



**BERKLEY CENTER for RELIGION, PEACE & WORLD AFFAIRS**

**GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY**



# **Global Development and Faith-Inspired Organizations in South and Central Asia: Meeting Report**

**Consultation on January 10–11, 2011  
Dhaka, Bangladesh**

A project of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace,  
& World Affairs and the World Faiths Development  
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## PARTNERS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### LUCE/SFS PROGRAM ON RELIGION AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Since 2006, the Berkley Center and the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service (SFS) have collaborated in the implementation of a generous grant from the Henry Luce Foundation's Initiative on Religion and International Affairs. The Luce/SFS Program on Religion and International Affairs supports research, teaching, and outreach in two main program areas, Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy and Religion and Global Development. A major focus is engagement with public officials in the U.S. government and international organizations grappling with religion and world affairs. The Luce/SFS program was renewed in 2008 through the 2010–11 academic year.

### THE BERKLEY CENTER FOR RELIGION, PEACE, AND WORLD AFFAIRS

The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, created within the Office of the President in 2006, is dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of religion, ethics, and public life. Through research, teaching, and service, the Center explores global challenges of democracy and human rights; economic and social development; international diplomacy; and inter-religious understanding. Two premises guide the Center's work: that a deep examination of faith and values is critical to address these challenges, and that the open engagement of religious and cultural traditions with one another can promote peace.

### THE EDMUND A. WALSH SCHOOL OF FOREIGN SERVICE

Founded in 1919 to educate students and prepare them for leadership roles in international affairs, the School of Foreign Service conducts an undergraduate program for over 1,300 students and graduate programs at the Master's level for more than 700 students. Under the leadership of Dean Carol Lancaster, the School houses more than a dozen regional and functional programs that offer courses, conduct research, host events, and contribute to the intellectual development of the field of international affairs. In 2007, a survey of faculty published in Foreign Policy ranked Georgetown University as #1 in Master's degree programs in international relations.

### THE WORLD FAITHS DEVELOPMENT DIALOGUE

The World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) bridges between the worlds of faith and secular development. Established by James D. Wolfensohn, then President of the World Bank, and Lord Carey of Clifton, then Archbishop of Canterbury, WFDD responded to the opportunities and concerns of many faith leaders who saw untapped potential for partnerships. Based in Washington, D.C., WFDD supports dialogue, fosters communities of practice, and promotes understanding on religion and development, with formal relationships with the World Bank, Georgetown University, and many faith-inspired institutions.

### BRAC DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

BRAC Development Institute (BDI), founded in July 2008 at BRAC University, is a resource center dedicated to promote research, provide graduate training and build knowledge to address the challenges of poverty, inequity and social injustice in the global south. BDI takes an inclusive, multi-disciplinary approach, across research, teaching and communications, to fulfill its mandate – to constantly challenge conventional knowledge and advance a southern voice in the global development discourse.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The report's principle author was Michael Bodakowski, working under the direction of Katherine Marshall. Samia Huq provided valuable guidance and made important contributions. Input from Melody Fox Ahmed, Esther Breger, Elizabeth Royall, Robert Van der Waag, and Claudia Zambra is gratefully acknowledged. The content is drawn from participant contributions at the Dhaka consultation, as well as from in-depth interviews with participants and others, conducted around the consultation. The interviews can be found on the Georgetown University Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs website, at <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/events/workshop-on-global-development-and-institutions-inspired-by-faith-in-south-and-central-asia>. Photos within the report are attributed to Melody Fox Ahmed, Michael Bodakowski, Ravinderpal Singh Kohli. The cover photo was taken by Mary Pinckney.



# Executive Summary

## Background and Overview

**O**n January 10-11, 2011, 25 leaders from religious organizations, faith-inspired development institutions, academic institutions, and international development agencies met in Dhaka, Bangladesh to discuss the current activities and potential contributions of faith-inspired organizations in addressing South and Central Asia's development challenges. The meeting was part of a series of regional explorations by Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs and the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD), exploring the work, roles, and policy issues associated with faith-inspired development actors.

The two days of consultation reaffirmed the hypothesis that the **intersection of faith and development is highly complex**, reflecting the particularly decentralized web of actors, variety of faith traditions, and differing types of organizations. There is a significant base of scholarly knowledge, notably for South Asia, on religion and society, but policymakers and practitioners lack a comprehensive understanding of the development work that faith-linked actors undertake. Meaningful **"mapping"** of this work does not exist, and, more importantly, there are no commonly agreed upon definitions to help to identify or assess faith roles. Treating the South and Central Asian regions together was challenging because the two are very different, but the exercise identified significant links and common threads. The meeting highlighted an extraordinary potential for these institutions, individually and

collectively, to bring about positive change. Many obstacles, sensitivities, and challenges, however, also were identified. The emerging issues highlighted by this report often echoed the key issues and agendas that the development community has identified, but the "faith lens" suggests some significant differences in approach and priorities.

## Faith-Inspired Actors: How Do They Work and What Do They Contribute?

Faith actors work on virtually all issues that are central to international and national development agendas, but many follow different or independent paths. Efforts to ensure effective coordination and meaningful dialogue may be on the rise, but they are fairly recent developments with uncertain impact. Beyond a widely expressed shared commitment to social justice (interpreted in quite different ways, though largely drawn from a spiritual imperative to help the needy), the consensus on how best to achieve cooperation seems quite fragile. Debates about many topics can be quite contentious. Theological differences interact with political realities, exacerbating tensions and raising barriers to engagement. Language differences and varying operating norms complicate engagement with secular development actors and policy circles. These factors limit and often distort formal cooperation, which tend to be largely ad hoc. With growing contemporary concerns about poor aid harmonization, coordination gaps and possible avenues to improvement were a constant theme throughout the discussions. Better coordination

is acknowledged as necessary to improve efficiency and effectiveness. Some heartening examples were cited, notably in complex disaster response. Participants pointed to examples of creative coordination among and between faith-inspired organizations, secular development agencies, governments, and communities. However, they acknowledged that lofty ideas often are difficult to translate into practice.

A central question remains: while many recognize the large development roles that faith-inspired organizations play, what positive and distinctive attributes do they bring to the table? What makes faith-inspired organizations effective development and peacebuilding actors? Faith and religion, all agreed, are central to the nature of societies and to decision-making in most communities in South and Central Asia. Participants grappled, however, with the difficult task of measuring and evaluating faith contributions. Faith's effects on development are elusive; data is limited, and given the often abstract nature of faith attributes, it can be difficult to quantify. Sharing experience through good case studies can contribute to and enrich dialogue about development, but it goes only so far. Participants highlighted the danger in overgeneralizing, given the extraordinary diversity of faith actors in terms of activities, intentions, and results.

## Education: Faith Roles and Values

Faith-inspired actors play significant and diverse roles in education, often filling gaps in public systems and reaching out to poorer populations. However, knowledge is very patchy: what do groups and individuals inspired by faith contribute to education, and how? Participants were convinced that the contributions of faith-inspired actors to the overall education landscape have immense importance, for educational instruction, curriculum development, and for their presence and reach in rural locations. Faith contributions to education, most said, are marked particularly by their strong focus on compassion and a humanistic approach, reflecting their sharper focus on, and integration of, values and ethics. Centering education on values, termed by participants "values-based education," was seen as vital and often distinctive. There are, however, a wide variety of ideas on what constitutes a quality education, despite obvious common concerns. Many see secular

education systems as incomplete and wanting, focusing purely on literacy and tangible outcomes. A quality and complete education, said most participants, must be grounded in a human/moral component, aiming to "broaden a child's mind" towards oneself and towards society, and to instill a global outlook. Participants grappled with defining and agreeing upon a universal set of values. The importance of language choice, most agreed, needs more focus, because subtle differences in presentation between different development organizations, governments, and societal groups, can generate tensions despite what are, at their core, very similar ideals. The differences between values-based education and civic education (a term often used within donor circles) need elucidation.

Very diverse faith-inspired education institutions offer different models and levels of education, ranging from completely religious to largely secular. Some faith-inspired schools are among the most prestigious, but others operate in the shadows, with poor monitoring and uncertain quality. Governments exercise varying levels of control over curricula; participants observed greater public sector direction of curricula and school establishment in Central rather than South Asia. Much discussion focused on different approaches to madrasa reform efforts. Participants generally agreed that most madrasas lack "secular" or vocational training, offering fewer economic and livelihood opportunities to students than their secular counterparts, marginalizing the students. Madrasa reform, some noted, is politically sensitive and prone to misunderstandings among both policymakers and madrasa leaders. One participant noted that "madrasa" has become essentially a pejorative in some policy circles. However, the reality is that madrasas are often the only option for an education for poor and rural populations. All agreed that frank dialogue is needed, particularly with actors generally excluded from the table.

Religious leaders play important roles in shaping public opinion and mobilizing communities, but low education levels can limit their ability to act as responsible development partners. Examples from both South and Central Asia were advanced to demonstrate how religious leaders can be instrumental in shaping development paths, both positively and negatively, at the local, regional, and national levels. Important initiatives to increase religious leaders' education levels are underway,



including imam training programs in Bangladesh and Tajikistan run by governments and NGOs. Participants were impressed with the reach of the training programs, urging that such programs could usefully be replicated in other countries. Faith influences and shapes alternative and informal education programs as well, including at the family level. More focus was urged on these informal dimensions of education.

## Gender, Faith, and Paths to Development

Gender inequity is a fundamental obstacle to sustainable development throughout the region. Virtually all participants described a sharp focus on gender in their work; the issues and challenges are well known, and there is lively debate about how to resolve them. Religion, all emphasized, informs the gender debate in diverse ways, as a tool of liberation, but also of oppression.

There was little disagreement that all the major religions tend to be patriarchal and interpreted by men, with women usually absent from the table. Against this backdrop, faith-inspired organizations have at least the potential to significantly change attitudes and practices towards gender inclusion.

In Bangladesh (one participant observed), a “very public manifestation of Islam” is evident in women’s increasing self-expression in religious terms. Women seek liberation through a textual and “modern” interpretation of scripture. Less clear is how such self-found liberation is mainstreamed in the public space, given widespread stigmas and stereotypes. Raising women’s education levels and sensitizing religious leaders on issues of gender equality are two effective strategies with potential to nudge societies towards greater gender equity.

Religious scriptures, all participants agreed, call for protection of the rights of women. It is cultural traditions, not religion, most stressed, that perpetuate gender inequalities; at policy levels, however, cultural practices often are misinterpreted as religious teachings. Practices including sati (bride burning), son preference, denial of inheritance rights to women, impeding education of girls, wearing of the burka, prohibition of divorce, and relegation of the woman to the home, among others, are “feudal cultural traditions,” (as one

participant put them) that are not condoned or advocated in scripture. In India specifically, son preference has created the phenomena of “missing girls,” drastically altering demographic landscapes.

Compounding scriptural misinterpretations, and also perpetuated by traditional cultural practices, are economic factors that foster gender inequality. Dowry practices, as one example, perpetuate stereotypes and stigmas of women as a burden or liability; one participant pointed to the marriage industry, one of India’s largest businesses, as part of the problem. Practices including abortion and infanticide are stubbornly common in certain areas of South and Central Asia, especially in India. One participant noted that particularly in large faith-inspired NGOs especially, gender sensitive programming, or “a gender lens” has become common practice. At the grassroots level, faith-inspired NGOs may contribute distinctively because they are able to reach out to local communities, often working with congregations; they speak “the same language,” and are often sensitive to cultural traditions, at the same time upholding rights guaranteed by all faith traditions. Religious leaders are said to play significant roles in promoting gender equality in some local communities, and many NGOs, international organizations, and governments, incorporate gender sensitivity training in religious leader training programs.

## Peacebuilding and Conflict: Faith Roles

In many conflicts in South and Central Asia, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, religion plays clear and definable roles. In other conflicts, including those in Bangladesh and Kyrgyzstan, religion’s role is less apparent; even so, faith-inspired actors play influential roles. A common humanity discovered through common faith beliefs, participants argued, can be a key to reconciliation and peace. The group emphasized the very diverse roles that faith-inspired actors play in conflict, as both brokers of peace, and at times promoters of violence; religion can be a force that both unites and divides.

The consultation highlighted faith-inspired organizations’ untapped potential to contribute to conflict resolution efforts and to lead “peacebuilding” activities. Many are keenly aware of religious dimensions to con-

flict, and are well situated to reach out to faith actors in dialogue. One participant noted that “peace has to be in the hearts and minds of the people, and that is the role of faith-inspired actors.” Their presence in remote and insecure regions, off the radar screen of traditional development NGOs and international organizations is an important asset.

Participants described peacebuilding as a process that involves many actors with different competencies; without human development, it is difficult to create peaceful and successful societies. They pointed to a myriad of faith-linked activities under the “peacebuilding” umbrella, including education, gender, health, governance, conflict resolution and transformation, among many others. Even so, faith-inspired actors explicitly involved in peacebuilding activities are seen as less established and organized than in other world regions. Greater coordination and dialogue would enhance effectiveness, as would more information sharing on experiences and lessons learned. In specific settings (Sri Lanka and Pakistan, for example) faith-inspired actors were cited as particularly positive influences. In contrast, lack of focus on values in a society is seen as a contributor to social vices and abuse, thus instigating and/or perpetuating conflict. Many came back to values-based education as a key contribution of faith-inspired actors to peacebuilding.

At the community level, religious leaders have both led populations to peace and incited war. Faith leaders have a responsibility to reach out to all actors within their respective traditions to promote tolerance and peace. Participants stressed that building peace in the family is also vital to building peace in society. Faith-inspired actors, historically a center for family values, can play important roles in this area.

### **Proselytizing and Religious Conversion: A Contentious Debate**

Tensions around proselytization and its ramifications for development and peacebuilding were a recurring theme. Some see sharing one’s faith as an inseparable dimension of development work, but most participants argued forcefully that it must remain quite separate. Both secular and religious actors are concerned about proselytizing linked to development work. A partici-

pant from Sri Lanka noted that following the tsunami, one Christian group linked Bible reading to emergency relief; the episode damaged the reputation of other Christian groups, including those that had carefully earned local respect and trust. In Sri Lanka and elsewhere, governments are suspicious of faith-inspired development activities for this reason, resulting in increasingly stringent requirements facing faith-inspired organizations working on development. Proselytizing and religious conversion can be particularly sensitive where education is concerned; while many education institutions are able to teach values without proselytizing, that is not universal. The complexities and misunderstandings surrounding proselytization highlight the need for dialogue and clearly understood standards of conduct; inclusive dialogue is a first and important step.

### **Health, Climate Change, and Corruption**

Health, climate change, and corruption were not explicit foci of the consultation, but all three topics were highlighted as issues with significant faith-inspired responses. In several countries, including Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Bangladesh, local imams are active in the HIV/AIDS response. NGOs, international organizations, and governments all run programs training religious leaders to integrate HIV/AIDS prevention, information, and sensitization into weekly sermons. One participant suggested that when engaging religious leaders on sensitive and often taboo subjects, including HIV and sexual health, influential imams should be involved as trainers to lend legitimacy to the intervention. A participant from Tajikistan described specific instances when parishioners shared what they had learned about HIV prevention in the mosque with the community, thus disseminating the information to a wider audience. Many examples were cited of faith-inspired medical facilities that provide free or reduced-cost health care to poor populations in remote locations, regardless of faith.

Climate change and the environment present crucial challenges to South and Central Asia and are the topic of lively reflection. Bangladesh and the Maldives, in particular, are already seeing direct effects of climate change. In Bangladesh, international faith-inspired organizations—including Muslim Aid and Islamic Relief—responded to typhoons; and in Sri Lanka,



the Red Lotus organization sprang from the tsunami response as an effort to provide greater disaster preparedness and coordination between and among faith-inspired and secular development organizations.

