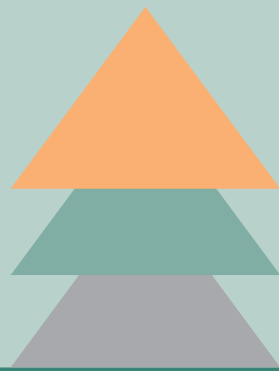


Religions and Development Research Programme

Religion, Politics and the Everyday Moral Order in Bangladesh

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Religions and Development

Research Programme

The Religions and Development Research Programme Consortium is an international research partnership that is exploring the relationships between several major world religions, development in low-income countries and poverty reduction. The programme is comprised of a series of comparative research projects that are addressing the following questions:

- How do religious values and beliefs drive the actions and interactions of individuals and faith-based organisations?
- How do religious values and beliefs and religious organisations influence the relationships between states and societies?
- In what ways do faith communities interact with development actors and what are the outcomes with respect to the achievement of development goals?

The research aims to provide knowledge and tools to enable dialogue between development partners and contribute to the achievement of development goals. We believe that our role as researchers is not to make judgements about the truth or desirability of particular values or beliefs, nor is it to urge a greater or lesser role for religion in achieving development objectives. Instead, our aim is to produce systematic and reliable knowledge and better understanding of the social world.

The research focuses on four countries (India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Tanzania), enabling the research team to study most of the major world religions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and African traditional belief systems. The research projects will compare two or more of the focus countries, regions within the countries, different religious traditions and selected development activities and policies.

The consortium consists of six research partner organisations, each of which is working with other researchers in the four focus countries:

- University of Birmingham, UK: International Development Department, Department of Theology and Religion, Centre for West African Studies, Centre for the Study of Global Ethics.
- University of Bath, UK: Centre for Development Studies.
- Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, New Delhi.
- Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research, Ibadan.
- University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
- Lahore University of Management Sciences, Pakistan.

In addition to the research partners, links have been forged with non-academic and non-government bodies, including Islamic Relief.

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Key words: Bangladesh, religion, politics, community, youth, *dharma*

Summary

An understanding of religion as lived experience is essential to challenge and complement analyses the role of religion in macro-politics. Drawing on in-depth research in Bangladesh, this paper shows how religion structures and is changed by people's perceptions, experiences and actions in everyday life, in their families and communities.

Wellbeing has cultural and religious dimensions but these are rarely well understood or clearly described. As a result, policies intended to reduce poverty and improve wellbeing may not address poor people's priorities or be appropriate and effective.

Much contemporary analysis of the relationships between religion and development focuses on the role of religion in macro-politics and governance. Previously neglected in analyses of politics in Bangladesh, religion is now hyper-visible. Founded on secular principles in 1971, the state in Bangladesh (under both military and democratic regimes) has been forced to make concessions to Islamist forces, including lifting the ban on religious political parties in 1972. As a result, the politics of radical Islam has become more prominent and conservative expressions of Islam have gradually become mainstreamed in the public sphere, not only in politics but also in the growth of the madrassah education sector and increased observance of core Islamic practices such as prayer, fasting and women's dress codes.

These are important trends but are not the whole picture. Religion and its role in society constantly evolve within a context of wider social change. Debates within Islam on what constitutes 'proper' Islamic practice interact with people's attempts to cope with economic and social change, influencing their everyday lives, religious beliefs and practices, and interactions with wider social organizations. Based on extensive research in Bangladesh, especially ethnographic research in two villages in Dinajpur District, in the north-west of the country, this paper develops an understanding of the social and moral order that informs villagers' lives and religious practices.

First, the local word for religion, *dharma*, is discussed. *Dharma* constitutes a deeply rooted cultural norm, a sense of the desirable moral and social order which structures people's lives and relationships. In addition, it provides a benchmark against which particular ideologies and practices, whether of 'religion' or of 'politics' are judged. The main findings relate to the ways in which *dharma* in this sense, in everyday life, is expressed, especially in community politics.

The main conclusions include:

- Religion should not be seen solely in terms of its role in macro politics because this both neglects the role it plays in people's everyday lives and runs the risk of mis-specifying what 'religion' is.
- Religion in Bangladesh is not a discrete set of doctrines and practices: it includes both specific beliefs and practices and also an underlying moral order that informs perceptions of the proper way of living and good social relationships, commonly expressed in the concept of *dharma*.
- The context of rapid economic and social transformation evident in Bangladesh produces everyday challenges to notions of order or *dharma*. These are manifest in concerns about unruly behaviour (especially of young people), the fragmentation of local communities and challenges to established local leaders.
- Such leaders have an important role in maintaining or restoring social order, through strategies that have traditionally concentrated on providing valued resources (such as assistance to those in need or investment in community facilities such as mosques) and demonstrating their moral integrity and legitimacy.
- Other ways of reforming society emphasize a more central role for Islam. One example is the *Tablighi Jamaat*, a reformist movement that offers a vision of reform based on spiritual development, piety (*tabligh*) and good moral behaviour and has drawn in many young people. Non-members express concerns, however, that excessive religious practice might clash with what are regarded as more fundamental expectations related to family and community relationships and responsibilities.
- Thus people's everyday choices, struggles, fears and aspirations are shaped not only by religion but also by other social factors.

The research demonstrates the need for

- a greater focus on everyday understandings and experiences of religion in Bangladesh, to avoid misunderstandings arising from a sole concentration on abstract doctrines and beliefs or the role of religion in macro politics.
- recognition that people's everyday choices, struggles, fears, aspirations and social relationships, are influenced by many social factors other than religion, even in a mainly Muslim society.
- ways of dealing with social and economic transformation that recognize both people's anxieties about social relationships and their attempts to deal with change, and the competition between religious and other actors promoting their own visions of a desirable social and moral order.

1 Introduction

From the 1970s to the 1990s, Bangladesh was a by-word for poverty and (under)development. Economics reigned supreme, and even sociological studies drew heavily on secular development frameworks in putting forward their analyses. By contrast, a spate of recent books identifies Bangladesh primarily in religious terms. For Uddin (2006), for example, Bangladesh is an “Islamic nation”, while Seabrook (2002) and Riaz (2004) emphasize the politics of radical Islam, configured as “fundamentalist” and “Islamist militancy”. Meanwhile Karlekar (2005) raises the prospect that Bangladesh may be in line to become “the next Afghanistan”. From a situation of neglect, religion is now hyper-visible in scholarly accounts of Bangladesh, and moreover has been given a particular visage. This article draws on primary data¹ and offers a different understanding of religion to the one that underlies such accounts, as well as the picture of Bangladesh and the place of religion within it in that they imply.

