam is attempting to use the family to capture and re-shape the social or political order are illustrated by a comparison of the political

party, Jamaat-e-Islami, and the pietist movement, the Tablighi Jamaat

For some people, the answer to the moral crisis lies in 'more religion,' and some use religion to articulate new narratives of the family. The paper argues, however, that to see the issue as fundamentally 'religious' is a category error. Instead, the changing place of religion and the changing uses that people seek to make of it are part of a much broader process of moral questioning and social realignment. As social and economic change challenges people's sense of the underlying moral order, so it simultaneously reshapes both the character of religion, and the ways that it can be drawn on to marshal that order more broadly. The paper makes clear that religion is not 'just politics', but offers a grounding to a moral universe that governs the everyday. Paradoxically, perhaps, it also shows that religion is not 'just religious', if religion is understood as referring to a separately demarcated sphere of life. While people in Bangladesh do talk about religion in this limited sense, as a particular set of practices and beliefs, they also use religious references much more broadly, to mark what is important to them, to say things about themselves.

The paper comments that in the Bangladesh context there seems no obvious reason why being identified as 'religious' should either qualify or disqualify actors from engagement with development objectives and activities. Instead, it argues, organizations and the work that they are doing should be judged in social, economic and political terms, with their religious identity considered only if it impacts on development objectives, for example by enabling access or promoting exclusion.

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