Corruption and governance were often mentioned, with participants citing numerous instances of programs hindered by corruption and poor governance. These issues were tied to the concerns about deficient values and ethics. Corruption contributes to lack of trust in government, weakening its ability to work effectively with citizens. Faith-inspired actors can help build and broker trust between governments and its citizens. Values-based education was cited again as essential to instilling universal values in youth and encouraging more ethical behavior in society. Thus, all agreed, religious leaders have greater roles to play in combating corruption.

## Interfaith Cooperation

Health, climate change, and corruption, along with gender, alcohol, and tobacco, participants emphasized, are issues around which diverse faith actors can cooperate and coordinate. The group cited several interfaith conferences in India, some organized by transnational religious movements. In Central Asia, DanChurchAid engages religious leaders of different faiths in local and transnational development and peacebuilding efforts, including HIV/AIDS, conflict mitigation and peacebuilding, and migration. Sikh participants emphasized the interfaith character of the Sikhism; Sikh-inspired values-based education institutions teach a universal set of societal values based on an interfaith tradition. Some participants committed themselves to building interfaith networks at the country level as a way to advance ideas emerging through the consultation. Some organizations, including Islamic Relief and Arya Samaj, provided instances of already functioning interfaith bodies as examples for expansion and replication.

## Final Thoughts and Next Steps

While faith-inspired work is widespread and embedded in development and peacebuilding across South and Central Asia, it often falls below the radar of most development policymakers and is largely undocumented or underappreciated in the development literature. Concerted efforts to replicate and scale up best practices

and core values to policy level programming and development are needed; practical examples—particularly in areas of education, gender, and training—participants stressed, offer good opportunities for replication across the regions. Interfaith initiatives can have an impact, especially on peacebuilding and health work. Coordination and networking need far more attention, beginning with issues of common interest. Faith leaders need to reach out to and increase engagement of fringe actors within their faith traditions; the actions of a few have widespread implications for the way faith-inspired actors as a whole are perceived. Regional, national, and local level consultations—most agreed—offer practical ways to harness energy, knowledge, and momentum towards effective development; but effective leadership and networking are needed to sustain their momentum. Beyond the foci of this consultation, future conversations should expand to other areas and sectors where faith-actors are involved; all agreed that this consultation was an important first step.







# Meeting Report

## PARTICIPANT CONTRIBUTIONS

**Swami Agnivesh**, of Arya Samaj (based in India), spoke about development, poverty, and inequity in India, in the context of his long and distinguished career as a social activist. Beginning his journey in 1968, Swami Agnivesh, worked and “identified himself with the hopes and aspirations of the poorest of the poor, trying to figure out what is missing in our whole concept of development.” He found that the spiritual dimension was missing; the culture of sharing and caring. He began his journey, he explained, to challenge the dominant model of development. Swami Agnivesh emphasized that religion is very patriarchal, and he challenged the consultation group on what can be done to promote greater gender equality. He asked participants to “say in one sentence that today, in the name of religion, we will not accept any discrimination of women, that gender quality is non-negotiable.” Turning to the issue of education, he argued that “to have a more rational type of religious education, we should educate students on the values of all religions, and allow the child to make an informed choice on their own religion once they reach an age of consent.” He emphasized that religion typically passes a worldview to a child at birth, without their consent. Poverty, social inequity, and child slavery, he said, deprive 100 million children of education in India; they are deprived of their fundamental right to an education. He closed by asking participants to develop a common

minimum program among religions, to cooperate on common issues for development.

**Younis Alam**, Founder of the Minority Rights Commission in Pakistan, focuses on the debate on religion in the public sphere, identifying that the misuse of religion by some has profound effects on fundamental freedoms and development. Specifically, he spoke about the Sufi traditions in South Asia that focused on culture, education, and promoting peaceful coexistence. Mr. Alam highlighted transnational links between South and Central Asia and emphasized the common Sufi traditions in each region. Looking forward, he recommended that South and Central Asia increase cooperation, building upon common religious and cultural traditions to promote peaceful coexistence.

**Amir Ali**, CEO of the Aga Khan Foundation, Bangladesh, highlighted its work of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) in Bangladesh. The AKDN, he said, “while based on Islamic principles, works for alleviation of various social needs, working against social ignorance, disease, and deprivation, without regards to faith or religion.” The AKDN, he said, is a faith-inspired organization, which he differentiated from a faith-based organization. Dr. Ali quoted an interview with His Highness the Aga Khan, where he said, as Muslim Imam, it is his responsibility and duty (and not a charity) to look after the welfare of those whom we can help – that is the duty of a Muslim Imam. Speaking about education, Ali empha-



## CONSULTATION PARTICIPANTS

### *Moderators*

**Katherine Marshall**, Senior Fellow at the Berkley Center, Visiting Associate Professor of Government, Georgetown University, Executive Director, World Faiths Development Dialogue

**Samia Huq**, Assistant Professor, BRAC Development Institute, Bangladesh

### *Participants*

**Swami Agnivesh**, Arya Samaj

**Melody Fox Ahmed**, Director of Programs and Operations, Berkley Center, Georgetown University

**Younis Alam**, Founder, Minority Rights Commission, Pakistan

**Amir Ali**, CEO, Aga Khan Foundation, Bangladesh

**Moulana Abul Kalam Azad**, Founding Chairman, Masjid Council for Community Advancement, Bangladesh

**Michael Bodakowski**, Asia Analyst, World Faiths Development Dialogue

**Keshab Chaulagain**, Founding General Secretary, Interreligious Council, Nepal

**Visaka Dharmadasa**, Founder and Chair, Association of War Affected Women, Sri Lanka

**Olcott Gunasekera**, Founding and current President, Dharmavijaya Foundation, Sri Lanka

**Francis Halder**, Coordinator, Anando, Bangladesh

**Jena Derakhshani Hamadani**, Scientist, International Centre for Diarrheal Disease Research, Bangladesh

**Syed M. Hashemi**, Founder and Director, BRAC Development Institute, Bangladesh

**Mirza M. Hassan**, Lead Researcher - Governance Team, BRAC Development Institute, Bangladesh

**Suhrob Khaitov**, Administrator, Center on Mental Health and HIV/AIDS, Tajikistan

**Ravinderpal Singh Kohli**, Kalgidhar Society, India

**Tatiana Kotova**, Regional Director for Central Asia, DanChurchAid, Kyrgyzstan

**Rabia Mathai**, Regional Director- Asia-Pacific, Catholic Medical Mission Board

**Father Cedric Prakash**, SJ, Founding Director, PRASHANT, India

**Maggie Ronkin**, Faculty, School of Foreign Service - Georgetown University

**Muhammad Amjad Saqib**, Executive Director, Akhuwat, Pakistan

**Bedreldin Shutta**, Head of Asia Region, Islamic Relief

**Baba Iqbal Singh**, Leader, Kalgidhar Society, India

**Maheen Sultan**, Coordinator, Pathways of Women's Empowerment South Asia Hub, BRAC Development Institute, Bangladesh

**Farida Vahedi**, Executive Director - Department of External Affairs, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís, India

**Fadlullah Wilmot**, Director of Islamic Relief in Pakistan

**Chintamani Yogi**, Founder, Hindu VidyaPeeth Movement; Chairperson, Peace Service Centre and Nepal Interfaith Movement

**Batir Zalimov**, Psychologist, Center on Mental Health and HIV/AIDS, Tajikistan

### *Also Interviewed*

**Fayyaz Baqir**, Director, Akhter Hameed Khan Resource Centre, Pakistan

**Abdurahim Nazarov**, Imam Khatib - Umar Ibni Abdulaziz Mosque, Tajikistan

From left to right, Katherine Marshall, Maggie Ronkin, Swami Agnivesh, Melody Fox Ahmed, Oclott Gunasekera, Suhrob Khaitov



sized that partial education can be dangerous, referring to religious leaders that “misuse this knowledge [religion] for personal uses or take advantage of the illiterate masses and guide them wrongly.” Dr. Ali emphasized the importance of reaching out to those who not at the table in dialogue; and for those that are at the table, to set attainable goals that are realistic, focusing not only on big picture ideas beyond one’s reach but at what is practical.

**Moulana Abul Kalam Azad**, Founding Chairman of the Masjid Council for Community Advancement a well known Muslim leader, works on community development programming in Bangladesh. He has worked in media for over thirty years, leveraging his status as a public figure to promote proper understandings of Islam and advance work for social justice. His work has a strong focus on engaging local imams in the development process, specifically on HIV/AIDS prevention; he described his partnership with UNICEF to create sermon curricula for imams. On gender, Moulana Azad emphasized gender equality in Islam; specifically on child marriage, he highlighted that Islam does not teach the practice, and said that misinformed religious leaders were responsible for perpetuating it, saying “The half doctor is dangerous for life, and the half-religious leader is dangerous for religion.” Speaking about education, he noted that the madrasa system in Bangladesh is not integrated into mainstream education; unless political and elite classes gain trust in the system, it is unlikely to improve across the nation.

**Keshab Chaulagain**, Founding General Secretary of the Interreligious Council in Nepal focuses particularly on the peacebuilding process in Nepal. He spoke about his work for peace, working through both religious and political channels, and engaging Maoist groups in dialogue. He emphasized the need to look for issues of shared importance from which to initiate dialogue. The moon, he says, is a common symbol for all of humanity, and can be used to approach all societal or faith groups, regardless of differences in beliefs. Mr. Chaulagain works actively for women’s rights, and shared his experiences working with UN WOMEN, as chairman of a women’s network in Nepal. On peacebuilding, he highlighted the role of Hindu rituals in helping to transform the enemy to an ally. Lastly, speaking about education, he emphasized the need to introduce peacebuilding lessons in higher education, not only at the primary but also at secondary levels.

**Visaka Dharmadasa**, Founder and Chair of the Association of War Affected Women in Sri Lanka, focused on her role as a leader in peacebuilding in Sri Lanka. Though the Sri Lankan conflict is not a religious one, she said, religion can play important roles in promoting unity. Ms. Dharmadasa emphasized that the father has an important role in raising a child, not only the mother. She differed with her colleague from Sri Lanka, saying that child marriages do happen in Sri Lanka, largely as an indirect result of conflict and poverty. Turning to education, she spoke about her experience as a child, and recalled



Consultation Day 2 - Documenting the discussion

learning about the major world religions until grade three, at which point it was the decision of the parents to decide if their children should continue religious education. Though she was exposed to the ideas of all religions, she said, there is much more for Sri Lankan students to learn about other faiths. Lastly, turning to peacebuilding and conflict, she noted that though most consultation participants were in agreement, outside the conference room the story was quite different. There is a large range of perspectives within and between faith communities, and each faith tradition should reach out to those actors with good will, not acting in congruence for peace. She highlighted the need to look at how religions define security as a starting point for dialogue.

**Olcott Gunasekera**, Founding and current President of the Dharmavijaya Foundation in Sri Lanka, among many positions he has held in Sri Lanka and globally, which include President of the Red Lotus humanitarian organization. He described the vision of the Dharmavijaya Foundation as “the creation of a society of moral and ethical integrity, with the universal Buddhist Values of loving kindness, compassion, justice, freedom, and fairness.” The Foundation aims to link communities with temples, a bond that was broken under colonial rule; the Foundation works through approximately 440 local temple branches around the country, he said. Mr. Gunasekera spoke in detail about aid coordination, citing experiences following the 2004 tsunami. On a resolution passed at a Global Buddhist Conference on “Buddhist Humanitarian Services in a Post-Tsunami Context,”

the Red Lotus organization was founded with Mr. Gunasekera as President both to promote coordination and cooperation between aid organizations (faith-inspired and secular), and to provide humanitarian relief according to Buddhist principles. Buddhist perspectives are not represented in many international development forums, including the United Nations, he said. Mr. Gunasekera also spoke about his work on alcohol and tobacco control, within the international framework of the World Health Organization. In discussing the overall activities of faith-inspired organizations in development in Sri Lanka, he noted that instances of proselytization have contributed to an overall suspicion of their work, especially among government institutions; this suspicion, he said, has created some obstacles for organizations working on relief and peacebuilding programs. Lastly, he urged participants to look at faith participation in informal and alternative education programs, not only in formal education.

**Francis Halder**, Coordinator for Anando in Bangladesh, focuses on community peacebuilding programs among indigenous groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region of Bangladesh. Mr. Halder spoke of his role representing a Catholic organization in a majority-Muslim country; the Catholic identity often lends him a position of impartiality between Muslim and Hindu communities. He introduced Anando’s peace education programming, arguing that peace education should promote three central principals: 1) Tolerance; 2) Justice; and 3) Reconciliation. In describing the state of peace-



Participants gather in front hall in between consultation sessions



building in Bangladesh he stressed that there is still conflict, and without getting to the root of the conflict, you cannot build sustainable peace. Mr. Halder gave specific details on his family peacebuilding programs, which approaches community peacebuilding starting within the family. He emphasized the effectiveness of this program in accommodating government sensitivities for community peace work, and for working to solve the roots of conflict in the CHT region.

**Jena Derakhshani Hamadani**, a Scientist for the International Centre for Diarrheal Disease Research, in Dhaka, Bangladesh; is a member of the Bahá'í community. She cited the founder of the Bahá'í faith: "if religion is the cause of strife and dissention, we are better off having no religion...we can find unity in diversity." She emphasized that education is not only reading, writing, and literacy; but rather should "broaden a child's mind." Dr. Hamadani told an anecdote from her time as a student in a Bahá'í moral school, where she was taught that "humanity is like the fingers of one hand, they are all of different sizes and shapes, and when they work together, only then can they achieve their tasks." A child needs to learn, she says, that people of other religions are like other fingers on the same hand. She highlighted the importance of data and evidence in development, arguing that there were differences in the quality of education between private secular and religious schools; private secular schools tend to produce higher-achieving students, she found.

**Syed M. Hashemi**, Founder and Director of the BRAC Development Institute in Bangladesh, attended the final session of the consultation and spoke about the complex interactions between religion and society. Religious distortions, above all other factors, have fueled atrocities in Bangladesh and abroad. He also saw many opportunities for positive change with so many faith-inspired organizations involved in development work. He provided examples of long standing faith-inspired development organizations operating in Bangladesh, from both the Christian and Muslim faiths. Natural disasters, he said, have brought organizations of different faiths together to collaborate on development projects, and can be an example of successful interfaith cooperation in practice.

**Suhrob Khaitov**, Administrator of the Center on Mental Health and HIV/AIDS in Tajikistan, set out the development challenges facing Tajikistan, highlighting the important role religious communities and leaders play in the development process. He described the Center's imam training program, noting that as a result imams in Tajikistan are preaching sermons on HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness. Mosque parishioners, he said, take lessons they have learned from their imams, and share them in their communities, creating a multiplier effect, and disseminating public information on social issues. During the session on peacebuilding, Mr. Khaitov compared peacebuilding to an orchestra, saying: "there are a lot of people in an orchestra, all with their own religion, their own instrument, but all of



Participants from Central Asia listen to discussion on roles of faith leaders in public health, from left to right, Suhrob Khaitov, Tatiana Kotova, Batir Zalimov

them are playing the same music.” He concluded by emphasizing the importance of networking, calling on all participants to strengthen the consultation network following the meeting in Bangladesh, to share experiences and lessons learned.