In presenting an alternative analysis of religion, we shift from the macro to the micro level, from consideration of national politics to the politics of the everyday. There are two main reasons behind this choice. First, like many other scholars (e.g. Clarke 2008), we are aware of the many hazards and difficulties in agreeing a comprehensive definition of religion. Our own position is that religion is primarily and above all a *lived* experience; a category therefore of practice before being a category of analysis. For this reason, our analysis starts by trying to understand the everyday uses of religion: how it routinely structures and is restructured by people’s perceptions, experiences and actions. From this perspective, religion is best understood “not through an ascent into transcendence but through a descent into the everyday” (Das, 2000, p. 208). Second, much of the literature on religion in Bangladesh focuses on macro level political analyses of formal institutions such as international organizations, political parties, government structures, religious associations and so forth. Our focus instead rests on an understanding of politics that inheres in human societies and informs the everyday organization of the social and moral order. This is the territory that is identified by Mahfuz², in the profile presented in Box 1, of authority between elder and younger, husband and wife; and of community cohesion or social fragmentation. As his account shows, it is a territory fraught with anxiety, as rapid social and economic change brings multiple challenges to the conventional moral order. In describing this, Mahfuz asserts that local young men have “*kono dharmā ney*” (no religion). To the extent that *dharmā* is conventionally translated as ‘religion’, it is tempting to see this as a lament for a former, more religious time, before the ravages of secular modernity. By contrast, we argue that the meaning of *dharmā* here refers to a sense of underlying moral order, the ‘order of things,’ which gives both ‘religion’ and development their place, rather than being placed by either.

Box 1: A profile

Mahfuz is a retired headmaster of a local college in Dinajpur, a District in the North West of Bangladesh. He now runs a small shop in a market that sits on the main road to Dinajpur town. He is also known as a local pundit and spends much of his time holding court in a small room of his house near the shop. In 2006, one of the authors visited Mahfuz to discuss his views on the pace and direction of social change that had occurred in the area over the last decades. At a general level, Mahfuz was enthusiastic about the changes he had witnessed and noted the many opportunities that were simply not available when he was growing up. However Mahfuz was also anxious about the impact of the changes; in particular on what he continually referred to as *samaj bichinno* (the breaking up of the community). Much of the anxiety focused on the local youth (young men) whom Mahfuz identified as both symptom and cause of a widespread *bisrinkula* (indiscipline) that had taken hold of society. In his view, young people had access to many benefits (education, mobility, new job opportunities, access to media and so forth) but also caused much trouble (lack of respect, increased violence and so on). In trying to explain the situation of the local youth, he uttered the phrase *tader kono dharmā ney* (they have no religion). He was asked to explain what this meant.

In his first attempt at a response, Mahfuz equated *tader kono dharmā ney* with a number of attitudes and actions that to him seemed inappropriate, immoral or unruly. The examples he pointed to included drinking alcohol, smoking (especially in front of elders), some hint of drug taking and a much bigger hint of harassing young women. He clearly disapproved of this kind of behaviour and also suggested that young people had somehow taken a wrong path in life. So, for example, he noted that they “do themselves harm because they are selfish. They are distracted (*onomonoskho*) and have only one rule - to live life as they please”. Naturally he contrasted this state of affairs with his own years as a young man when, despite the lack of opportunities, life was more peaceful and orderly.

Mahfuz was also asked to explain why he had used the term *dharmā* to make his point. This time, in his response, he linked two observations. First, he stated a belief that young people have

somehow overstepped the mark or their place in society. They are, in his view, trying to become *netas* (leaders) and acquire power in the community, but do not possess the required skills or experience. As a result, they turn to violence and force in order to impose their will. They have therefore, he claimed, become arrogant and, to use a phrase often heard in Bangladesh, their “heads had become hot”. Second, by stepping outside of their social position young people have lost their ability to relate to others in a proper manner. The list of relational misdoings was long. Thus young people “do not listen to the elders”, “do not respect community rules”, “do not obey parents”, “do not follow customs”, “do not accept our judgements” and so forth. The result of this, he asserted, is *bisrinkola* (indiscipline) and *samaj bichinno* (social breakdown). Mahfuz accepted that it is easy to blame young people for all of this, as they are often seen hanging around in groups all day instead of working or studying. However he warned that the problem is not restricted to young people. Thus he argued that the cohesion of the community and all its households was being pulverized and replaced by what he called *doliokoron*, i.e. narrow, factional attitudes and practices. As he put it: “one brother does not listen to the other brother any more and even, husbands don’t know their wives”.

At the heart of this paper is therefore the play between *dharma* understood as the underlying moral order and *dharma* as religion, which confers a particular community identity (Muslim, Hindu, Christian and so forth); refers to specific practices (prayer, *puja*³, fasting, charitable giving), beliefs and values; and draws on particular texts or bodies of teaching. We argue that just as the context of social and economic change brings challenges to the underlying moral order, so it simultaneously reshapes both the character of religion and the role that religion plays in relation to that moral order. This paper explores how some of these dynamics work themselves out in the everyday context of rural Bangladesh. It begins with a brief introduction to religion in Bangladesh and its increasing visibility in society and politics. This leads into a brief discussion of the concept of *dharma*. The next section returns to Mahfuz, and traces out the context of community politics against which he is speaking. Finally, in the conclusion, we offer a number of reflections on social change and religion that are inspired by our analyses.

2 Religion in modern Bangladesh

Until very recently, the main focus of writings on Islam in Bengal emphasised not its purity but its syncretism, not its hard line but its malleability (see, for example, Ahmed, 1981; Maloney, Aziz and Sarkar, 1981; Abecassis, 1990; Basu, 1992; Uddin, 2006). Within Islam, also, there are many different and localized traditions of practice and belief. In this context, the emphasis found in more recent publications⁴ on neo-orthodox Islam appears rather odd. It also obscures the considerable diversity of religion in Bangladesh. While Muslims constitute a majority of the population (87 per cent), there is a sizeable minority of Hindus and smaller groups of Christians, Buddhists and followers of traditional beliefs.

The recent rise to prominence of a discourse emphasizing religion in public life is linked to the historical process of state formation in Bangladesh. Secularism was one of the founding principles of the Bangladesh state and the country's first constitution, introduced in November 1972, banned all religious-based political party activities. The inherent fragility of this position was exposed almost immediately after independence, when the ruling party was forced to make a number of political concessions to Islamist forces in order to retain its hold on power. During this process, the commitment to secularism slowly faded and Islam began to exert influence in the public domain. The attempt to combine these apparently contradictory political orientations led to the introduction of what Sreeradha Datta has aptly described as a "multi theocracy in the name of secularism" (Datta, 2008, p.146). Its secularist beginnings notwithstanding, Islam has never been far from the centre of political life in Bangladesh. As Dina Siddiqi (2006, p. 2) states:

a gradual but sustained mainstreaming of Islam in public political life, in the representational practices of the state as well as in national policy and constitutional principles, began in the mid-1970s.... By the mid 1990s, Islamic symbols and idioms had become part of everyday political vocabulary.