**Tatiana Kotova**, Regional Director for Central Asia for DanChurchAid in Kyrgyzstan, recounted her experience working with faith-inspired development organizations following the break-up of the Soviet Union. After working with Christian organizations in Russia and Eastern Europe, she took up her present position in Central Asia. Ms. Kotova has come to understand faith practice and church mission, she said, as something beyond prayer and worship, but including doing good for others. In her current role with DanChurchAid, she feels that if she does not engage religious leaders in development, she is not implementing the promises of what is meant by practice and mission. Ms. Kotova discussed the recent conflict in Kyrgyzstan, and the diverse roles religious leaders played saying that “some provoked violence, and some stopped the violence.” Now, Kyrgyzstan is working to overcome this conflict (Ms. Kotova noted), and trying to identify with whom to work and who to involve. When engaging with religious leaders, she emphasized that one must “be gentle and wise, not to harm but to help each other.” She appreciated that Central Asia was included in the consultation, as it is too often excluded from the development dialogue.

**Ravinderpal Singh Kohli**, a member of the Kalgidhar Society in India, explained that he is one of approximately 300 volunteers who have found purpose in their life by devoting their life to Baba Iqbal Singh’s mission. Mr. Kohli described the large-scale education endeavor the society is undertaking in the northern regions of India. He emphasized the importance of values-based education in creating a just and equitable society, as described by Baba Iqbal Singh, and discussed the network of schools run by his society in northern India that teaching values and literacy to poor rural communities. Turning to discuss faith-inspired institutions in northern India more generally, they have not, he said, been able to deliver what there were supposed to or have promised; rather, people in those positions have in many cases only been accumulating wealth for themselves or their clan, he emphasized. During a discussion on gender, Mr. Kohli placed blame for the perpetuation of gender inequality in India on the marriage industry, which “burns resources and labels women as a burden and liability.”

**Rabia Mathai**, Regional Director for the Asia-Pacific region for the Catholic Medical Mission Board, has worked across Asia and Africa on health, peace-building, and education development programming. Currently based in India, she focuses on health interventions in the Asia-Pacific region, leveraging Catholic health networks. Dr. Mathai emphasized poverty alleviation as a critical starting point; however, she fears that it has become a slogan for development; it is action, she said, that is needed.

The view from the consultation venue, The Westin Dhaka



Faith-inspired organizations, she emphasized, must take leadership in defining what poverty alleviation means in practice. She discussed proselytization in the context of the Sri Lanka tsunami; World Vision was one of the most effective organizations in providing tsunami relief, but Buddhists were made to read the Bible, along with receiving food. This was both immoral and harmful to the broader effort, she emphasized. Turning to interfaith engagement, CMMB at first quarreled with organizations of different faiths, but once a common framework was established and each religion could practice within their own religious values, the program was successful; “as a group we brought force,” she said. In the session on gender, Dr. Mathai emphasized that men need to be further involved, as they are the ones committing violence against women. Dr. Mathai highlighted the importance of ensuring quality in faith-inspired education, as well as seeking data and evidence on the efficacy of faith-inspired development work.

**Father Cedric Prakash, SJ**, Founding Director of PRASHANT, a human rights organization based in the city of Ahmedabad; expressed as a Jesuit priest pleasure at being able to cooperate with Georgetown University, a Jesuit institution. He spoke about his experience working at the grassroots level in Ahmedabad; from what he has witnessed, religion often keeps people divided instead of unified. A watershed in his life, he said, was the destruction of the Babri mosque on December 10, 1992, triggering wide-scale violence between different faith groups

in Gujarat; he has since been working to foster peaceful coexistence between different faith and ethnic groups in India. In a discussion on religious leaders and their development roles, he noted that “it is often the peddlers of religion that keep people manipulated, in our gurukul, madrasas, and seminaries,” “we have to engage, and try to change the mindset of those we teach and preach to.” Speaking about education, he stressed three points: 1) State-controlled curricula often promote stereotypes and discrimination against minority groups and women; 2) India has mandated universal education for all, though quality of curricula and access to schooling remains a challenge; and 3) Increased commercialization in education can contribute to a decrease in values-based education. Corruption also, he emphasized, is pervasive in education and governance in India.

**Maggie Ronkin**, visiting professor at the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University and career-long anthropologist in Pakistan, is presently a Fulbright Scholar at the American Institute of Pakistan Studies based in Islamabad. Dr. Ronkin emphasized the importance her profession gives to cultural relativism, but noted that with regards to gender rights, protection of women often supersedes cultural relativism, particularly as it relates to child marriage. Poverty alleviation, she said, “is something that can be facilitated through faith-inspired actors, and that is for me the basis for empowering women.” She described a video conference course she developed for Georgetown and



Amjad Saqib discusses the role of Islamic microfinance institutions in Pakistan

Harvard Universities, linking American students with Pakistani practitioners, focusing on issues of education, health care, rural and urban development, microfinance, economic activism, and Sufi sacred space.

**Muhammad Amjad Saqib**, Executive Director of Akhuwat in Pakistan, spoke about his experience as head of an interest-free microfinance organization in Pakistan. Akhuwat, he explained, means brotherhood, and “brotherhood is not confined to Muslims, but encompasses in all religions.” He noted that Akhuwat utilizes mosques and churches for social and economic mediation; he believes “that to achieve participatory and inclusive development, we need to utilize indigenous institutions for the benefit of the people.” He is working to further engage religious leaders in the overall development process.” He emphasized that “we need to make clear distinctions between cultural traditions and religious teachings” because they are often wrongly labeled. Dr. Saqib committed himself to holding a similar consultation in Pakistan, bringing together faith-inspired organizations, secular organizations, and government representatives to develop a tripartite arrangement on the role of faith-inspired actors in development. He was also inspired by the effectiveness of imam training programs in Bangladesh, and hoped to see similar programs in Pakistan. Lastly, he invited Baba Iqbal Singh to establish one of his schools in Pakistan to foster cross border understanding.

**Bedreldin Shutta**, Head of the Asia Region for Islamic Relief Worldwide, is based in the United Kingdom. He introduced his comments with a story from his work in Sudan, where he first witnessed the effectiveness of religious leaders in development; without the religious leaders assuring the communities of the safety of the program, he said, his organization would not have succeeded in implementing a large scale immunization program to prevent childhood diseases. That experience, he emphasized, motivated him to seek work with a faith-inspired organization. Any Muslim, he explained, “from a religious point of view, is actually required to serve humanity, and also the earth,” to promote prosperity and peace. Mr. Shutta emphasized the important roles religious leaders play in making peace, drawing from his experience in Sri Lanka. In speaking on education, he explained that he attended a madrasa as a child, and that it provided him with a solid educational base, but that today, corruption and content of curricula can degrade the quality of learning.

**Baba Iqbal Singh**, leader of the Kalgidhar Society in India, has opened over 60 schools in rural northern India, and has plans to open over 150 additional schools over the next three years. His vision for education centers on his convictions about the needs for a universal values-based education approach that emphasizes the practical application of values. To change the world, he said, we must start with the children through a values-based education. A lack of values, as acted out in society through alcohol, drug, and other abuses, is a barrier to sustainable





Consultation participants at the first day session

development. He noted that the holy scripture of the Sikh religion is interfaith, drawing from the world's major religions. "We are searching within ourselves for the same divine," he said, "we come from different countries, but within ourselves the divine is one." Along these lines, his schools are open to students of all faiths. Concluding the session on education, he highlighted that the discussion had not addressed the important role of the mother in children's education. Mr. Singh echoed his colleagues in maintaining that culture and religion are not synonymous, and that religion is often condemned for what is really an aspect of local culture

**Maheen Sultan**, Coordinator for the Pathways of Women's Empowerment at the BRAC Development Institute in Bangladesh, introduced BDI's work in the consultation introduction. BDI's research focuses on specific themes, including poverty alleviation, governance, citizenship, and women's empowerment, but with a lens for history, culture and development. Within these themes, she emphasized that BDI is trying to explore the roles that faith and religion play in development, politics, and government. Ms. Sultan noted that religion and development is a very sensitive topic, and that many initiatives have shied away from dialogue. BDI, she said, wants to enter into constructive dialogue with those organizations not often involved these dialogues. She saw the consultation as a good venue to begin a network on these issues.

**Farida Vahedi**, Executive Director of the Department of External Affairs of the National Spiritual Assembly

of the Bahá'ís in India, highlighted the underlying principles for Bahá'í development work. Emphasizing the spiritual concept that "the greatest form of oppression that human beings suffer today is a deprivation of the knowledge of one's true self." Ms. Vahedi provided many insights into the education programming of the Bahá'í. She addressed the need to teach both values and science in schools at all levels, and that values-based education is a core component in addressing social inequities and peacebuilding. She spoke about her work with government agencies in India to bring spiritual concepts and moral values into the educational curriculum. She argued that peacebuilding is a process that must include gender equality and education. Building on discussions on religion and cultural relativism, she challenged people of all faiths to move beyond cultural relativism in defense of those facing injustices. Lastly, Ms. Vahedi echoed the need for evidence and good case studies on faith-inspired development work.

**Fadlullah Wilmot**, Director of Islamic Relief in Pakistan, previously worked in development-related capacities throughout the region, including in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. He highlighted the political and societal challenges faced by Muslim-inspired aid organizations in South Asia, and the very different country contexts in which they work. From his experience with Muslim Aid and Islamic Relief, he said that within Muslim aid agencies, there are efforts to become more accountable, transparent, and to adhere to international principles. His present organization, Islamic Relief, starts from a rights-

based approach, “coming from a Qur’anic imperative that the poor have a right to the wealth of the rich.” Mr. Wilmot said, “What we are doing is not charity, it is their right.” He noted that he sees “militant piety” as a danger, as it is not conducive to inclusive development. In a discussion on education, Mr. Wilmot argued that madrasas fill an important gap in education that is not being filled by governments; this has to be appreciated by policymakers, he said. Speaking about Central Asia, he views the region as a very separate issue that “should not be lumped together” with other regions. On gender (noting that gender-based violence is against the teachings of Islam), he highlighted the benefits of coordination between faith-inspired and secular development organizations, citing efforts of UNICEF and the WHO.

**Chintamani Yogi**, Founder of Hindu VidyaPeeth Movement in Nepal, works for Hindu-inspired education and peacebuilding in Nepal. Dr. Yogi discussed his vision for education and the links between values-based education and peace. The current political system of Nepal, he said, is damaging the religious harmony and destroying the cultural, social, spiritual beauty of Nepal. He identified “three pillars of education” as values-based education, culture-based education, and spirituality-based education. It is values-based education, he said, that produces a “whole human.” He told consultation participants about his participation in a government-mandated committee to create a textbook for human values education, to be the first of its kind in Nepal. Turning to aid effectiveness, a problem in Nepal is that NGOs (international and national) are funded by foreign agencies that tend to ignore the religious communities and their important roles and contributions. Dr. Yogi stated that the main reason for gender discrimination is poverty and illiteracy, and that much blame is wrongly placed on religious communities.

**Batir Zalimov**, a psychologist at the Center on Mental Health and HIV/AIDS in Tajikistan, focuses on individuals with HIV and those addicted to drugs. Mr. Zalimov told participants that he was a drug user and that his faith helped him to drop the addiction and refocus his energy on public service. As part of his work, he engages imams, regularly visiting mosques to talk to imams and parishioners about HIV prevention and drug abuse. He highlighted

that gender equality is protected in the Qur’an, and that gender discrimination and predetermined gender roles are cultural traditions, not prescribed by religion. Mr. Zalimov highlighted three issues: 1) relations between religion and government, 2) relations between religion and education, and 3) proselytizing. The issue of proselytizing, he said, is perhaps the most important for Tajikistan, as it colors all relationships between the government and faith-inspired actors. In discussing peacebuilding, he underscored the significant power and influence that religious leaders have on the people; if we invest in educating religious leaders, then peace will be achieved in Tajikistan very soon.



Tatiana Kotova (DanChurchAid) and Faria Vahedi (National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís, India)





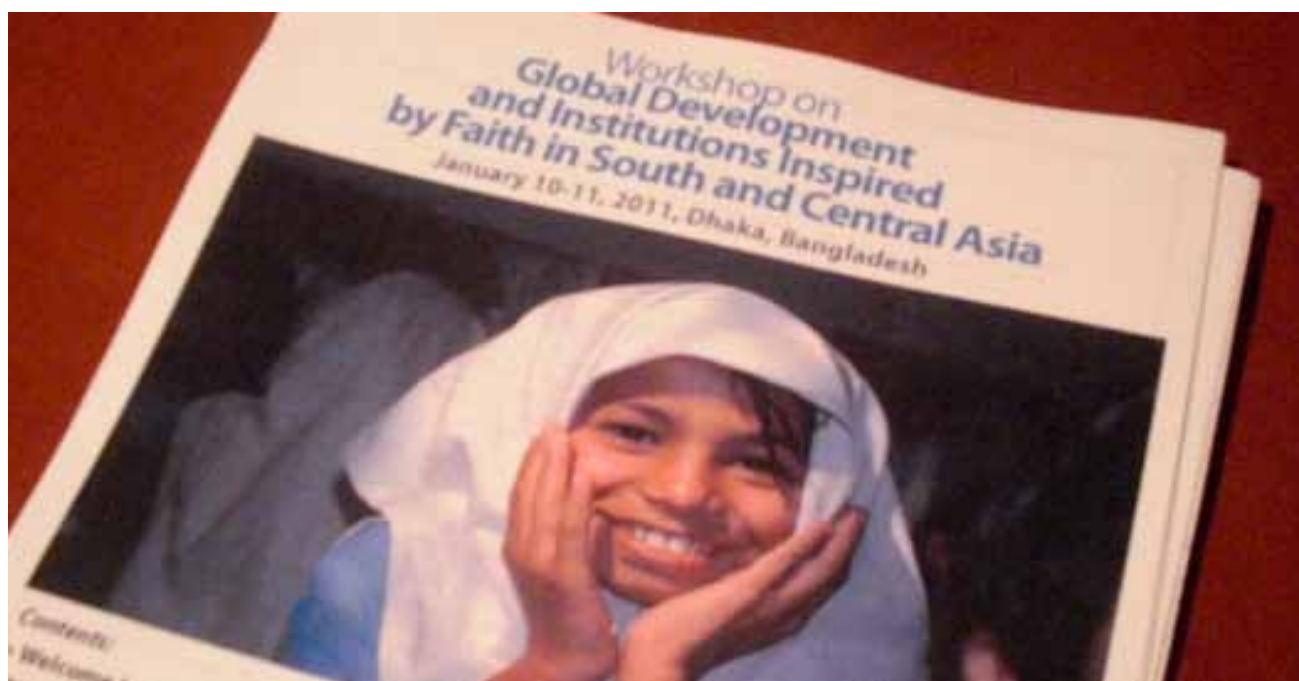
Dhaka Consultation Participants



## Framing the Discussion

**T**he World Faiths Development Dialogue, the BRAC Development Institute at BRAC University, and the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, convened a two-day consultation in Dhaka, Bangladesh on January 10-11, 2011 which engaged a diverse group of practitioners, technical specialists, and religious leaders. The topic was emerging issues surrounding faith-inspired development work in South and Central Asia. The event was a part of a three-year Berkley Center project exploring the landscape and potential issues for faith-inspired organizations in international development. The project is supported by the Henry R. Luce Foundation. This

program segment focuses on different world regions, and builds on earlier consultations in Phnom Penh, Cambodia in December 2009 on Southeast Asia; Antigua, Guatemala in January 2009 on Latin America; The Hague, Netherlands in June 2008 on Europe and Africa; Doha, Qatar in December 2007 on the Muslim World; and in Washington, D.C. in April 2007 on the United States. A capstone consultation to address all of the seven world regions is planned for late 2011. Publications present highlights of each of these events and results of background research and can be found on the websites of both the Berkley Center and the World Faiths Development Dialogue.



## Luce/SFS Program on Religion and Global Development: Exploring Faith-inspired Institutions

**Katherine Marshall**, Senior Fellow at the Berkley Center, Visiting Associate Professor of Government, Georgetown University, Executive Director, World Faiths Development Dialogue

The Religion and Global Development program examines both the role of religious groups and ideas in wealthier and developing countries and the prospects for greater religious-secular cooperation in the development field. Its components include graduate student research fellowships, a religion and development database, and the creation and dissemination of “religious literacy” materials for development professionals in government, NGOs, and international organizations. Through a series of meetings with stakeholders and background reports, the Luce/SFS Program on Religion and Global Development maps the role of faith-based organizations around the world and points to best practices and areas for collaboration.

The multi-year project explores issues involving institutions that play critical roles in social and economic development and that are, in various ways, inspired by and linked to religious faith. The objectives are to establish a solid information base about the nature of institutions and the work they do (a “mapping” of organizations and activities), to take stock of the dynamics and direction they are taking, and to explore the range of policy issues involved, including: relationships to secular development institutions, political and social ramifications of their work, and approaches and work styles that might distinguish these institutions and their leadership from other institutions working in the development field.

The work program of which the Phnom Penh consultation forms part involves a sequence of distinct reviews focused successively on issues in different world regions and faith traditions. The investigation entails research papers (involving substantive input by Georgetown graduate student research teams) followed by a focused consultation meeting with small groups of academics and practitioners engaged in the field. A particularly useful feature of the approach is proving to be in-depth interviews with leading practitioners to explore their individual, thought-provoking, and differing approaches to emerging issues.

The work will be summarized at its conclusion in a book. Over the course of its life, the program is seen as a dynamic and “living” effort, where information,

interviews, and tentative findings are an evolving and expanding part of the Berkley Center’s work and website. The work is pursued in partnership with other institutions active in the field.

### Faith-Inspired Institutions and Development: The Backdrop

The worldwide resurgence of interest in religion and its greater presence on public policy agendas are important contemporary global phenomena. There is growing awareness in both policy and religious circles of the powerful roles, both potential and actual, that faith-inspired institutions can play in a variety of social programs. One such area is international development work, which seeks to relieve poverty, address humanitarian crises, and work for longer-term human and socio-economic development.

Until recently, religion and religious institutions were only partially engaged with the major secular development institutions, with the notable exception of humanitarian aid and emergency work. This picture is changing as a growing group of faith institutions build on their traditional work in health and education and expand their development work, propelled by issues such as HIV/AIDS and rising consciousness of the pain of world poverty.

The leading development institutions are showing greater interest in learning from this experience and in building partnerships that reflect both different and complementary approaches to development challenges. There is still much uncharted ground, however, because there has been little systematic investigation into the work of faith-inspired institutions, and the area is complicated by tensions and failures in communication between different faiths and between faith-based and secular development institutions. There is an urgent need for better knowledge and understanding. These offer the potential to enhance both the quality and reach of global development work.

**Phase 1: The United States: Faith-inspired Organizations Working in International Development.** The first stage of investigation focused on the United States, and culminated in a conference at Georgetown University in April 2007.



A student team reviewed the academic literature on the topic, assembled information on the wide range of institutions from different faith traditions working in the field, and investigated emerging issues. Leading practitioners participated in the conference, examining issues such as distinctive elements of faith-inspired development work, financing sources and trends, relationships with governments, sensitivities around proselytizing work, their views on priorities, and areas of focus.

**Phase 2: Development and Faith in the Muslim World.** The second stage focused on the Muslim world. This addressed the role of largely non-state institutions in majority-Muslim countries with special focus on those inspired by faith and on the emerging role of global Muslim-inspired institutions, including Islamic Relief, the Red Crescent Society, the Aga Khan Network, and the Islamic Development Bank. Building on background research and discussions with quite different practitioners leading a spectrum of institutions and with scholars, a consultation meeting was held at the Georgetown campus in Doha in December 2007. That discussion addressed institutional arrangements and trends in Muslim-majority developing countries; relationships among public, private, and religiously inspired actors; financing issues (including the post-September 11, 2001 landscape); and approaches to leading issues such as children, education, health, and gender. The review highlighted active and widely differing work by emerging institutions in the Muslim world, especially those with explicit faith links, and the issues of social and economic development.

**Phase 3: Europe and Africa.** The third stage focused on Europe and Africa. As in other world regions, there is fragmented data and little systematic assessment of the role of faith-inspired organizations working on development. The consultation presented Africa's extraordinarily varied tapestry of organizations working in development, many of them inspired and often founded by faith traditions. Recently their work has received greater focus (prompted above all by the HIV/AIDS pandemic), but still little systematic information is available, and policy implications have barely been explored. The rapidly changing religious landscape at the grassroots level was a prominent topic of discussion. The review also focused on European institutions and approaches to faith development links. A particular sectoral focus was on the work and role of faith leaders and institutions in post-

conflict environments, especially in fragile states. The consultation meeting took place in The Hague, Netherlands in June 2008, cosponsored by the Institute of Social Studies (ISS).

**Phase 4: Latin America. Exploring faith and development issues in Latin America.** The fourth stage focused on Latin America. Participants at the consultation—held in Antigua, Guatemala in January 2009 and cosponsored with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)—focused on the role of fast-growing Protestant churches in service delivery, major challenges facing children and youth in the region, the need for an ongoing forum for faith-inspired organizations working on development to collaborate and share ideas, and the global economic crisis and its impacts on the region and migration. This was the first meeting of its kind bringing together evangelicals, Catholics, and representatives from secular institutions to address common concerns around development challenges. Participants included: VIVA Network, World Conference of Religions for Peace, Pastoral da Criança, Fundacion Avina, World Vision, and Catholic Relief Services.

**Phase 5: Southeast Asia.** The fifth stage focused on Southeast Asia. The consultation, held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and cosponsored with the University of Cambodia and the Asia Faiths Development Dialogue, focused on a range of pressing development issues in Southeast Asia; including peacebuilding, proselytizing, interfaith cooperation, youth and education, health, orphan care, and aid coordination and effectiveness. The consultation brought together participants from nine countries, representing local and international religious institutions, government, international organizations, and academic institutions. A specific session focused on Cambodia and the role of faith in the development process. WFDD is engaged in a parallel multi-year country study on the role of faith actors in development in Cambodia; preliminary findings were presented at the consultation.

**Phase 6: South and Central Asia.** The sixth stage, covered in this report, explored faith and development issues in South and Central Asia. Participants came from nine countries representing the Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh faiths and traditions.





## The Dhaka Consultation

**O**n the first day of the Dhaka consultation, January 10, the discussion focused on the intersections of faith and development across the South and Central Asia regions, with specific discussions on conflict, peacebuilding, and gender. The second day, January 11, looked at issues of faith and education and concluded with a session that highlighted action ideas and recommendations.

**Katherine Marshall** welcomed the group to the consultation, noting her pleasure at the diverse group of faith and development leaders present. The partnership with the BRAC Development Institute has special importance; BRAC has made and continues to make significant contributions to the development field and offers a rich experience and network. Ms. Marshall introduced the Berkley Center, with its dynamic and central role within Georgetown University; and she introduced WFDD, tracing its often sensitive but productive history, from its beginnings within the World Bank, to its present status as an independent non-profit organization.

She framed the consultation and its policy context in terms of the larger regional “mapping” project of faith-inspired organizations in global development being undertaken by the Berkley Center and WFDD. Ms. Marshall shared key areas of interest and tension from previous consultations, which have included aid coordination, proselytizing, and orphan care. The academic literature, she emphasized, does not always capture the complex work of development practitioners; and even less so those inspired by faith, highlighting the

pertinence and importance of the consultation. The practitioner interviews have emerged as a key component of effective research methodology to fill the gap between literature and practice. Most international donor agencies are today interested in the intersection of faith and development and recognize its importance, although gaps still exist between expressed interest and official policy.

**Samia Huq** and **Maheen Sultan** of the BRAC Development Institute (BDI) welcomed participants to Bangladesh and introduced the work of the BRAC Development organizations. Dr. Huq noted that there is a huge knowledge gap and many misconceptions on the use and mobilization of faith in the public space; she stressed the importance of dialogue and cooperation between secular and faith-inspired actors to dispel misconceptions. Ms. Sultan echoed similar points, noting that BDI has set out to explore the role faith and religion play in development, politics, and government.

*The morning sessions* centered on personal introductions of each consultation participant. During introductions, an overview of key topics and themes emerged, including education, gender inequalities, peacebuilding, the centrality of faith and spirituality in informing worldviews, the role of religious leaders in development processes, interfaith cooperation around common issues, and efforts towards coordination and transparency.

During a discussion on development and poverty alleviation, the challenges of participatory and inclusive

development in South and Central came to the forefront. Participants noted that traditional social roles can perpetuate social inequalities and that cultural traditions are often misunderstood as religious teachings. Faith-inspired actors can be instrumental in clarifying myths and promoting equitable development, participants agreed.

In examining the concept of development more broadly, consultation participants concurred that values and spirituality are often missing from secular development models. Rather than a separate development paradigm, participants expressed their common support for the view that values and compassion need to be better and continuously built into all development models, whether secular or faith-inspired. **Farida Vahedi** echoed that point with a description of the Bahá'í model of education. Bahá'í-inspired education, she said, teaches children to value religion as a system of knowledge and practice that contributes to the advancement of civilization, in the same way as science does.

The ensuing discussion about the roles and efficacy of religious leaders and faith-inspired organizations explored strengths, weakness, and common misconceptions. Participants agreed that while religion is an important factor in instilling values in the development process, religion is often misused by religious leaders, and can be a cause of division in society; the need for genuine, frank dialogue was stressed, contrasted with the common absence of such truly engaged exchange. Several participants offered examples of how religious leaders have stalled, or even set barriers to inclusive development, particularly around education and gender equality. Participants noted and provided specific instances of religious leaders making constructive contributions to peace and development. **Bedreldin Shutta** shared his experience of working on a community vaccination program; local residents heard rumors that the immunizations were intended to reduce the population's size. "It took the intervention of local religious leaders," he said, to change perceptions and successfully implement the program. **Tatiana Kotova**, discussing the recent violence in Kyrgyzstan, observed that religious leaders participated in both provoking violence and in promoting peace. All participants agreed that a lack of education among religious leaders contributes to misuses of religion and thus makes religion a catalyst for division rather than social harmony.

Faith-inspired actors, all agreed, have particular contributions to make at the grassroots level, particularly in education, peacebuilding, and health work. **Chintamani Yogi** stressed the importance for all to "think globally and act locally," serving humanity through spirituality, as inspiration for his values-based education institutions in Nepal.

Proselytizing emerged as a salient and recurring topic across several sessions. It is seen as having wide-ranging implications for faith-inspired actors engaged in development work, affecting relationships among and between governments, donor agencies, communities, and faith-inspired organizations themselves. **Olcott Gunasekera** discussed tensions surrounding faith-inspired development work in Sri Lanka, particularly after the 2004 tsunami. Activities of some groups engaged in proselytizing activities, he reported, have had implications on the political debate surrounding faith-inspired development work more generally. Participants discussed different understandings of proselytization, those both between and within faith traditions. The groups pointed to a need for further dialogue on the issue, particularly engaging those voices commonly not at the table.

Towards the end of the morning session, the group's discussion centered on using development more proactively as a means to find common ground to promote cooperation between and among faith-inspired and secular development agencies. Tobacco, alcohol, gender, and HIV/AIDS were all cited as issues around which one can start constructive cooperative dialogue and later expand the dialogue to tackle more divisive issues.

*The afternoon sessions* addressed two specific areas where faith-inspired organizations are actively engaged: peacebuilding and gender.

While the importance of faith-inspired actors in peacebuilding was well recognized, tracing common threads and approaches proved challenging. It was largely agreed that their role in most cases is nascent and often ad hoc, and appears less developed than in other world regions. **Katherine Marshall**, drawing on parallel discussions in the United States on the topic, noted that even as all religions have peace as a center of their philosophy and teachings. In addition, some of history's greatest peace leaders have been inspired by their faith,

“bringing religious voices into dialogue and practice for peace is still an uphill battle.” **Suhrob Khaitov** agreed, comparing religion and peacebuilding to an orchestra: “there are a lot of people in an orchestra, all with their own instrument, but all of them need to play the same music.” Further, the language of faith-inspired actors, participants agreed, may not resonate with secular actors, and that contributes to their exclusion from dialogue and partnerships.

Participants stressed that in areas in conflict, distrust of outside actors is common; peace they said, has to come locally. Local religious leaders, participants said, can be both a voice of compassion and peace or a voice that encourages violence at the community level. Even where religious leaders are working towards peace, however, a systematic approach and well-developed coordination efforts are often lacking. Participants agreed that their roles are widely misunderstood and not appreciated; political realities can paint generalizations of faith-actors as a single entity, while their activities are in reality much more complex and diverse.

Education was often cited as vital in peacebuilding. Education, most agreed, can be an empowering process for youth; nudging them to choose their own paths, and to enable them to transform society. Values -instilled education aims to create a peaceful society. **Visaka Dharmadasa** noted that religion teaches tolerance and that “the problem lies when religious leaders preach intolerance.” The educational levels of religious leaders are thus, participants echoed throughout the consultation, a key element for peacebuilding. **Fadlullah Wilmot** provided one practical suggestion: to introduce religious education on conflict resolution in madrasas and Islamic schools. There is some material available, he said but it needs to be adapted to the local context and customs.

**Francis Halder** added that peacebuilding as a discipline is diverse, and that there is a strong relationship between peace in the family and peace in society. He shared his experience from the Chittagong Hill Tracts region of Bangladesh, managing programs to construct peace in the community through first forming peace at the family level.

The discussion then turned to gender. **Samia Huq** of BDI opened the discussion, introducing BDI’s DFID-

funded research on the relationship between women and Islam. In recent years, Bangladesh has experienced a very public manifestation of Islam, particularly through clothing, television, and print media. She has found that such public expressions are framed as modern due to their textual adherence and the rhetoric that calls on the individual to read and learn for himself. This Islam is different from “traditional” modes of religious engagement in which Islam has long been “handed down from women’s grandparents’ generation.” The ability to read and think about the texts for themselves, she added, has a scholarly and modern appeal for women. Many middle to upper class followers also see Islam as very pro-women, where women’s roles and responsibilities are clearly demarcated. Women’s roles as wives, mothers, and daughters in Islam speaks of duties and a respectability which the women feel has been denied to them by culture and how Islam has been understood as a part of culture. Dr. Huq grappled with the relevance of gender mainstreaming in the public space. She asked how the feel-good factor emanating from women’s roles and responsibilities within the domestic sphere translates to women’s more public roles. It is good to talk about gender equality through religious text in the context of the home, she noted, but what does it mean to take that discourse to the societal level? The link between complementarity of gender roles at home and women’s more public roles as preachers, leaders, and figures of authority is something that needs further thinking, especially in the context of South Asia. Further, she asked whether without this linkage, this new form of religious practice is actually a liberation for women? Or rather, could further liberation be experienced if the discourse expanded from understanding women solely through their roles and responsibilities, to incorporate understandings of women as human beings who live in and create society in tandem with their male counterparts?

Building on Dr. Huq’s comments, some participants highlighted the exclusion of women from discourse within religious institutions; religion, most agreed, is highly patriarchal in practice. **Swami Agnivesh** provided an example from a conference he attended in the Vatican following September 11th, 2001; noting that among 300 religious leaders present, there were almost no women. Patriarchy is built into the whole system, he said, and he challenged consultation participants: what can be done about it? Gender equality is espoused in

all sacred texts, and misinterpretations of those texts are responsible for the subjugation of women, all agreed.