The assassination of the country's first political leader, Sheik Mujib, and his family in 1975 heralded the beginning of a fifteen year period in which the political landscape in Bangladesh came to be dominated by two military leaders: General Ziaur Rahman (1975-1981) and General Hossain Ershad (1982-1990). These two men and their respective parties were confronted with an almost identical political challenge: how to legitimize their hold on political power. The response of both leaders was very similar and entailed offering political concessions to potential allies, stifling political dissent, introducing constitutional reforms, and bestowing greater legitimacy on Islamist principles in public life. Thus in

1977, the government of General Zia introduced a new constitution, which removed the commitment to secularism and replaced it with an ideology that stressed the Islamic legacy of the nation. To signal this new ideology, citizens were no longer to be called 'Bengalees' but 'Bangladeshis', and the ban on religious political parties was lifted. In 1988 General Ershad raised the stakes further by again amending the constitution and making Islam the official religion of the state. By this juncture, the secular rhetoric that had underpinned the emergence of independent Bangladesh had been completely sidelined.

In 1990 President Ershad was forced to relinquish power, following a mass movement led by the two leading opposition parties in coalition with the main Islamist political party, the Jamaat-e-Islami. The active and visible participation of Jamaat-e-Islami in the mass movement for democracy helped the party gain recognition as a legitimate national political actor, after its unpopular alignment with Pakistan during the liberation war. When representative democracy was reintroduced in 1991, therefore, Jamaat-e-Islami launched itself into electoral competition and began to map out its own political ideology and strategy in a way that it had never been able to do under the military regimes. In the parliamentary elections of 1991, Jamaat-e-Islami secured eleven seats, a number that enabled it to build a ruling coalition with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and form the government. Jamaat-e-Islami had become a legitimate part of the established political order, assuming the mantle of kingmaker.

Throughout the democratic era (1990-2007)⁵, Islam and Islamic discourse have continued to be an important political force. The leaders of the two largest political parties have made very visible moves to highlight their Islamic credentials, both in their personal lives and in their respective parties. This was made very evident in the run up to the December 2008 elections, during which one of the two leaders urged voters to "save Islam and the country" by voting for her and her allies, and the other explicitly emphasized Islam as the "religion of peace". By making such references to Islam, both candidates were aware of the political need to demonstrate that, under their stewardship, Islam would remain an integral part of political life and national identity. In the meantime, the number of Islamist political parties and their presence and influence in the political machinery and discourse continue to increase. In his study of the rise of Islamic militancy in Bangladesh, Ali Riaz (2008) analyses the fortunes of the Islamist parties in the democratic national elections. He found that in the parliamentary elections of 1991, 1996 and 2001, the Islamist parties' overall share of the public vote had decreased.

Despite this, they had managed to increase their number of seats in parliament.⁶ Riaz concludes from this that in the political arena

Islamists in general and JI [Jamaat-e-Islami] in particular, are exercising influence beyond their support base in society, and have been forcing the majority onto the defensive (Riaz, 2008, p. 33).

The increased visibility of Islam in public life is not restricted to the political arena. One of the key institutions that has attracted substantial attention both nationally and internationally is the madrassah (Muslim religious school). These are often portrayed as training centres for radical Islam in Bangladesh. At the time of independence, Bangladesh inherited four types of madrassahs (Aliya, Qwami, Hafizia, Nuarani) and over the past thirty years these have increased in number⁷ and their role in society has been transformed.⁸ In 2002 almost 3 million students were enrolled in government madrassahs, with possibly a further 2 million in the more hard-line, privately financed Qwami madrassahs (Karim, 2004, p. 297-8; see also Bano, 2007). A number of factors help explain this growth. Arguably the most significant factor is that in the early 1980s, the government initiated a scheme to modernize madrassah education by making the provision of non-religious subjects such as English and mathematics compulsory (Bano, 2007). This made government-registered madrassahs⁹ more attractive and removed the perception that they offered a poor curriculum and a second class education. Second, there has been a significant and successful drive by successive governments in Bangladesh to ensure greater national school coverage and student recruitment. Since the mid-1990s therefore, the number of secondary madrassahs has risen at a phenomenal pace, mostly in response to increased demand for female education. While recruitment levels continue to grow, there have also been significant changes in the patterns of madrassah recruitment, with a very marked increase in the number of females enrolled. Asadullah and Chaudhury (2006), for example, report that girls now make up 50 per cent of secondary level madrassah enrolment. In addition to the rising number of madrassahs and increased recruitment rates, the role of these institutions has also evolved. On the one hand, madrassahs have become an important player in the education sector in Bangladesh and estimates indicate that their significance is increasing rather than waning. On the other hand, there has been a steady and increasing flow of reports linking certain types of madrassahs (Qwami) with militant Islamic groups (Riaz, 2008) and underground terrorist groups (Datta, 2008).

The mushrooming of institutions associated with Islam has been accompanied by other social trends that point to the growing presence or influence of more conservative expressions of Islam in society (Ellickson, 2002). There is evidence, for example, of increased observance of core Islamic practice such as prayer and fasting, including amongst young people. There has also been a marked increase in women wearing maxis, burqas and shawls over their saris.¹⁰ Such social trends may help to explain Dina Siddiqi's observation that

With notable exceptions, the majority Muslim populace has not felt especially threatened by such moves; hence state sponsored Islamization has faced muted and intermittent resistance (Siddiqi, 2006, p. 2).

The increasing orientation and concessions to Islam has influenced the fortunes of the country's small but important minority groups, of which Hinduism is the largest. The early characterization of religion in Bangladesh as being eclectic and malleable was an assertion of diversity in religious practice (within Islam and other religions), while there were also commonalities in practice that crossed religious divides. Thus in Bangladesh, for example, Hindus and Muslims attended the same shrines (*mazars*) and turned to the same religious teachers (*pirs*) to seek favours from their respective gods (Ellikson, 2002). Since Partition in 1947, however, the size of the Hindu population in Bangladesh has decreased significantly, with the majority migrating to nearby India in the realization that Bangladesh is no longer 'our country'. The pattern of this exodus has changed over time, with the wealthiest leaving around Partition and poorer people migrating as the years pass. Much of this movement is illegal and no official figures exist. However the Association for Land Reform and Development (ALRD), a Dhaka-based NGO, estimates that 5.3 million Hindus migrated out of Bangladesh between 1964 and 1991 (Human Rights Features, 2000). A number of factors push Hindus to migrate. For some, the move to India is a response to particular localized incidents of violent aggression. For others, the fear that such violent aggression might occur in the future is a strong enough motivation to move. The Vested Property Act, which empowers the state to seize Hindu-held land, has significantly added to the overall sense of insecurity among Hindus and the impoverishment of their communities (Barkat, 2000).

The rise of Islam in public discourse has therefore had three quite significant effects. First, it has drawn attention to ongoing debates and discussions internal to Islam about what constitutes orthodox or 'proper' Islamic practice. Second, it has highlighted the equally important question of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Bangladesh. Third, it indicates that the role of religion in society

constantly evolves in iteration with wider socio-political changes. When trying to understand the role of religion in modern Bangladesh, therefore, even a surface scratch reveals a complex mosaic of parallel and intersecting tensions that continually throw up new configurations and alignments, which then have profound effects on the everyday lives of citizens.