The conversation then moved to the issue of “missing girls,” particularly acute in South Asia, which **Ms. Marshall** termed the ultimate expression of discrimination. A reported 49 percent of the world’s child marriages take place in South Asia. **Mr. Singh Kohli** commented that the largest industry in India is the marriage industry, and that it serves to perpetuate gender discrimination.

Participants grappled with challenges of cultural relativity in development work, particularly as related to gender roles. At what point are gender roles as dictated by local customs an acceptable part of cultural tradition, and when should they be challenged by religious and community leaders or development practitioners themselves? Religious leaders can incite gender discrimination but in doing so, several argued, they are not representing religion in its true form. Faith-inspired actors can play significant roles in challenging local norms and reaching out to fringe actors within their faith traditions; though their potential contributions, participants stressed, often come under the radar of development policymakers.

**Bedreldin Shutta** shared his experience working to find ways to encourage different religious groups to act together globally; gender is one issue of agreement and convergence for all religions, he said.

*The focus of the January 11th session was education, followed by concluding thoughts and ideas for next steps.* Ms. Marshall told the story of an encounter between a priest and a World Bank economist that highlighted the large communication gap around the issues of values in education, as two very different perceptions were in evidence. The tendency of educators to ignore education of future religious leaders was another dimension of her story. Participants were challenged to suggest ways to bridge the divide between faith-inspired organizations, who feel that values and morals are an intrinsic, and often missing component of a complete education, and secular development organizations, which aim to teach students to think independently, without a pre-determined set of “values.” Consultation participants agreed that communication around what is meant by values is at the heart of miscommunication,

and that in practice, the two schools of thought are congruent in thought and aim, and need not be mutually exclusive. The core question that arose was: how do we talk not just about values in a broad sense, but also pluralist values, teaching children a foundation of morality and ethics while also equipping them with tools to be independent thinkers?

Framing the conversation on religion and education, Ms. Marshall suggested four areas of focus: 1) Education by religion; 2) Education about religion; 3) Education for religion; and 4) training of religious leaders. Looking at global development and the MDGs, the roles of the religious communities are under appreciated in policy circles in delivering education service. Religious communities give input into the quality and content of education. Dialogue can be complicated because what faith leaders term values-based education may be referred to as civic education in other settings.

The topic of madrasas and their complex role in providing education emerged as a point of concern. **Amir Ali** voiced concern that the word madrasa has become taboo in many circles because of the misuse of the institution by a small number of groups. **Moulana Kalam Abul Azad** noted that madrasas are marginalized within the education system, explaining that the political and elite classes do not choose to send their children to madrasas; those who typically attend madrasas are students who fail general education placement exams. Politicians however, **Moulana Azad** noted, expect that the system will become mainstreamed in society. If you plant a mango tree, the tree will produce mangos; but if you plant a different tree and are expecting a mango, that is not what you will get, he said, referring to the need for madrasa reform. Discussion pointed to the crucial role that madrasas play in education for poor and rural societies. Some participants remarked, however, that a religious education by itself could be dangerous, as the teachers themselves often lack a quality education and credentials.

**Ms. Kotova** brought focus to Central Asia; there, while the old Soviet system of education no longer exists there are not functioning national education systems. In this environment, religious institutions and movements can quickly establish themselves to fill the education void, but they often offer education with little transparency or accountability for content and quality. Inclusive and



Fadlullah Wilmot shares thoughts and perspectives on madrasa education in South Asia



frank dialogue can help, she stressed.

Participants agreed that improved measurement of content and quality of education is needed, though discussion highlighted some disagreement on how far generalizations on the quality of faith-inspired education make sense and are valid. Some participants stressed that studies report that students of religious schools are generally less equipped to join the mainstream workforce and society than those from non-religious institutions. Participants agreed that quantitative evidence would help to make a stronger case for faith-inspired organizations' contributions to education and development more generally.

The role of the family in education, and faith-inspired programming in informal education systems were emphasized as important topics that deserve further attention.

The final session invited participants' impressions and thoughts on the consultation. Many said that they planned to integrate lessons from the dialogue at their home institutions, and expressed interest in holding similar consultations at the country level. Priority areas for action included enhanced education for religious leaders, greater efforts at coordination, increased dialogue around community level faith-inspired initiatives, and a commitment to develop good case studies of faith-inspired development work. The participants were eager to continue working with their new network of colleagues and to expand its work at the country and regional levels. Some concrete collaboration ideas,

notably involving India, Pakistan, and Tajikistan, were a direct product of the consultation



Katherine Marshall gives closing thoughts and reflections on the consultation

## Faith, Religion, and Development: In Policy and in Practice

A central question at the intersection of religion and development is where precisely religion and faith play definable roles in the broader development landscape. All consultation participants described their work as deeply guided and informed by faith. They suggested that this link between their religious beliefs and their work to address development challenges had practical applications for development conversations and policy more broadly. A specific and recurring point was that faith traditions place an emphasis on the human and spiritual dimensions of development, an emphasis that participants said they found lacking in many “secular” approaches to development.

Though faith is an important and influential guide for the decisions that shape society in South and Central Asia, especially at the community level, participants argued that the faith and spiritual dimensions of life and development are given minimal consideration at development policy levels. Faith often provides motivation, direction, and purpose that encourage individuals to improve their lot in society and contribute to their communities, though misunderstandings of faith and religion can contribute to social strife and inequities and even impede development. Practical issues around the engagement of faith-inspired actors and religion in “traditional development policy” include issues of common language and vocabulary, misunderstanding of roles of religion, approaches to religion and development, and practical issues of cooperation. All agreed that faith-inspired organizations are often well-placed to engage people on the level of personal belief and to transform beliefs into actions.

### Katherine Marshall

An especially pertinent issue and common concern is the need to take religion more seriously. Early in my career, gender was not a popular issue. Often only women were at the table, a very few women at that. Most men found discussions of gender foolish and peripheral. Only when leadership gave the topic serious attention, and only with persuasive evidence, did gender become what it is today, a mainstream issue. At least in the World Bank, data about the benefits of educating girls made the difference. Similarly with religion, many people approach the topic emotionally, and

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*“To quote from Bahá'u'lláh, founder of the Baha'i faith, religion must be the cause of unity for mankind. If religion is the cause of strife and dissention, we are better off having no religion. We all come from different religions, but we are all human beings, and we are here to respect and love each other, rather than think of each other as enemies and to focus on our differences. We can find unity in diversity.”*

— Jena Derakhshani Hamadani

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not with their minds; prejudices abound, and people's starting point is often their own beliefs. In contrast, we should focus on what the people we are working with believe and why it is important to them.

Who is at the table is important. The harmony and likeminded thinking that we heard this morning does suggest an important question: whose voices are we not hearing? Who is not here? How far should we be reaching out to those that may not see things the way we do?

### Samia Huq

As faith-inspired organizations, what are your negotiations and relationships with the state and political parties? There are obviously implications, for the work of faith-inspired actors; these implications can vary tremendously by context. With the state, what are some of the negotiations you have to undertake, and what are the concessions you are accorded by the state and political parties; what are the wider political implication?

### Farida Vahedi

Some of India's greatest challenges are the extremes in wealth and poverty. Roughly 400 million people live in absolute poverty, and the divide continues to deepen. The inequality between men and women is burgeoning; there are an extraordinary number of missing girls and cases of child labor; corruption is one of India's biggest challenges. Caste discrimination is tearing this country apart. There are politically motivated people that purposely misuse religion for political gains, creating com-



munal riots throughout the country. Social disharmony is a major problem facing India.

### Swami Agnivesh

I began my journey back in 1968; I was challenged by a group of activist who call themselves Maoists, also known as Naxalites, who in 1967 started in a small village in Bengal. The movement reached Calcutta and the premier educational institutions in India, including the Presidency College and Scottish Church College. The Maoist slogan was that revolution grows from the barrel of a gun, and that Chairman Mao is our chairman, and that they would follow the philosophy of revolution as propounded by Mao.

While teaching business management and law at a Jesuit college in Calcutta, I became active in a movement called Arya Samaj; it is a reform meeting to overcome the caste system, gender inequality, idol worship, superstition mongering, and medical mongering in the name of religion. While the Maoist movement's commitment to social justice influenced me, I could not accept their taking to arms; their whole approach was fraught with violence, and met with counter violence by the state. Upon self-reflection, I decided at that time that I could no longer be quiet, and if I join the Maoists I would have to find another avenue. I left my job, my family, and everything behind and I went to the state of Haryana to work among the poorest of the poor: peasants, farmers, landless laborers, brick kiln workers, child laborers, bonded laborers, and so on and so forth.

I identified myself with the hopes and aspirations of the poorest of the poor, trying to figure out what really is missing in our whole concept of development; I found that it was the spiritual dimension that was missing. The culture of sharing and caring, which was part of our traditional culture was missing. Society was becoming increasingly about selfishness, individualism, and competition. Further, there is so much religious bad blood among Hindus and Muslims, and politicians manipulate the tensions for their benefit. I felt challenged to confront the dominant model of development. In 1968-70, I founded a political party, thinking that to bring about radical social changes, it was necessary to have the political power in our own hands; but that did not succeed. I resigned my political posts (as Minister of Education and member of the Haryana Assembly) and committed myself to working among the poorest of

the poor, those living akin to slaves. I have since worked against the practice of sati, where the widow is burned alive at the funeral of her husband, bonded and child labor, and other social issues.

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—Swami Agnivesh

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### Moulana Abul Kalam Azad

We are working to build bridges between religious institutions and development agencies; overall, we have been very successful. We are all here today, and we are all from the same family, as faith-inspired organizations, working together on development issues for a common cause. We can and need to disseminate our ideas to others. However, though we are sitting side by side, we may also have a large distance between us; that must be openly discussed. We are often negative, and rarely positive; we should practice a positive approach where everybody is respected as human beings. Religion is not the perpetrator, but it is the so-called “religious people” that are doing the mischief. According to the glorious Qur’an, Allah says that “I have made the children of Adam honorable.” Our father is one, our mother is one, we are brothers and sisters of the same family; this idea should be owned by each of us. We are not there yet, but things are changing.

### Younis Alam

Over the last thousand years of Muslim rule across the subcontinent, Sufi thought and practice has been, and should continue to be, looked upon as a model. A key message is that we should not use religion in public

life. God for the Sufis was the center of cultural life and education. Sufis of the subcontinent clearly say that you have to use the authority of love and service, and through this, you can inspire the world. Priestly classes, they say, do not know the mystery of friendship, and they left mystery of friendship to their creator and to the Universe. What we are doing in the holy land of Pakistan is to revive the great teachings of the Sufis as a tool to bring forth human centered development.

## Education

Education was discussed through all sessions, with participants highlighting the large, though often misunderstood, roles faith-inspired institutions play in all aspects of education. Quality education is a key component in sustaining equitable development and peacebuilding in South and Central Asia. Religion and education intersect in many important ways, in obvious areas like schools and curriculum development, but also affecting gender equality and empowerment, constructive roles of religious leaders in development, and poverty alleviation more broadly. The issue of values in education was a central focus, especially “values-based education” in the broader curricula; one participant suggested a value-integrated curriculum. Among questions raised were: what values are being taught? Can there be universal values in education? How can values-based education institutions engage education curricula and systems more generally?

The topic of religion and education is often difficult to engage because it is often highly politicized in the South and Central Asia contexts. Issues of conversion and proselytization, and which interpretation of faith traditions is taught have policy relevance. While there are many examples of faith-inspired institutions that teach values without proselytizing, that is not universal. Low education levels among many religious leaders are an obstacle to engaging religious leaders.

Some governments in South and Central Asia are unable to provide adequate levels of education for their populations, especially in rural areas and at the secondary level. Faith-inspired organizations are in some situations playing significant roles in filling the gaps. The content and quality of that education remain a source of contention.



Societal fragmentation exacerbated by the separation of religious and secular schools contributes to tensions and misunderstandings. Madrasa education often lies at the center of this debate. There is little consensus on how to engage the religion/education policy debate most effectively and inclusively, but religion and education, all said, are a hot topic that badly needs thoughtful discussion and debate.

### Samia Huq

Engaging the religion and development policy debate will not happen overnight. We need to define what the necessary steps are in mainstreaming our wisdom and having that reflected into education policy and what actually goes into schools. In Bangladesh, there has been some tension around national education policy affecting the role religion will play. Some Islamic groups feel that Islam is inadequately reflected in the curriculum; this has created tensions within the political parties that are working to maintain a proper balance between the secular and religious spheres. How do we broach the debate in a way that is not necessarily Islamic, but at the same time is not devoid of a moral ethical base? What are practical steps forward, given the very real constraints and challenges?

### Tatiana Kotova

Education presents critical issues across Central Asia. As I listen to our discussions, I see another example of how difficult it is to find the right place on the map for Central Asia, and how we are desperately trying to find our cultural roots and link ourselves to something bigger in terms of religion, education, culture, and development. I often hire people for regional positions, and receive many CVs from different counties. For instance, looking at a CV from Tajikistan, nearly every-

## Religion and Education - Engaging Development Policy

Katherine Marshall

Let us begin with an anecdote about a priest and a World Bank technical specialist. A priest, a World Bank colleague, and I met to explore possible common interests in education in the Muslim World. World Bank specialists had just completed a “flag-ship” study of education in the Middle East. The priest was involved in trying to arrange academic exchanges between Al-Azhar University in Egypt and theological institutions in the UK. After a brief introduction by my priest colleague, I could see that the technical specialist was puzzled: “What is Al-Azhar, and why is this of any interest to me?” he asked himself. Realizing that we had a communication issue, I chimed in, asking the technical specialist, “How do you look at the issues of values in education?” He responded: “Our objective is value free education.” The priest blanched.

The anecdote illustrates some large communication gaps around the issue of values. The specialist was touching on a point that is very much on peoples’ minds: education should focus on teaching people to think independently, not rote learning, and not giving students a preset set of ideas. That was the idea the specialist wanted to convey with “values- free” education. But when the priest hears values- free, it suggested the image of an educational approach devoid of ethics and oriented to promoting greed and selfishness. How then, do we talk about values, but also pluralist values? It comes back to the challenge laid out for us by Swami Agnivesh, teaching children a foundation of morality and ethics, but also equipping them with tools to be independent thinkers and to deal with the plural world that they will encounter.

We should explore least four dimensions of education and religion:

1. Education by Religion – Schools run by religious

institutions; the actual delivery of education services.

2. Education about Religion – Teaching people about their faith, but also about other faiths, so that they are equipped to deal with pluralist societies. This also addresses values in education. Is a curriculum that is founded in the principles of the great faiths—looking at values that are not necessarily tied to an individual religious belief system—possible? Does that exist? We are looking for good models.
3. Education for Religion – Teaching people, either through a religiously-run school or another mechanism, to be a good member of their religion,
4. Training religious leaders – both in institutions and in practice

When people raise the topic of religious education, many immediately think of religious indoctrination. In discussions about the MDGS or national development goals, the roles of the religious communities in delivering education services and having input into the quality and content of education, are seriously underappreciated. I know of no country that has fully engaged the wisdom of religious communities in their thinking about the challenges of education. Given how important these issues of education are in South and Central Asia, there does seem to be a very large gap. How can the important roles of religious institutions in education be more effectively conveyed at the policy level? One comment I have heard is that if you are not at the table you end up on the menu. How can this wisdom and understanding be harnessed, not only to run programs more efficiently, but to be better translated into the broader policy debates about education?

one has some type of education from India. If you take somebody from Kyrgyzstan, they may have education from the U.S., the Netherlands, Germany, or Russia. Kazakhstan is different in that it has its own sustainable education system, so fewer students go aboard to study. There is the American University of Central Asia as well, which invites students from all countries in Central Asia to study.

We in Central Asia do not have our own functioning national systems of education. The Soviet system does not work anymore, but national systems of education do not exist.