3 Public *dharma* and private *dharmas*¹¹

In Bangladesh, religion is directly translated as *dharma*, a term that has rich, dynamic and pan-Indian roots. The etymology of the term *dharma* is complex (Mahony, 1987) and its application to a context like Bangladesh is not without its difficulties, given its strong association with Hinduism. However, while accepting that the term *dharma* may be foreign to the formal lexicon of Islam, we argue that its analytical usefulness should not be dismissed, since it is a familiar term to the Bengali Muslim culture and a common term, as we shall see below, in the way people talk about religion.¹² Moreover, the application of the term *dharma* demonstrates once again the syncretism that has characterized 'lived Islam' in Bangladesh. As outlined in the previous sections, this syncretism seems to be under threat from the rise of Islam in public discourse and the attempt to assert a particular (more orthodox) vision of Islam in society. However, this tension is ongoing and unresolved, as evident in the persistence of localized syncretist practices, even in contexts where there is exposure to more universalizing or orthodox versions of Islam (Callan, 2007; Ellickson, 2002). The existence of variable and localized forms of 'lived Islam' in Bangladesh today has its roots in the origins and expansion of Islam in the region.

Muslim rule in Bengal lasted from 1204, with the arrival of Turkish conquerors, until the start of the British colonial period in the late eighteenth century. Safia Uddin (2006) traces in some detail the impact this period of Muslim rule had on both the political unification of the region and the expansion of Islam among the general population. One of her key arguments is that Islam was never simply imported into the region by the ruling Muslim elite, whose primary interest was almost exclusively economic, i.e. to extract and export muslin, cotton textiles and rice. Instead it was a group of Muslim itinerant preachers (non-ruling class), charged with organizing people to cultivate the land, who introduced Islam to the community of Bengali speakers. The Mughal period in particular proved to be a fecund time for the expansion of Islam in the region, because it heralded the beginning of a distinct Bengali literature within Islam. According to Uddin, the local population had no knowledge of the Arabic language and no direct access to the Qur'an. As a result, the early Bengali Islamic literature had to use and adapt local customs and language in order to convey its messages. The Islamic literature produced to target local populations was therefore very different from the normative and orthodox literature, which had its roots in the Arabic and Persian traditions and was used by the Muslim ruling class of foreign descent. The genesis and expansion of Islam in Bengal therefore inspired a distinctly regional Bengali Islam form, which then, as today, both contests and competes with more universal and normative conceptions of Islam (Bertocci, 2006). This regional vision of Islam is firmly rooted in

the culture of Bangladesh and historically has resisted concerted efforts to reform or unify it.¹³ Notions like *dharma*, just like many other religious practices and beliefs found in Bangladesh, may well be alien to some universal vision of Islam but they thrive, often in great tension, in the diversity of everyday practices that shape the attitudes, perceptions and worldviews of the overwhelming majority of the population.

The term *dharma* derives from the Sanskrit *dhr*, meaning to sustain, support or uphold (Mahony, 1987). Both etymologically and in its everyday use in contemporary Bangladesh, *dharma* implies significantly more than 'religion', at least as the latter is understood in the West. There are two related applications of the term *dharma* that interest us. In the first, *dharma* refers to 'the proper order of things', a cosmological order of the universe (Inden, 1985). In this sense of the word, everything that exists has its own *dharma*. Hence, "the word *dharma* was applied not only to divine or human *jatis* and *kulas* but to virtually every differentiated set of substances and beings. Everything ranging from a metal rock to a human *jati* or king was said to have its own particular *dharma*" (Inden, 1985, p. 18). The second application of the term *dharma* is more colloquial and comes somewhat closer to the way the term religion is used in the West. Bangladeshis often use the question *apnar dharma ki?* (what is your religion?) in their introductory conversations with others, especially non-Bangladeshis. However even here there is a need to be cautious and not assume a correspondence between *dharma* and religion as understood in the west. *Apnar dharma ki* is not only or primarily a question about religious affiliation or faith. It is also a way of finding out more about practical lifestyles, ways of doing things, of being with people, feelings and so forth (Kotalova, 1993).

Although more pragmatic, the second application of *dharma* is not unrelated to the first one. *Dharma* therefore represents an idea of "correctness, ordering and way-of-being in the world", both in a descriptive sense (the way things are) and in a prescriptive sense (the ways things should be) (Mahony, 1987). It manifests itself in a range of 'religious contexts' such as prayer and rituals, as well as in 'non-religious contexts' such as discussions on behaviour and conduct, knowledge of what is right and wrong, and social interactions. *Dharma* therefore is concerned as much about the everyday as it is about the eternal; the here and now as it is about the cosmological. It is this context that makes Mahfuz's comment *tader kono dharma ney* both so intriguing and also so revealing of the wider significance of religion in people's everyday lives. In what follows, the significance and dynamics of

dharma in the everyday lives of the communities where the research was carried out is explored. In so doing, we try to understand the extent to which the idea of *dharma* provides a moral foundation for social life and practices. This leads to a consideration of the potential relevance of religious practices (understood in the narrow sense familiar to Western scholarship) as an alternative foundation.

4 Religion, politics and community

The major advantage of being a *samaj* [community]¹⁴ member is that you can't live here without society and social relations. You need society to live your life here in the village. *Samaj* is the common place for the villagers. The collective interests of society are carried out through the *samaj*. You need *samaj* in the three important stages of your life: birth, marriage and death. *Samaj* also arranges religious and social rituals for its members. *Samaj* is the guardian of the society. It tries to protect the *bhalo-mondo* (good and bad) and moral position of society. (*dulal*)

The *samajes* are breaking up because people are becoming more *apon apon* (individualistic) (Mahfruz)

When asked about changes in the nature of village life and organization, people frequently talk about the way the community has broken up and its unity fragmented. This is often accompanied by discussions of how people have become more selfish and individualistic. The comments of Mahfruz reported in Box 1 capture these sentiments very well. In his analysis of the breakdown of society, Mahfruz draws attention to the situation of young people and focuses on their chaotic lifestyles and overall lack of discipline. This is perceived as both symptom and cause of wider problems in society. By describing the unruly behaviour of young people with the term *tader kono dharma ney* (they have no religion), Mahfruz brings together ideas about religion, behaviour and morality – an association of ideas that is familiar to all Bangladeshis.

At first sight, Mahfruz's judgement about *tader kono dharma ney* belies the many signs that religious practices and institutions are thriving locally and exerting greater influence on the organization of social relations. For example, in the village (circa 450 households) where we met Mahfruz, eight of the nine existing *samajes* have their own mosque and imam, and over the past two generations the number of mosques in the village has increased from four to eight. The mosque has symbolic as well as material significance for *samaj* members because it enables them to perform important religious functions, such as burials, births and approving marriage proposals; arrange the collection of donations or taxes (*zakat*) and then use them for different charitable or social purposes; and of course to hold both weekly and special prayer meetings. Attendance at the *jumah namaz* (Friday prayers) and the size of the *korbani* (sacrifices during the Korbani Eid festival) are often used by members to show off the pedigree of the *samaj*. For this reason, members of the only *samaj* in the village without a mosque are embarrassed by their situation and are often derided by others in the community. Given that reputation

is at stake, members invest considerably in the religious symbols, institutions or practices that are attached to a *samaj*. This quickly escalates into an inter-*samaj* competition.

In this context of apparent religious flourishing, how then can sense be made of Mahfuz's comments about *kono dharma ney*? His own explanation of the comment indicates that he is making a judgement not on people's religious practices, beliefs or adherence, but on the breakdown of some foundational order that guides and structures the organization of social relations. This order is fundamentally a moral or 'ethicized' one. *Samaj* therefore becomes a key cultural idiom that relates to some sense of a proper ordering of social relations. The sense of confusion and disorder that threatens the *samaj* and which Mahfuz links to *kono dharma ney* is therefore seen to jar with this deeper sense of morality that underpins the norms and expectations of social interaction. This way of thinking sensitizes us to a distinction between 'dharma as religion' and 'dharma as moral order', a distinction that is captured in expressions such as *tader kono dharma ney* (they have no religion) and *tara dharma palon kore na* (they do not practise religion). While the latter relates specifically to the upholding of religious practices (attending prayer meetings, fasting etc), the former concerns ideal forms of ethics and behaviour that infuse and order social life more generally.¹⁵

Anxiety about disorder frequently came up in discussions about the *samaj*. It is expressed in concerns about the fragmentation (*bichinno*) of the community, the general lack of discipline (*bisrinkola*) found in some members, especially the youth, and the increase of factionalism (*doliokoron*), leading to the formation of splinter and competing subgroups. While people acknowledge that these types of concerns existed in the past, the general feeling is that they have increased in recent times. People almost inevitably link social disorder to wider socio-economic changes, especially those associated with *adhunik kal* (modern times). Modernity or simply adopting modern practices or making modern life-style choices is therefore seen as significantly contributing to the perceived break-up of social order and discipline. It is not surprising then to find that in terms of making sense of these changes, the sharpest differences of opinion run along the age or generational axis. Those most associated with modern lifestyles, i.e. young people, are depicted as both product and perpetrator of the breakdown of social order:

The problem with our young people is that they are becoming individualistic (*apon apon*) and don't want to obey the *samaj*. Everyone does what they want and this brings disorder (*bisrinkola*). (Kamal)

Discussions about young people and their individualistic or selfish behaviour inevitably home in on particular patterns of behaviour that are considered culturally inappropriate (e.g. drinking alcohol, dressing in a particular way, watching provocative Hindi films and, more recently, taking drugs), simply unruly (e.g. bullying or harassing others) or immoral (usually in reference to illicit relationships or sexual activity). This is the world of Mahfuz's *tader kono dharma ney*. It is a world that requires people to know their place and know how to relate to others. Marsden identifies a similar moral world among the Chitralis in Northern Pakistan. In describing what happens when people no longer know their place in life, one of his respondents offered the following vivid description:

...when people fall out of their notch in the same way that the spindle slips from the eye of the millstone, the world becomes one of everyone's choice: the result being chaos and rowdiness (Marsden, 2007, p. 58).

Discussions about unruly forms of behaviour are almost always orientated towards the perceived consequences for the social order of the community. The lack of *dharma* therefore points to a deep relational malaise in which people no longer know or refuse to comply with a perceived proper place in the world. When asked to elaborate on the meaning of *apon apon*, a respondent offered the following commentary, which neatly captures this understanding of what it means to live 'properly':

People only look out for themselves. Young people no longer listen to the elders, sons don't obey their parents, young girls do what they want and even wives won't accept their husband's word. The *samaj* can't do anything about this. If someone is not satisfied with the *samaj*, they can ignore it. Bangladeshis have become like this, selfish. (Anwar)

The organization of life is therefore strongly connected with and judged by a set of moral concerns about what it means to live according to the 'proper order of things'. This is the world of *dharma*. Broader societal changes, such as greater access to education and new opportunities that have emerged from the way land, labour and credit markets operate, impinge both on the organization of life and on the underlying moral order. This is illustrated well in the case of the current struggle within Kodomtola *samaj*. This particular *samaj* was one of the largest (160 households) in the community and its leader (Hossain) was the community's richest landlord. Many of the *samaj* members worked

as day labourers on Hossain's land and relied on him for credit, protection and information. Over time, the community has witnessed radical shifts in employment patterns, with many poorer members abandoning agricultural labour and taking on work as rickshaw pullers and small business entrepreneurs, or simply freeing themselves from traditional landlords and selling their labour elsewhere. This has had an impact on the structure and content of interpersonal relations within the *samaj*.¹⁶ At the same time, many of the younger members of the community have acquired educational qualifications and refuse to take on agricultural work because they consider it demeaning. They are also far more mobile than earlier generations and have established a wider network of contacts outside the community and its immediate confines. Unemployment rates are high among the youth and often they are seen hanging around in groups. It is unclear what these groups do, but elders worry that they are becoming more and more like gangs and being used by local criminals. For many of the young people, being part of such a group is the only way to access some of the goods they want in life: visits to the town, peer respect and so forth.

Hossain is therefore no longer the main provider within the community and in that process he has lost much of the authority he once held. Arguments over his authority culminated in 2001, when some of the younger male members of the *samaj* began to publicly question him about the *samaj*'s accounts.¹⁷ The group of younger male members were all rickshaw pullers and had formed a local trade union much against the wishes of Hossain. Through the union, the group began to engage directly (as opposed to through the intermediation of Hossain) with local political actors and this enabled them to assert themselves more forcefully (Devine, forthcoming). Hossain was, of course, furious that his authority and integrity were being put under scrutiny by members of the *samaj* who were from a much lower class, had far less status and who, in his eyes, were responsible for introducing criminal-based politics into the community. He refused to respond to the demands for clarity on the accounts and as a result more members of *his samaj* began to openly question his honesty and morality. Although Hossain was a *haji* and had built up a reputation based on his prestigious religious position, members of the *samaj* began to refer to him as *sahukur*.¹⁸ As the confrontation escalated, the leader of the rickshaw group (Rafiqul) announced his intention to formally split from Hossain and form a separate *samaj*. One of the first steps he took to achieve this was to organise a *jalsa*.¹⁹ Members from around 120 households attended the *jalsa*, thus signalling their break from Hossain and allegiance to Rafiqul's new *samaj*. This left Hossain with about 40 households, most of which belonged to his immediate

blood family. The Kodomtola *samaj* therefore split into two rival subgroups. Rafiqul's *samaj* is large but the poorest in the entire community and the only *samaj* without their own mosque, a fact that Hossain never fails to highlight.