People’s lack of general education creates an environment where religious institutions and movements can easily come and establish educational institutions with little transparency or accountability as to the content



Katherine Marshall and Baba Iqbal Singh discuss the intersection of values and education in India

and quality of that education. I know stories from Kyrgyzstan where families with many children simply do not understand who took their children. They know that their five girls are studying somewhere, and that this school delivers food parcels every weekend to the family. They may even have little interest in knowing where their children are, they are just happy that someone is taking care of them and supporting their family.

Another problem is a complete disintegration of ties between religious and secular education; the two are completely separate. This is not unique to Central Asia, but here there are two parallel systems, and the systems do not cross. Central Asia belongs to the larger Asia region, and I am happy that we are together at this discussion; but at the same time we should not forget that for nearly a century religion was prohibited. People are just now trying to rebuild their religious roots. They are reaching to religious practice that existed 80 years back and applying that practice to today's context; it does not work. Our society lacks religious experience.

It is difficult to compare the Central Asian context with other countries in looking for good models of education, but it is an ongoing process. We cannot use our own experience from pre-Soviet times, but it is also very difficult to use models from other countries. We are in a difficult situation from multiple angles.

### Amir Ali

Unfortunately, in South Asia, madrasas have become—in a sense—a four-letter word, because of their misuse by small groups. The AKDN works in East Africa,

where Muslims are not the majority, and there were not many madrasas. Children transferring from madrasas had problems when they went into secular primary schools. They had no educational preparation other than Qur'anic teachings. What we have done over the past 15 years is to implement a program that has introduced English, science, and mathematics in madrasas, teacher training. Today, we have a madrasa resource center in the three east African countries where we work, and women now lead the centers (The AKDN began its first all girls school in 1897). While AKDN's every activity is based on Islamic principles, you will never see Islam mentioned in our work. Our chairman's policy is that actions should reflect you and your principles, rather than having to beat your own drum, saying, "this is what Islam is about, or this is not what Islam is about."

Religious education is a sensitive topics. Each religion and each community will want their children to follow their particular religion, and we do not want to suggest that they do otherwise. I do not see a problem with education by religiously-inspired institutions, however; I studied in a Catholic school as a Muslim. Many religiously-inspired education intuitions are not restricted to certain faith groups but are open to everyone. No one is imposing his or her religion in these institutions. In Pakistan as well, there are well-regarded Catholic schools where religious conversion is not an issue. Whichever religion you belong to, if you provide secular education and philosophy as part of the instruction, then it can speak for everyone.



## Perspective and Practice on Values in Education

### The Kalgidhar Trust/Society

#### Baba Iqbal Singh:

Broadly speaking, there are three types of education: The first focuses purely on literacy, without a moral component. Most schools, colleges, and universities around the world impart literacy, and not values-based education. The second is values-based education, where you combine literacy with moral, ethical, and religious instruction, which is far more holistic. An individual who has gone through this type of scholastic career starts to think about the needs of others and begins to see himself as interconnected to the world around him. Such a person is more likely to help others, as he begins to see the "One in all and all in One." The divine reality (God) is one for all faiths. "Value-based education is the answer of the day." The third is spiritualized education with divine wisdom, for which there is no need to go to any school; the divine knowledge of the universe comes from within. None of the prophets or the founders of the great world religions went to any university to learn the lessons about the Divine. One only needs to delve into the scriptures of the great religions for this type of education.

We have misunderstood religion. Religion is correlated with spirituality. Religion should not be confined to rituals, but be considered a moral guide; if there is a religious component in the schools, students will be disciplined; and regardless of the spiritual path they choose, they will choose a path free of the influences of drugs, alcohol, and other societal abuses. In the Catholic schools in India, for example, there are few stories of drugs or substance abuse. If that were the case country-wide, I would not need to open the Kalgidhar Society schools as I have done. We are opening our schools to improve the condition for the children; the Kalgidhar Society combines spirituality with literacy (basic education) to impart a values-based education to students.

#### Ravinderpal Singh Kohli:

In 1986, after his retirement, Baba Ji set up small schools in very rural locations. All 70 of his schools are located in remote areas of Northern India. His first school had five children in one small room; now we have 70 schools with 60,000 students, and a private university.

Our mission began in 1906, 105 years ago, on the premises that modern education was coming, and that without modern education no region, country, or nation can prosper; but with modern and scientific education also comes mass destruction. Our founders decided the best way to educate our children was to reinvent gurukuls and synthesize scientific education with faith. Among our first schools was a girl's college in Punjab, unbelievable in that region in 1906.

Why does Baba Ji believe so firmly in the cause? The state of Punjab had India's highest per capita income in 1990; and in 2000 it slipped to number five, in 2005 to number eight, and in 2011, Punjab is now the slowest economy in the whole of India. The main problem is the exclusion of rural masses from India's economic boom. As a small example, over 56,000 students were enrolled in professional courses in the state of Punjab last year, out of which only 285 students were from a rural background. It is for that reason that our schools are located in rural areas.

The government has not allocated a proper budget for education. In 1970 the education budget was approximately 22 percent of total expenditure. Last year, the number was just over 10 percent. The income that the government earns from the sale of liquor alone in Punjab is 820 rupees per capita, and spending on education is only 520 rupees. Community leaders in Punjab (we are known to be a very religious clan) have built nearly 20,000 temples—or gudwaras—in our state; the state has maintained under 13,500 primary schools, of which 765 do not have teachers, and 4120 have just one teacher. There is an approximately 48 percent dropout rate, among the highest in the country. That is the sad state of affairs.

We believe very strongly that the ruins of our education system have come because people have not been empowered, educated, and enshrined in cultural values. Our schools are called Akal Academies and they aim to help rural kids become enshrined, educated, and find employment opportunities; we also have a teacher training programs which targets girls whose parents were not willing to invest in their daughters' education. After a 4-6 year training course, the girls are ready to be good teachers and earn a very good salary.

### Fadlullah Wilmot

Madrasas in South Asia are providing free basic education, care, clothing, and food for children; this must be appreciated by policymakers. Madrasas are filling a gap

that is not filled by governments; the basic education they provide is the only education the children can receive.

I was involved in a school feeding program with an international organization in the poorest area of Bangladesh. The organization, however, would only give food to government schools; they would not give food aid to madrasas. Why is this, I asked? Their answer is all too common in development circles - they could not be involved with religion.

I think madrasas have gotten bad press. There is a book written by the Malaysian academic Farish Noor titled *Qur'an and Cricket*, that studied the madrasa system in South and Southeast Asia; the realities are not as bad as they may look. In Indonesia, with Australian government (AusAID) support, a review of the madrasa system aimed to bring focus to the real educational needs of students. There are similar initiatives in Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Where you find governments taking over the management of faith-inspired educational institutions, in the long-run the schools end up in a state of disarray. In Bangladesh, for example, in rural government schools teachers come to school to get a salary. In Pakistan, there are schools of 120 kids with two rooms and fifteen slates; the teachers only come twice a month. At least in the madrasa system the students have the facilities they need. There is potential for reform, and when you talk to madrasa leaders, they are willing to listen; but they also have their own agenda. The debate over madrasa reform is complicated.

Why are parents sending their children to school? They send them for morals and values. Are the children actually learning morals and values? Government mandated one hour per week of religious instruction in public schools will not achieve what parents wish for their children. Malaysia, as an example, has created religious schools that also teach all of the secular subjects. These schools should be a model.

### **Chintamani Yogi**

What is education? For me, education is not only news, but also views. It is not only information, but also inspiration; not only competition, but also cooperation

Education and wisdom need to come together. At the Hindu Vidya Peeth School in Nepal, we aim to combine all aspects of education - the human, moral, spiritual, and traditional elements. We do not have an

individual book that teaches students about Hinduism, but rather, we look at spirituality as an all-encompassing component of our curriculum woven throughout the classes. The top students in our school are actually Muslim; our teaching of spirituality is for everyone, regardless of faith.

The question we must ask ourselves is if we do not provide religious education, how do we instill values, culture, and spirituality? It is through the environment we create in our schools rather than through textbooks. Our teachers are role models, and bring the vision of "values-based" education into the classroom.

I am a member of the inaugural Nepalese government committee to make a textbook for human values education. In three months we hope to have a textbook for grades 6, 7, and 8 that teaches students to respect and accept everyone for who they are. The government of Nepal has an excellent policy to bring religious-inspired schools into the mainstream national education system.

### **Muhammad Amjad Saqib**

We are putting too much emphasis on values in education. Why do parents send their children to school? It is not just to learn values, but to prepare them for life. I do not know any madrasa teaching technical and vocational skills; madrasa students do not graduate prepared with life skills.

The poverty issue is also important; poverty is rampant, and poverty levels are intertwined with four different education systems: (a) the madrasa system; (b) the public education system; (c) the English medium system (elitist); and (d) the mushrooming of "street schools" (private schools which charge less - an affordable combination of religious and secular education).

We need to analyze what kind of facilities and infrastructure are available in each school. Are the teachers able to inspire and provide moral education to the students, and are they at the same time qualified to provide them with the practical life skills? We need to look at overcoming poverty and teaching values in schools, but also at what skills we are providing our students.

### **Farida Vahedi**

India's Bahá'í community has been very involved in the area of education. Apart from our many schools, we

have institutions working on curriculum development and teacher training as well as various discourses with NGO and the government (the National Council for Educational Training and Curriculum, for example). The different agencies have been part of the discussion on how we bring spiritual concepts and moral values into the educational curriculum.

Let me take you through a process of change that happened in India: Around 2000, we had a Bharatiya Janata Party government that many people called a Hindu fundamentalist government (whether it was is a separate issue). This government was very keen on bringing values into educational curriculum. It established a task force to look at the national curriculum. The Bahá'í were involved in the national consultation. We had moved into the area of value-integrated curriculum to teach values through all subjects, not just a “moral education” course. This approach helps not to divide science and knowledge into different fragments, creating a more holistic education. Unfortunately, with the change of the government, the efforts to put values into education were diluted, and peace education was devised; but in essence, it was very much the same.

Because I am a member of the national commission

## Gender

Gender equality is a mainstream focus of the development industry; almost all development programming has a gender specific focus or “lens.” Much the same is true for faith-inspired organizations engaged in development. Faith beliefs, ethics, and sacred texts all uphold gender equality and the right to be protected from gender discrimination or persecution. Consultation discussions, however, highlighted the sometimes complicated realities surrounding misinformed religious interpretations and practices and the resulting societal rules governing gender roles. Distorted interpretations often become intertwined with cultural practice, engraining gender inequalities in cultural traditions. Religious texts can also have an opposite effect, liberating women from the confines of cultural practices; there was agreement on the need to reinforce the positive and minimize the negative while sharing and replicating best practice.



on communal harmony in India, we have had numerous opportunities for consultation with the minister for human resource development as well as our home minister. In those discussions there has always been an urgent need to relook at curriculum. The government is very much for integrating values into the curriculum, using terminology like: “the curriculum should help our students to start a process of individual and social transformation.” This is something, that based on my background of development, is really addressing the core of the issue - society wants to raise children who are very concerned that their own individual behavior, action, and mindset, that influences the way society will be shaped.

All participants recognized that misconstrued interpretations of religion and faith have been used to justify gross injustices to women, the most extreme cases being son preference and foeticide. Religious leaders have an obligation to safeguard gender rights because they are protected by religion. Faith-inspired organizations are well situated to reach out to religious and community leaders, and to advocate for gender equality within their own institutions. Poverty creates and perpetuates gender bias in communities, prompting families to give a girl child into marriage or servitude to escape the customary giving of dowry; faith-inspired organizations can be instrumental through poverty alleviation and education programming. The group asserted that they saw gender equality as an issue of mutual agreement and consensus among faith-groups that can be used to build cooperation both between and among different faiths.

## Ruby Singh

Why is gender discrimination prevalent in this part of the world? I ask you, what is the largest industry in India? The answer is an industry where we save for decades and decades, work hard, and then burn that money in one day; that is the marriage industry. We have been burning our resources and then we blame the women for being a burden or a liability. Recently there has been a lot of controversy over a female Supreme Court judge in India who had listed on her website that her daughter is a liability. This is the state of affairs; we have to revisit our cultural traditions that have become outdated and start thinking about the way the modern world has been behaving. This has been the biggest bane of humans here.

## Farida Vahedi

India has taken steps towards a structural response to some of the financial issues related to gender inequality and dowry issues. The country's legal framework passed the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, and sex determination and dowry giving or taking is illegal. But one thing that faith-inspired organizations do not fully understand is that no amount of legal framework or reforms can take root unless you address the issues that are so deeply ingrained in the culture to solve the preconceptions, misconceptions, and mindsets which are a way of life. We have to be able to understand the personal motivations of human beings in order to understand how they look at life and their value system before we can actually hope to bring about any type of long-lasting reform agenda. This realization is thankfully growing within the government and among the decision makers.

India does have the problem of female infanticide and female foeticide. Despite an act passed by the government that prohibits selective abortions and prohibits parents from discovering the sex of the fetus, this practice remains pervasive. The practice is so widespread that in some of the most affluent states of India, such as Haryana and Punjab, there are 827 girls born for every 1000 boys; this is very abnormal, since the usual ratio is that there are many more girls than boys.

Society is now facing a number of related social problems. The issue of dowry is related because a girl's family must spend money for a daughter to find a good husband, and the daughter is made to feel like a burden

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*The half-doctor is dangerous for life, and the half-religious leader is dangerous for religion.*

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- Moulana Abdul Kalam Azad

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to society, unwanted by family and others. There is also the continuous harassment of the daughter-in-law in so many families, a large source of domestic violence.

These issues are not just related to marriage, but to the whole life cycle of a female child. Many parents do not want a female child because they feel that she is a financial drain on the family and that she will not be able to support them and help them financially. Many families do not consider the girl to be a resource, but rather a capital or financial resource for another family. As a result, they do not invest in higher education or health-care for the girl. Most of these issues are mentioned in the UNICEF reports on the preference of sons.

In the Bahá'í community, through grassroots programs and through our understanding of the purpose of life and motivation, we have been able to address issues of gender discrimination in significant ways. In the Bahá'í community, gender inequality is always relevant to our work and so we frequently press the issue of son preference in rural families. In Hyderabad and northern India, women are controlled by their husbands and have little freedom. Often they only step out of the house when they are married, and even that is looked down upon. Through our own methods of teaching and through our courses, we address issues of inequality. We discuss how girls are undervalued and that there is no difference between boys and girls.

Gender inequality has become a central component of the development agenda. I have seen this with Action for Food Production (AFPRO), Church Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA), Participatory Research Institute of Asia (PRIA), the Centre for Social Research (CSR), Seva Mandir, and of course with the Bahá'í community; gender is an integral part of the development agenda for all these organizations.

## Swami Agnivesh

Since 1987, when I led a march against sati, I made the issues of female infanticide, dowry, bride burning, and



## Religion and Gender in Bangladesh

Samia Huq

At the BRAC Development Institute, we have been looking at women and Islam, and the relationship between the two, as part of a DFID funded research project coordinated by the University of Sussex. Through our research, we see a new type of Islam in Bangladesh emerging that is today marked by very public manifestations, especially through women's clothing, television, and print media. There are myths and stereotypes about a woman in a black burka. So we wanted to have a sense of what it all really means.

Our study looked at different groups of women, and found that most respondents favor a new and very textual adherence to Islam in Bangladesh. This "new" mode of engaging with Islam is framed as modern for its textual, and scholarly bases, and also because it marks a break from past "traditional" ways where Islam was learnt at home and handed down from a previous generation. Due to this shift which calls for a first-hand engagement with texts and precepts around rituals, women feel as if they are practicing a very different Islam than what their grandmothers (who were very religious, less educated, and mostly in the home) practiced. Women are able to read religious texts (primarily the Qur'an and the Hadith) for themselves, and think through the meaning for themselves, which offers women a great sense of achievement. This textual engagement, however, does not necessarily preclude other "worldly" achievements such as success, wealth and careers. Thus, women are becoming religious, and carving this religiosity out from the existing modernity in which their lives unfold. Women thus aspire to be simultaneously Islamic and modern. This aspiration of thinking about and becoming a modern Muslim without denouncing their modern lives of material comfort and professional success is felt by the women themselves as a new trajectory for women in Bangladesh.

My observation is that such modes of engagement offer positive outcomes by way of a sense of greater emancipation and liberation. Many women are able to take recourse to Quranic verses and hadiths to

counter expectations of them held even by dominant male family members. And so, there seems to be a discourse that is working for women, helping them to feel more like wives who are in control, and who demand greater respect as authority figures in the family. Many of these women are reading and training themselves to be preachers; they feel good about themselves and their pursuits.

We were not able to sense, however, what this actually means for gender mainstreaming in the public space. It is one thing to talk about equality, where women have a domestic role and where men are the economic providers, but when roles extend beyond those boundaries (which is often the case), what does it mean to take that discourse beyond the home? What are the implications of a discourse on women based on complementarity of roles and duties when women are more than, or not even mothers, wives and daughters? What does it mean when women come forth at the center of a conversation on an issue like acid violence? How do we talk about sensitive and very important issues in a way that liberates women from the sexualized position that they are ascribed, both by culture, and sometimes reinforced by the kind of Islam that they find liberating on many fronts? What does it mean for women to be mainstreamed, and does society agree that they should be? Would faith inspired organizations take up this cause, so that women are respected not only as mothers and daughters, but also as citizens who are equal human beings? What would be the contours of such a project? How would one link the assumptions underlying it with tangible expected outcomes? And what would be some of the tensions that brew underneath and coping strategies that mediate the tensions? To what extent are we ready to initiate such conversations and actions?

I speak from the point of view of Islam, and from my experience with women that engage with particular interpretations of Islam, but it is important to hear about other traditions, the interplay between those traditions, and to see what a universal faith-inspired message looks like.

property rights for women a central concern. It is not enough that you let the girls be born; you then need to give the girls equal rights to get an education, and there should be no dowry abuse and no harassment of

brides by in-laws after marriage. We are raising attention to these issues; there are currently some new laws to protect women under consideration and many cases in the courts. Overall, there has been a positive response to raising awareness, but the results are not as promising

as I would like.

I went to speak at a Christian girls' college on issues of gender equality and the response was tremendous. Even Muslim groups with orthodox beliefs are changing their attitudes about women's issues and they are not as radical as they might have been in the past or elsewhere. Girls' education is supported by government organizations. There is a general increase in demand for girls' education, even in the Muslim communities.

### Amir Ali

I visited a BRAC program in a village that the Aga Khan Development Network had been supporting. At the onset of the monsoon season, the rain there was delayed for five days. During those days, in a sermon, the imam of the local masjid preached that the delay in rain was God's punishment because BRAC was providing motorcycles to women. The purpose of the motorcycles to women was so that the women could travel faster and safely, rather than having to walk or take a rickshaw. Low and behold, from the power that came from above, the rains came immediately following the sermon, and the people were happy and did not follow the imam's words. However, if the rains had held off for another week, the staff would not have been able to work in that area because the people would have resisted the women riding the motorcycles. This is a misuse of religion, in which half-educated people talk about religion to uneducated people. There are no negatives in any religion; only people that use it for a negative purpose.

### Francis Halder

Women are not yet free in Bangladesh. Only 15 percent of women are educated, leaving almost 85 percent who are illiterate. They are under the custody of the male members of the family and they are often victims of the faith tenets espoused by religious leaders. Women are forced to stay under a veil and are restricted to their household. Women are the victims of superstitions and dogmatic religious orders. Per Hindu Law, women do not have property inheritance rights from their fathers.

However, I do see some progress. A large number of NGOs are working in Bangladesh to enlighten women, particularly Muslim women. Many of these NGOs have intervened and started to melt the ice around these difficult issues. Some Christian leaders have established different development organizations. Now, many in

Bangladesh are continuing gender work that was started initially by missionaries. Examples include Barisal Development Society (BDS), Kainonia, Annyasa Foundation, Caritas-Bangladesh, Bangladesh Baptist Sanghaw, Bangladesh Baptist Federation, Anando, Bangla German Sampreeti, Deepshikhas.

Rural women have a difficult time obtaining access to education, though secondary level education is free for female students in Bangladesh. When girls are very young they are not encouraged to seek an education but are encouraged to focus on household matters and look for a bridegroom. A challenge for gender advancement is that many religious leaders are not well educated, particularly in Muslim and Hindu communities. They preach what they know and what they understand from the tradition, but it is not always accurate information. In most cases, it goes against women and their rights.

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*There are some cultural traditions that have been linked with religions. Specifically in Islam, for example, the tradition of the burka, and the prohibition of divorce; these are not a religious tradition, rather they are cultural traditions. In rural areas of Pakistan, women lack inheritance rights. This is a purely feudal cultural tradition, where women are denied their rights to property, while Islam specifically mandates that property is shared with the mother, wife, and sister.*

*We should make clear distinctions between cultural traditions and religious teachings. We must be careful when placing blame on religions; and we should distinguish between cultural pursuits, traditions, history, geographical realities, and religious teachings. I want to reemphasize this point.*

- Amjad Saqib

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### Moulana Abul Kalam Azad

In our society, people state in the name of Islam, that paradise is under the feet of the husband, and this has been honored as the message of God. But in Islam, you will not find that message. On the other hand,

paradise under the feet of the mother, yes, you will find. I had the occasion to answer a question from a woman who said, “My husband is a drunkard, and he has got no character at all, and he married another wife a few days after our wedding.” “How many wives can take a place under the feet of one husband? In heaven are there men like him as well?” I answered that paradise under the feet of husbands is not true in Islam; these are misconceptions. This is hatred created by the people of our communities. Muslims have many misconceptions. Islam, however, cannot speak; it is Muslims who are speaking. Islam is blamed when Muslims are the perpetrators. If we do not work together, using religion for public and common good, religion will be of no use for human beings. Religion is for human beings, and development targets human beings; not only for the hereafter, but for this life as well.

The prophet (PBUH) allowed women in the mosque, and he encouraged women to go to the Eid congregation and listen to the sermon. After the prophet, the caliphs of Islam allowed women to go to Salah. Many things that we have made unlawful for women were made unlawful by people, not by Islam. Women can go outside and go shopping, they can work in the office and they can join the military and police. There is no embargo in Islam. Women can take part in politics as well; in Islam there is no embargo. In Bangladesh, we can proudly say we have a prime minister, an opposition leader, and ministers in the cabinet who are women.

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*We are assembled here, on January 10, 2011, in the 21st century; though whenever we discuss religion, we go back 1400 years or 5000 years. We are all enlightened people here; can we say in one sentence that today, in the name of religion, we will not accept any discrimination against women and that gender equality is non negotiable. Whatever may be the interpretations of scripture, can we revisit some of our practices?*

- Swami Agnivesh

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The case is the same for early marriage; it is again an act of the people, not of religion. We are not representing religion, as it should be, unfortunately. In Farsi there is a quote that says, “The half-doctor is dangerous for life, and the half-religious leader is dangerous for religion.” Islam says that there is not compulsion in religion; without consent of the girl or women, you cannot arrange her marriage or force her to marry. This is a fundamental right in Islam; if someone does not agree to marry another, and if you force them into marriage, then the marriage will be canceled according to Sharia. It is the responsibility of the parents or guardians to arrange marriage for a girl who is apprehensive that she cannot marry.

As our colleague Chintamani Yogi said, the blame is placed on religion, but things happen because of ignorance about religion and its practice. If we practice religion properly and have proper knowledge of religion, then things should be alright.

### **Maggie Ronkin**

When I conducted my doctoral fieldwork in Lahore, I studied a woman who was extremely poor, had divorced her husband who had become a heroin addict, and had five daughters. My dissertation dealt with the narratives that she told in order to construct a moral identity; it became apparent early on that she did have a moral identity. In her eyes, she was a good Muslim and a progressive person, though she had a formal education equivalent only to the sixth grade.

The woman had sent her oldest daughter to a madrasa after having a very troubled life; the daughter had already been married twice by the age of 18. This woman saw the madrasa as an institution much like institutions in the Western tradition that prepare women to be nuns; however this was a place that was actually empowering and liberating for an 18 year old girl. The madrasa enabled her not only to have a stable life and to learn to read and write well, but also to become somebody who could empower other girls in similar situations.

While I was in Lahore continuing my fieldwork, the women decided to marry off her 14-year-old daughter. This presented me with an ethical dilemma; as an anthropologist, I support people in their decisions and their life choices, but my cultural relativism does not

extend to this issue. This woman saw the marriage of her 14-year-old daughter as not only a necessity, but as a way to provide a better life for her daughter; she had found a young man from a family that was known to her that had a stable job and who could provide a home, food, and general support for her daughter.

In my research, it has become apparent that faith-inspired institutions need to do a great deal more thinking, not necessarily about abstract issues, but about what they can do to affect the material conditions of the poorest of the poor, particularly through poverty alleviation aimed at mothers and girls. I realize that everyone here likely is already aware of the situation I described in South Asia, though it is important to note that many of my colleagues elsewhere are not. The very real issue of poverty alleviation is something that we can facilitate through faith-inspired activities; for me, poverty alleviation is the basis for empowering women.

### Fadlulah Wilmot

On a practical level, as faith-inspired organizations, we have the capacity to involve more women in greater capacities in our work. I do not think we have done enough to get women involved in senior management positions and decision-making positions. If organizations like Oxfam and Save the Children can put women in senior management positions, why can't faith-inspired organizations follow suit? We can talk about theology, but we are not theologians, and we are not going to change everyone's theological mindset. The whole debate around women and Islam does need a revision in how we understand the Qur'an, though I realize that will not come easily. As organizations, we can involve women within our organizations on a practical level; we have to make a special effort to do so.

At the grassroots level, we need to make sure that women's concerns are addressed. While I was working with the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, I noticed a grave oversight in our programming that was having very real implications for women in the community. Most staff involved in our programming there were men and they had not designated a place for women to hang their menstrual clothes; it was not even considered! There was not a woman on site to propose that idea, which is so important to the refugee women living there. In Bangladesh, it is easier to get women involved than other countries, but still in some areas there are

challenges. As faith-inspired organizations—whether Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, or Muslim—we have to make an extra effort to involve women.

I am now working in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, Pakistan, where we formed a committee of women to engage in social decision-making. After the establishment of the committee, we received permission from the community to enter the compound and speak with the committee. Following local customs, two ladies talked to us with their backs to us, while some ladies relayed their messages to us through a man; we were able to have access to the women while respecting their cultural norms. What we found however, through our conversation, was that the women's committee had

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*One of the difficulties in the peacebuilding versus development conversation is differences in vocabulary; a rather secular issue is accentuated by religion that adds layers of language...We need to take what are very strong convictions of what makes for peace, whether it is inner peace, peace in the family, or a school system that deals with conflict and inculcates values; and translate that into the kinds of terms that will be persuasive to people making decisions at a larger scale.*

– Katherine Marshall

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not yet met because our female staff had not taken the initiative to call the meeting to order. Therefore, it is our fault in a way. In speaking to the women that day, they said “I would like to send my children to school, but my husband doesn't let me.” We could not have changed the situation immediately, but at the least, we could have had our female staff meet with the women and discuss the issues.

Regarding the shelters we built in the region, there was a problem as well - the kitchens. The kitchen is a social space for women, yet we constructed tiny kitchens. It was not only us, but also every NGO; 450 of the best NGOs in the world with millions of dollars did not take into account the need for women to have a kitchen as



## Thoughts on Religion and Gender, and a Freedom of Choice

Swami Agnivesh

Whenever we talk about gender and religion, we must note that religion is very patriarchal, including Hinduism. If you read the story of Ramayana and of the Mahabharata, the center of both is a woman; Sita in Ramayana and Draupadi in the Mahabharata. The wars in each are being fought in the names of these women. I find it highly patriarchal.

I am reminded of a peace conference that I was invited to by Pope John Paul II in the Vatican immediately after the September 11, 2001 attacks about praying for peace. When my turn came to speak, I stood up, with about 300 religious leaders seated in the grand Vatican hall, and said, "my dear sisters and brothers," then I paused and looked around, and I said, "where are my sisters?" All participants were men, with only a few sisters present to care for the men.

On a different occasion, I spoke to a huge gathering of Muslim clerics, more than 100,000, held in Delhi. I began by saying, "Where are our sisters? Where are the women?" They were not there. The organizers made sure they are not there, or if at all, behind a screen and out of sight. In India, the mosques do not allow women; I find they hardly have a rightful place of equality in any religious rituals. Women are considered to be biologically polluted. Men are never polluted; women invariably become polluted.

Last night I was watching television in my room and the TV personality was asked by a woman, "Why are we not allowed to pray equally with men?" He answered "because you menstruate, you cannot pray with us."

Patriarchy is built into the whole system. What will we do about it? Religion is like the caste system, which is bad because it comes to you by birth; there

is no choice and you must live with it for the rest of your life.

In religion, there is much talk about freedom of religion, but there is hardly any freedom. Most people around the world are a certain religion because they are born into their tradition. Where is the freedom, I ask? Freedom presupposes informed choice; to have freedom means that you are free to make an informed choice; but who makes an informed choice? Instead, a baby is branded through the ritual of baptism or circumcision, and that decision stays with you for life.

In that way, religion is a form of slavery imposed on our people. Why is this so? If instead we teach children all the values of the major religions, we can help the child to grasp the quintessential values of each, including truth, love, compassion, and justice. In society, when the child reaches an age of consent, we give a child the right to vote, but not before the child has reached an age of maturity. You cannot marry a person of your choice until you are able to make an informed choice. For religion however, a worldview is passed to a child without reaching an age of consent or maturity. An unsuspecting child is given the baggage of rituals and dogma, and ascribed to a certain religion. What right has a society to impose a religion on a child? If we really want to have a more rational type of religious education, we should educate students on the values of all religions and allow the child to make an informed choice for their own religion, once they reach an age of consent.

a social space. How was this so? It was because we did not talk to women.

As faith-inspired organizations, even though we debate the big theological issues, on a practical level there are more ways to involve women in decision-making and finding out-of-the box solutions to get women involved; we should be doing more.



## Faith Actors, Conflict, and Peacebuilding

Conflict affects many parts of South and Central Asia. Many conflicts, including those in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India have clear religious components. Others, including those in Bangladesh and in Kyrgyzstan, have less apparent religious elements; yet faith actors play important roles. Consultation participants suggested that faith-inspired organizations

are uniquely placed to contribute to conflict resolution efforts and to lead “peacebuilding” activities actively. Peace education at the family level is an important starting point for peacebuilding, participants agreed, and can be a non-controversial avenue to involve diverse stakeholders. Participants cited education instilled with values as being of particular relevance to building a sustainable peace, instilling a sense of morals and ethics. In South and Central Asia, faith-inspired peacebuilding efforts appear to be less formalized and coordinated than in other world regions. Faith-inspired actors, particularly religious leaders, have important roles to play at the community level because they usually hold the trust and yield the influence needed to affect attitudes for positive change.