There has therefore been a reworking of interpersonal relations and allegiances within the community and this has opened up the possibility for people like Rafiqul to acquire positions of power and influence. Unlike Hossain, Rafiqul's authority rests not on landholding status, wealth or religious honour, but on his ability to resolve (or at least to be seen responding to) the everyday practical problems that members of the *samaj* face. In many ways, Rafiqul is a political entrepreneur who has gained prominence because of his ability to mobilize the right kind of external networks and secure access to material help and welfare. While members of his *samaj* may lament the fact that they do not have their own mosque and that they cannot celebrate key religious events and moments, the majority see this as a secondary - albeit an important symbolic - issue. What really matters for members is that the *samaj* is seen to be relevant and responding to their everyday, practical and 'mundane' problems, and that the *samaj* leader is seen to be helpful.

Rafiqul has earned the respect of those in his *samaj* and is considered a leader with an array of positive attributes. He is known for his political acumen and in particular his ability to attract the support of leaders higher up the political pecking order. He is also described as a 'modern leader', broad-minded, educated (*shikhito*), equipped with modern skills and able to understand the real needs of people. This is contrasted with Hossain, who is often described as 'living in the past' and out of touch with reality. While the creation of a new *samaj* is primarily intended to secure material and practical benefits, questions of morality and order are never far away from people's considerations. In particular, the moral qualities expected from leaders and from those with authority is a focus of constant discussion among *samaj* members. Indeed if we look closely at the genesis of the disagreement that led to the break up of the Kodomtola *samaj*, we see that members were aggrieved with Hossain for his perceived lack of responsibility towards others in the *samaj*. The reputation of a *samaj* often depends on the way members are seen to take responsibility for each other, and in particular the way in which the *samaj* helps those most in need (the poor and widows). The grievance that triggered the Kodomtola split was, therefore, not a judgement on Hossain's competence or skills, or even a complaint against the fact that he had managed to accumulate significant wealth because of

his position. Instead members were disappointed with his lack of moral integrity and disillusioned with the way he had misused his resources and authority in social relations. The focus was not on the resources Hossain had at his disposal but on the way these were used.

Paradoxically, comments on Hossain's 'mean' dispositions was an important way in which members of Rafiqul's *samaj* reflected upon the erosion of what they see as traditional social obligations and responsibilities. The move to support Rafiqul was therefore a move, not without its risks, to realign social and political relations in a way that restored an underlying sense of order. Even if Rafiqul possesses significantly less personal resources than Hossain, he is seen to use them to do 'good work' or 'look after people'. This gives moral legitimacy to his authority. During an interview in which the importance of being seen to pray together as a *samaj* was being discussed, one of the members of Rafiqul's *samaj* made an insightful comment about people's expectations of leaders. The member had said that it was difficult to pray together because people were poor and spent most of their time just trying to make ends meet. When asked if it was sinful to choose livelihood over prayer, he replied

...they [those that need to go out and work] will not go to hell after death because they are not pious. If a *haji* like Hossain has acted corruptly in the *samaj*, what worse sin can ordinary people ever commit? The poor will not go to hell; hells are reserved for the rich people who have acted wrongly and who could have worked for the good of society.

The association of sin and behaving wrongly to others in the *samaj* illustrates the sense of an underlying moral order that fashions and informs social life. Rafiqul may be a modern leader with modern qualities, but the legitimacy of his authority rests on satisfying local ideas about 'doing what is right'. It is therefore not surprising to find that those who oppose Rafiqul focus their attention on his perceived lack of moral attributes. For example, as Rafiqul's *samaj* has expanded and gained experience, it has tried to assert itself more in the local political scene. Rafiqul's reputation as a key political broker has grown. His adversaries accused him of being opportunistic, using the loyalty of his members for his own interests and of being greedy (*lobhi*). They also blamed him for introducing criminal and 'dirty' politics into the community and encouraging the social breakdown of the community by filling the heads of young people with 'nonsense talk'. The important point is not whether the claims or counter-claims are true, but that they demonstrate that, as new configurations of authority emerge, they are inevitably accompanied by reflections and judgements that focus on leaders' moral integrity and legitimacy – judgements that are deeply informed by local understandings of 'what is right and

proper'. This is not lost on people like Rafiqul and Hossain. The struggle for power continues in the Kodomtola *samaj*, with Hossain accusing Rafiqul of polluting the minds of his members and Rafiqul convinced that Hossain has become morally bankrupt. If we look at how people vote with their feet, Rafiqul seems to be winning that particular argument – at least for the moment.

5 Competing visions of *dharma*

Despite their animosity, Rafiqul and Hossain have much more in common than they would like to admit. They share very similar political 'projects', which require them to construct an internal loyal constituency (hence the struggle over the *samaj*) and then to engage with a range of external networks that normally operate in the political realm. This strategy is a very common and familiar mode of resolving local power struggles in Bangladesh, and by implication, for imposing order in society. However there are other initiatives that offer alternative ways of reforming society and some of these explicitly emphasize a more central role for Islam. One of the most notable cases is that of the Tablighi Jamaat, a reformist movement that started in India in the 1920s and has since expanded internationally. Although the Tablighi Jamaat has been present in the research area since the early 1970s, it has grown rapidly over the past few years, especially through its religious instruction programmes. Unlike the projects of Rafiqul and Hossain, the reformist agenda of Tablighi Jamaat is quietist, and quite adverse to as well as distrustful of politics.²⁰ It offers instead a vision of reform that is based on spiritual development, piety (*tabligh*) and the promotion of good moral behaviour at the level of both the individual and the community. It also contrasts with the other religious-based reform initiatives found in the area, especially the Jamaat-e-Islami, which seeks to capture traditional political institutions in order to achieve its overall mission of controlling the Bangladesh polity.²¹

The emphasis given to teaching good and moral behaviour and to promoting self-improvement has made the Tablighi Jamaat attractive to many people. White (2009) considers some of the activities and messages of a *talim*, an established and permanent teaching circle set up in the research site and run by women. A second Tablighi Jamaat initiative that seems to have gained popularity are the *chillas*, where travelling volunteer missionaries set up camp in local mosques and offer training on Islam. The duration of *chillas* varies from three days to a few months. In line with Tablighi Jamaat principles, the aim of the *chilla* is to inculcate Islamic values and practices among Muslims. Although there are no exact figures on *chilla* attendance, anecdotal evidence from the research sites suggests that over the years the number of participants has increased, especially young people taking part in *chillas* during college or university holiday breaks.

The basic aim of the *chilla* training is to highlight the need to redirect priorities from worldly affairs to religion. Participants are exposed to the principles of Islam and the teachings found in the Qur'an. Our interviews with young men²² who had attended the *chilla* also suggest that the training has quite practical implications. For example, attendees are encouraged to adopt a more austere lifestyle and to

curb various excesses, including time spent watching TV, money spent on clothes and of course 'social vices' such as smoking, alcohol and betting. These external lifestyle changes are related to a second practical principle covered during the *chilla*: the need to develop moral fortitude in life. The *chilla* therefore encourages hard work and discipline amongst participants, and stresses the need to build social relationships that are based on trust, respect, solidarity (at least among those committed to *tabligh*) and helping those in need. Underpinning these practical lifestyle choices is a strong message about 'giving up the old ways'. As one respondent put it:

The *chilla* teaches us to be modern in the right way. If you are modern and don't live a good life, then the modern is bad. Today our society has no rules and this is not good. If we accept Islam, then the modern will become good. This means giving up the old rules and behaviour.

The idea of moving away from old rules (*niti*) and behaviour (*bebohar*) was a recurrent theme in discussions about the *chilla*. When asked to elaborate on these statements, respondents offered examples that were very similar to the ones raised in our discussions about *tader kono dharma ney*. In other words, 'bad modernity' was considered to have brought individualism and selfishness, chaos and disorder, factionalism and fighting. The teaching during the *chilla* instead was held to offer an Islamic framework for reforming modernity and improving society.

When asked about the benefits of the *chilla*, most respondents admitted that they had acquired more knowledge about Islam and that they had learned about how to live their lives properly. Of all the respondents who had taken part in a *chilla*, however, only one admitted that the experience had pushed him to follow a more religious line (*dhormio dike*) in his life. Since returning home from the *chilla*, this respondent reported that he had made considerable effort to practise his religion more (attending the mosque, praying five times a day, etc.), change his physical appearance (mostly by wearing Islamic clothes), and adopt a more morally informed lifestyle (by giving up smoking and playing cards). Although respectful of his decision, the vast majority of his friends were not entirely convinced of his choice and some hinted that he had perhaps gone too far. From his own account, it also seemed that he was facing a lot of pressure from members of his household, who were keen to see him reduce his level of commitment to *tabligh*.

The tensions that may arise because of excessive *tabligh* involvement were illustrated in another case, in which the father of a young man who had spent considerable time with the *tabligh* was concerned that his son had somehow lost his way in life and that his commitment to religion had displaced more fundamental social responsibilities and obligations. Although he was proud that his son had become an itinerant preacher, he was also worried that he was walking away from practical responsibilities like getting married, starting a family, finding a job and looking after his retired parents. The inference was that excessive religious practice (*dharma palon kora*) can clash with what are considered more fundamental or primary expectations related to reciprocity and interpersonal relations. This was also captured in the discussion with the young men about their friend who had decided to follow the religious line in life. They continued to maintain an implicit separation in their minds between their responsibilities to their moral and social order, invariably described as our customs (*amader niti*) or our rules (*amader niti*), and the lifestyle choice made by the *tabligh* follower. The separation was not made explicit because of the obvious difficulty of articulating an argument against a life dedicated to religion. However, as one respondent put it: “you need to get a balance: to follow religion more but also to respect our ways of doing things. Both are necessary and only doing one is not right. It will cause problems”. The gravitas of ‘local custom or rules’ therefore continues to have a profound effect on the way Islam and religion is assimilated.

6 Conclusion

This paper has argued for a greater focus on the everyday understandings and experiences of religion in Bangladesh. The need for such a focus is triggered by a bias evident in the existing literature towards an understanding of religion that is informed by modernized and secularized frameworks of what actually constitutes religion. This, we argue, has contributed to a mis-specified discussion of religion in Bangladesh, in which the emphasis has been placed firmly on abstract beliefs, doctrines and practices; and on the role of religion in macro politics. There is no denying the fact that a discourse that gives greater emphasis to religion in public life has gained momentum over the years in Bangladesh. This has been accompanied by social trends that indicate a move towards more conservative expressions of Islam in society. In seeking to understand these changes, however, scholars and commentators alike have tended to treat religion as a monolithic, one-dimensional, independent and analytically separate domain. This is undoubtedly the perspective that has come to inform international discussions of religion in Bangladesh, including those voiced in international development arenas. The main mis-specification of this perspective, we argue, is that it exaggerates the explanatory significance of religion in social life, and ignores other frameworks and understandings that play an equally important role in shaping people's everyday and routine choices, struggles, fears and aspirations.

In our research, religion presented itself in a myriad of ways and for the respondents, religion was never far away from what actually mattered in their present, past and future lives. However the sense of religion (*dharma*) to which they referred was very distinct from the idea of religion as a discrete set of doctrines and practices. They therefore relate to two different forms of *dharma* in their lives; one that stresses specific practices or beliefs (*dharma palon kora*) and another that is understood as a horizon of meaning or an underlying moral order that informs the proper way of being and relating in the world. This latter sense of *dharma* is both sacred and moral; it provides a grounding for all areas of life, including the economy, society, politics and even 'religion' understood as *dharma palon kora*. It is therefore transcendental as well as mundane, normative as well as practical. It cannot be reduced to a single 'religion' or doctrine but provides grounding equally for Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and so forth. Each religion can be said to have its own *dharma*. The key conclusion to be drawn from this research is that the significance Bangladeshis attribute to their religion (*dharma palon kora*) is fundamentally shaped by wider ideal forms of morality or order (*dharma*). In this perspective, the explanatory significance of the religious (understood in the narrow sense) is severely limited.

This research has led to a focus on an area of life (community relations) in which references to *dharma*, understood as order, come up frequently. This is not a surprise, because *dharma* is fundamentally about a sense of proper relationship in life, including what can be expected of relationships. For Bangladeshis, the community (*samaj*) remains the main institution that regulates everyday extra-household exchanges, and it is through the *samaj* that people seek to achieve *dharma* and avoid its opposite, chaos and disorder. In White (2009) the dynamics of the relationships between *dharma* and family life are noted and explored, and very similar patterns and perspectives found to those rehearsed here. Our reading of this is that ideas around *dharma* are not restricted to community dynamics but indeed inform all aspects of social and political life, including national politics. Although much attention has been given recently to the rise of Islamic-influenced political parties in Bangladesh, the reality is that Bangladeshis hold a very wide range of opinions concerning the relation between religion and politics. These opinions are informed rather than displaced by reference to *dharma*.

Dharma is not a monolithic and static sense of order that is fixed eternally. It changes with time, integrating past experiences and continuously being activated and worked upon. Broader societal changes impinge on the underlying moral order, forcing a reorganization and renegotiation of what is considered an ordered and proper way of being and living in the world. This affects the organization of key areas in life, such as economics, politics, society and religion; and at the same time, the relations between each of them. It also potentially turns each into a site of contestation and struggle. In our research sites, people are acutely aware of the social and economic transformations that are going on around them. While some celebrate and embrace these changes, others are more anxious. In both cases, it is primarily through the lens of *dharma* that people try to make sense of the changes and find ways to adapt to them. *Dharma*, therefore, is where the process of social and political re-ordering begins to take shape. Again it is not surprising that the *samaj* is brought to the forefront of this process of re-ordering, because it is foundational to the broader organization of life. As our analysis demonstrates, the nature of *samaj* is in flux and undergoing transformation. This is experienced as a fundamental challenge to the wider moral order – a challenge that has sacred, ‘religious’, as well as very material implications.

In this wider context of change, religious actors and organizations, with their different symbols and frames of references, are mobilizing in order to influence the pace and direction of change, and by implication to feature more in the reworking of the social and political order. This is a complex and

contested process that will continue to evolve over time. It is difficult to see which direction the process will go in, partly because diverse religious actors and organizations are involved, some of which are in competition with each other. The main finding to emerge from this research is that these changes are part of an ongoing and iterative process of assimilation that involves social and economic changes; internal developments, theological or otherwise, within Islam; and the ongoing relevance of ideas associated with *dharma*. Among the vast majority of Bangladeshis, there is an important, although often unobtrusive, distinction between *dharma* and 'religion'; and the ongoing significance of the former will continue to have a profound effect on future expressions of the latter in Bangladesh.

Notes

- ¹ This paper comes out of two major research programmes, on Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD), University of Bath, 2002-2007; and Religions and Development, University of Birmingham, 2005-10. The WeD programme undertook an interdisciplinary study of wellbeing with country teams in Peru, Ethiopia, Thailand and Bangladesh. The support of the UK Economic and Social Research Council is gratefully acknowledged. For more details see <http://www.welldev.org.uk>. The Religions and Development Research Programme Consortium is conducting research mainly in India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Tanzania and Bangladesh. The support of the UK Department for International Development is gratefully acknowledged. For more details see www.rad.bham.ac.uk. The data used in the article were drawn predominantly from two villages in Dinajpur district, north-west Bangladesh.
- ² All names used in this paper are pseudonyms
- ³ Act of devotion to a personal deity.
- ⁴ As explained earlier, the publications that highlight the rise of neo-orthodox Islam in Bangladesh tend to focus on macro politics. This literature includes academic analyses (Riaz, 2008), reflective social commentaries (Seabrook, 2002), reports on social trends (Saferworld, 2008), or indeed international or national journalistic accounts. A provocative illustration of the latter can be found in the 4 April 2002 edition of the Far Eastern Economic Review, which had a cover story entitled “Bangladesh: cocoon of terror”. The article described Bangladesh as besieged by “Islamic fundamentalism, religious intolerance, militant Muslim groups with links to international terrorist groups, a powerful military with ties to the militants, the mushrooming of Islamic schools churning out radical students, middle-class apathy, poverty and lawlessness.” The government banned this edition of the FEER.
- ⁵ On 11 January 2007, a state of emergency was imposed in Bangladesh and this remained in place until 29 December 2008, when new parliamentary elections were held.
- ⁶ In the 2008 elections, the percentage of votes for Jamaat-e-Islami again decreased and the party only managed two seats. At the time of the research it was too early to interpret this result or to understand its longer term implications.
- ⁷ Choudhury (2005) states: “According to government published sources (BANBEIS), during 1980-2000, the number of registered junior and high madrassahs increased by 271 per cent compared to 185 per cent growth of secondary schools. During the same period, the number of students in junior and high madrassahs increased by 818 per cent compared to only 317 per cent growth of secondary school students. Today, 30 per cent of all secondary level students are from madrassahs and they are catching up fast. These statistics do not include thousands of unregistered ‘Qwami’ madrassahs all over the country, nor does it include English medium ‘Cadet Madrassas’ that are sprouting up in urban areas.” Riaz (2008, p.38) reports that in 2005, the Bangladesh Qwami Education Board estimated that there were 15,250 Qwami madrassahs with 1.85 million students and 132,150 teachers.
- ⁸ Various spellings are used e.g. Qwami is also spelt Qomi.
- ⁹ Qwami madrassahs are privately managed and funded. One can assume, therefore, that the increase in numbers of these madrassahs reflects greater private investment.
- ¹⁰ The burqa is a full length garment worn over other clothes outside of the house. A maxi is a full length dress, generally worn at home, which is identified by some women as more Islamic than a sari, as it covers the full body. Shawls are now being worn on top of saris to provide additional modesty, especially by women who cannot afford a burqa.
- ¹¹ Discussions with Sergio Targa have helped to clarify points made in this section.
- ¹² While presenting the ideas discussed in this section, a number of colleagues have highlighted the overlap between our use of *dharma* and the idea of adab. The latter, meaning comportment, is certainly a more Islamic expression and has been used in a way similar to our use of *dharma* by

Marsden (2007) to understand aspects of lived Islam in Pakistan. So the problem for some lies more in the term than the underlying idea. We continue to employ the term *dharma* because of its almost universal use in Bangladesh.

- ¹³ Most notably the various reformist movements of the late 19th century, and of course the attempts by West Pakistan to impose a uniform version of Islam and its language on the then East Pakistan (Hashmi, 2004).
- ¹⁴ *Samaj* is the term used widely in Bangladesh to refer to one's community. The *samaj* is usually organized around kinship or proximity of residence. In some of the areas where the research was carried out, people used the term *jamaat* to refer to their *samaj*. In this paper, the term *samaj* is preferred, because it is more familiar to the Bangladesh context and avoids possible confusion with *Jamaat-e-Islami*, a national political party that is also referred to locally as *Jamaat*.
- ¹⁵ Another common phrase that resonates with *tader kono dharma ney is tar dharma thaka uchit* (literally, he should follow *dharma*). Again this phrase is used to encourage better moral conduct, rather than as an exhortation to practise religion more.
- ¹⁶ See Devine (forthcoming) for more details of changing agricultural relations in this research site, and the impact this has had on social life.
- ¹⁷ The *samaj* collects donations from members, which are used to finance mostly religious or philanthropic activities, such as improving the mosque, paying for *korboni* or giving alms to needier members of the *samaj*. As head of the *samaj*, Hossain managed the collections and looked after the accounts.
- ¹⁸ *Haji* is a term used to describe those who have made the pilgrimage to Mecca. As a title, *haji* confers considerable social status and prestige, especially in rural settings. In contrast, *sahukur* is a derogatory term used to describe someone who has become rich in an illegal or immoral way, usually through unscrupulous money lending.
- ¹⁹ A public meeting where religious preachers are invited to speak.
- ²⁰ Although the Tablighi *Jamaat* is a non-political movement, we report in a companion article (White, 2009) how it benefits from and contributes to the fortunes of the *Jamaat-e-Islami* political party in the community. Formally the two groups may have different agendas but the success of one feeds into the success of the other.
- ²¹ In both its approach and mission therefore, the *Jamaat-e-Islami* is similar to Rafiqul and Hossain. Here we have chosen to focus on the Tablighi *Jamaat* instead of the *Jamaat-e-Islami* partly because of its different approach, but also because the *Jamaat-e-Islami* was not a powerful force in the research sites. For recent discussions on the role of *Jamaat-e-Islami* in everyday politics see Riaz (2005) and Shehabuddin (2008).
- ²² This section draws heavily from focus group discussions with young people.

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