### Katherine Marshall

Differences in vocabulary take on particular importance in the peacebuilding challenge. For the development community, we should remember the basic hypotheses; first, unless you have human development, you will not have peaceful and successful societies with education, health, jobs, and opportunities. Nothing is more dangerous than large numbers of unemployed young men, in South Asia, large numbers of young men who have nobody to marry due to the large gender disparities accentuates the issue. We need to build stronger vocabulary to try to promote discussions among these different worlds. We need to take what are very strong convictions of what makes for peace, whether it is inner peace, peace in the family, or a school system that deals with conflict and values, and translate that into the kinds of terms that will be persuasive to people making decisions at a larger scale.

### Olcott Gunasekera

Peace really has to be in the hearts and minds of the

people, and that is the role of faith-inspired actors. War or any kind of conflict first starts in a person’s mind; that is where Buddhism comes in a very big way. The philosophy of Buddhism is to develop one’s mind so that there is no conflict within ourselves nor with the outside world. In this respect, all faith-based actors involved in peacebuilding have to concentrate on developing the minds and hearts of people so that human beings treat others as human beings. I think Christ mentioned that we all have red blood; even though on the outside we may be black or yellow, we are the same color inside.

### Suhrob Khaitov

I sometimes compare peacebuilding with an orchestra. An orchestra has lots of people, all with their own religion, their own instrument, but all play the same music. I agree with Ms. Vahedi that peacebuilding is based on education, starting in the family from childhood. Every country and people has their own meaning of culture and ethics, but one common meaning of culture, education, and ethics can be found in religious precepts. If everyone follows the religious precepts, we will have a foundation from which to build peace.

### Fadlullah Wilmot

Muslims have to look at the concept of jihad; it has misled many people. The prophet only fought 1.5 days in his whole life, yet, we look at fighting as a means to achieve desired outcomes. If we can revisit what jihad really means, a personal struggle rather than a fighting struggle, that would help in conflict resolution.

### Visaka Dharmadasa

Why does religion matter in peacebuilding? It matters because religion teaches us tolerance. The problem occurs when religious leaders preach intolerance. All religions preach tolerance, but some people preach intolerance. We have to accept and respect another person for what he or she is, not the way we want them to be. A meeting like ours has to work towards this understanding, but it is much easier said than practiced. If we could tolerate the other, many conflicts that are raging would not turn to arms.



Displaced Rohingya children in Bangladesh

### Swami Agnivesh

In most South Asian conflicts religion plays a prominent role. Religion may be less significant in the disputes with the Maoists, though religious leaders should advance elements that are religious, including the central demand for justice. Religious leaders have central roles to play in Kashmir since there are religious (Muslim and Hindu) elements to the conflict. Religion is more central to other issues, especially the Ayodhya dispute. Hindu-Muslim conflicts and narratives are at the very center of a long-standing dispute. I see some progress, but overall things are still moving slowly.

In the Kashmir Valley, there are almost 4.5 million people, with Muslims the majority (approximately 2.5 million). India is home to the second largest Muslim population in world, next to Indonesia. There are nearly 200 million Muslims in Mainland India. There is an obvious need for dialogue.

I was invited as the first non-Muslim to be a main speaker at an Islamic seminary in northern India along with many members of the ulema from the largest Islamic seminary in world. In my talk I touched upon the subject of peace in the tradition of Islam; they appreciated it immensely. We need to stand firm and strong against all forms of violence. Coming from a non-Islamic person, when I quote the Prophet, and the Qur'an it has an impact on building bridges between the two communities.

### Francis Halder

In the Chittagong Hills Tracts, most of the Bengali com-

munity is Muslim, and the indigenous communities are mainly from Buddhist and Hindu faiths; there are very few Christians. The tensions are mainly between Muslims and Buddhists, as well as occasional interracial conflict among the local groups like Chakma, Marma, Tripura, among others. Unless the religious leaders start peacebuilding work and there is an informal harmonious accord among them, a peace process cannot be sustained. Indigenous people in CHT have faith and trust in their religious leaders. We [Anando] invite religious leaders from various communities/races, and under their guidance and leadership we conduct seminars and workshops. Reconciliation has become easier now because of the intervention of religious leaders, which was only a dream before the peace treaty of 1997.

Local community and religious leaders lend a sense of truthfulness to the negotiation process. We select the leaders to join our workshops who are already faithful to the community and sincere in their intentions for peace. To achieve a real solution through faith and trust building, we invite leaders or trainers from all communities in a conflict. Once clarity and trust are achieved, then government officials are invited to reach a final understanding and agreement. We have found that this methodology brings results, with Anando serving as a neutral convener. At present, some issues have already been agreed upon through negotiation, but the people are not aware of this and conflict still breaks out around those issues; dissemination of information is one area that we hope will increase through broad community engagement.

### Keshab Chaulagain

We, the religious communities and leaders, have the ability to use religious tenets and rituals to raise awareness about harmony and peace. For example, in Nepal I personally pray at every full moon, according to my tradition, in order to bring reconciliation. I think that nature is a thread shared by all people and we can use this opportunity for interfaith harmony. The moon is a common thing between people, and the importance of the sun and moon is agreed upon by all religious traditions; we can use these common themes to create harmony between groups. I think we must also bring the Maoists into the discussion. Perhaps they do not believe in God but surely they believe in the sun and the moon.

### Father Cedric Prakash S.J.

I am involved in a small group called PRASHANT—a center for human rights, justice, and peace—located in Ahmedabad in the state of Gujarat in northwest India. For several years, I have been working in the slums of Ahmedabad among the poor (with Hindus and Muslims) and with tribals. One thing I have experienced at the grassroots level is that religion often keeps people divided instead of unified. A watershed in my life was December 10, 1992, when the Babri mosque was demolished by right-wing Hindu activists. On December 6 I, along with some social activists, joined together and said “let’s ask for peace” as people were being battered and killed in Ahmedabad. We organized a sit-in with police permission, but in a matter of minutes, a group of right-wing Hindu fundamentalists destroyed our placards, told us to leave and beat me to a pulp. At the same time they were telling me to go to Pakistan. I was asking for peace, love, and acceptance between Hindus and Muslims, but they wanted to kill me. It was then that I began my engagement in grassroots faith-inspired work to use religion as a force of unity, not division. Ten years ago we began small group called PRASHANT, trying to look at human rights and injustice at the grassroots in Gujarat and trying to engage the people that control power in policy discussion. Despite difficulties, we are making some headway, and though we are not sure if we will succeed, we are very happy with what we are trying to do.

### Tatiana Kotova

Several months ago we experienced one of the most violent conflicts in Kyrgyzstan. Now, people are talking about the role of religious leaders, who both provoked

violence and stopped the violence. Who is working to overcome this conflict, and with whom should we work and include? We cannot ignore the growing power and influence of religious leaders. So many things have been said on the necessity to integrate religious leaders and communities in peacebuilding. For development organizations, how can they be both gentle and wise in working with religious leaders and communities, not to harm but to help each other?

### Jena Derakhshani Hamadani

On the issues of education, we do not only mean academic education – not only teaching reading, writing and literacy. Rather, we mean a kind of education that broadens the mind of the child. When I was a young child attending Bahá’í moral schools, we were told that humanity is like the fingers of one hand, they are all of different sizes and shapes, and when they work together, only then can they achieve their tasks. If a child understands that, for example, their Muslim neighbors are like the other fingers of the hand, then can we do something productive for peacebuilding. Unless we consider the totality of human-kind as one body, and think of everyone as equal human beings, we cannot have peace with them.

### Bedreldin Shutta

The role of faith in South Asia is visible at the village level, where Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims have lived side by side for centuries. However, the positive role of religious institutions in social life has now been gradually misused to make political gains. The result is that people are becoming increasingly confused as to why the same unifying religion that has brought peace to people is now a source of tension and conflict. The way forward, as I see it, is for policymakers, governments, academics and humanitarian workers to recognize that there is a need, more than ever before, to support and strengthen the overwhelming peaceful message of faith that calls for peace and prosperity.

To provide two concrete examples: a Catholic priest in Mannar, Sri Lanka (where I lived and worked) has been crucial in his role in the country; the army and many Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) leaders in particular, give him a great deal of respect. His role makes it easier for us to access communities because he has created good relations with international NGOs, the army, and the Tamil Tigers. This priest brought



## Baha'i Perspectives on Peacebuilding and Development

Farida Vahedi

How do we [from the various faith-based organizations] view peacebuilding, how do we approach it, and how do we see it with reference to development?

Peacebuilding is a process that has many components. One component is establishing equality of men and women – gender equality. Another component is investing in education; making education meaningful as an empowering process for children and youth to understand how they can choose a path for their own individual and societal transformation. A last component involves sharing of knowledge and learning from what has been done.

The Baha'i community focuses on peacebuilding as something synonymous with the foundations of development. If there is no peace, there cannot be development. An underlying principal of our whole approach is that human beings are noble; they are neither violent nor born with sin. They are a noble creation of God, and therefore all of our approaches for education of the individual work towards how to empower people, to safeguard their nobility, and to manifest that nobility into action; in other words, faith and practice. Our educational programs aim to broaden the basis of our identity, without narrowly defining our identities to an extent that we end up polarizing ourselves even more in the process.

From that perspective, we again approach the issue of gender equality. There is a saying in our religion that human beings are born equal in the eye of God and that human perfection belongs equally to all; there is no distinction in the eye of God with regards to caste, sex, or gender. The fundamental reality of the human being is the soul and the soul has no sex. We approach the principal of equality as giving a reality and shape to something that is already a spiritual reality. God created us equal, therefore, the distinction between man and women is not something that was the creation of God; it is a social con-

struct. In that sense, it is not a struggle of women for equality, rather a struggle for all of humanity to achieve equality. In other words, change the social reality, keeping in mind the spiritual reality.

The other underlying principal for our work is that the greatest form of oppression that human beings suffer today is a deprivation of the knowledge of one's true self; again, this is a spiritual concept. The answer for questions of self-identity and for the purpose of life and sources of motivation comes from religion. Unless we educate and give children the opportunity to be able to read, contemplate, and understand, we are doing the greatest oppression. When you are able to address and overcome oppression in this manner, people understand that violence is not a tool for overcoming oppression; they realize that there is a way to reach understanding of one's personal nobility, and that one's personal contribution to the world is to make the world better place.

The third aspect of our work, one we feel is very important, is that we have to go beyond cultural relativism. For years and years, we have been accepting injustices by saying "this is in the culture," but there are things in the culture which are wrong, and which should not be accepted. Shall we accept sati (bride burning) because it is in the culture? Shall we accept son preference because it is culturally accepted? Of course not; we have to address those aspects of culture that are no longer relevant to establishing peace with society and family. We are not saying that everything from old culture is negative, there are positive and negative elements, and we have to do away with the negative elements.

Lastly, sharing and learning cannot be limited to just a community. We would like to have greater involvement in the research and documentation of the learning that has been done at the grassroots level.

all the different groups to his own house to initiate dialogue on how to work together and solve the issues of the country. His message has always been that God wants peace on earth and that humans should not suffer from abuse and violation of rights. The priest has been the common denominator for the fighting parties and other stakeholders to come together and discuss differ-

ences and find points of convergence.

In Pakistan, the role of the religious organization, (mainly the imams) has been to guide people in the villages and to train them for disasters. They have been very effective because the work conditions are dangerous with limited NGO/government presence. When

*You need the needle of consciousness and thread of love to graft the fruit of wisdom.*

- Shah Hussain, Sufi poet

the earthquake hit the area, the religious leaders were an asset to our work because they mobilized the jirgas and pursued their own mechanisms of resolving conflict. We have realized that local conflict resolution mechanisms are indeed effective, and we are working to make them sustainable.

### Fayyaz Baqir

Religious peacebuilding efforts are at a very preliminary stage. Most of the moderate religious scholars and leaders are not actively engaged. They expected that things would change and improve on their own, but now they are realizing that may not be the case and that the situation of insecurity is affecting many people. The peacebuilding efforts that do exist are mostly in the form of protests, but religious leaders are starting to seek a way to initiate dialogue to find common ground between those engaged in conflict and those who want to end the conflict. However, little has been done so far. We need sophisticated planning done thoughtfully. Three alliances of religious and spiritual leaders have taken the lead in molding public opinion or education, organizing mass rallies and processions, and declaring war against the terrorists. These alliances include

## Religious Leaders and Development

The consultation highlighted the important roles religious leaders can play in development in South and Central Asia, particularly in areas including health, education, gender equality, governance, advocacy, and peacebuilding. Religious leaders often hold the trust and respect of their communities and can shape public opinion on development and social issues. Further, in isolated or insecure areas, religious institutions and leaders are often the only institutional presence when the state is absent. However, secular development agencies and governments however, rarely engage religious leaders in development policy creation and implementation. While religious leaders are useful partners, there are challenges to engagement, including low education

Sunni Tehrik, Sunni Ittehad Council, and Jamaat Ahle Sunnat. These alliances enjoy the silent support of the Muslim majority in Pakistan.

The main challenge for faith leaders is to devise creative analyses of the conflict and options available to diffuse it. Sufis believe in spreading their message through personal example. Sufi views are based on the hope that while people do make mistakes, they cannot go very far away from their Lord. With prayers, personal attention, and Allah's blessing they can establish their connection with the Lord. Faith cannot be spread with a sword; however, Sufis have always supported wars against injustice. Sufi ways consist of compassion, hope, and wisdom.

Hadhrat Ali, spiritual teacher of almost all Sufi Orders, was stabbed in the back by a person who had joined his congregation prayer. Wounded, he called his two sons and advised them to keep three things in mind: 1) the person who had attacked him was accused, not proven guilty, so he should be offered courtesy, food, and protection; 2) the judge, and not you or anyone else will decide the case; 3) if I die and my assassin is proven guilty, I forgive him. Sufis believe that at times you need the knife and at times you need to be a lamb. Great Sufi Master of Punjab Shah Hussain very aptly described the Sufi approach when he said you need the needle of consciousness and thread of love to graft the fruit of wisdom.

levels among religious leaders, differences in interpretation of religious texts that relate to development issues, and political sensitivities surrounding religion in the public sphere. All participants agreed that religious leaders are important, though often misunderstood and under-utilized, development partners.

### Father Cedric Prakash S.J.

We have been trying to engage religious leaders because we believe that much of the spiritual mindset is created and generated by those that control religion; these are the so-called priests, bishops, popes, moulanas, pundits, and rabbis. We have been trying to engage the information disseminated to people. I try to go into

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*In Central Asia, the situation is difficult and complex. The conditions and context in each country is unique. What works in Kyrgyzstan will not work in Tajikistan. In Tajikistan, one of the main ways to change public attitudes is through the religious leaders. Tajikistan as a country has neglected education and other public service structures and we have very limited access to internet, TV, and radio due to a lack of reliable electricity; thus one of the main ways we can receive information is through the religious leaders.*

- Batir Zalimov

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mosques and madrasas, where they are teaching little boys to memorize the Qur'an instead of understanding the Qur'an. Within the Catholic Church in India a woman is a sidekick of the man, and it is the men who make decisions.

A lot of those that control religion—who I would call the peddlers of religion—keep people manipulated, oppressed, and subservient. In our gurukul, madrasas, and seminaries, we have to engage and try to change the mindset of those to whom we teach and preach.

### **Francis Halder**

As Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority country, Muslim religious leaders have a big role in the socio-economic development of Bangladesh, though many of the religious leaders are not educated, particularly in Muslim and Hindu communities. They preach what they know and what they understand from their tradition, but it is not necessarily accurate information.

About 20 years ago, the Government of Bangladesh started a training program for imams. Imams and other Muslim religious leaders are invited to a 45-day long development training in an Imam Training Center (ITC) located in different parts of Bangladesh. The program's main purpose is to build awareness among imams and establish a relationship between major social change and the role of imams in society and development in the light of the holy Qur'an. For example, the imams discuss birth control according to the holy

Quran so that they can guide their communities to understand and accept the true teachings of their faith and stay clear of propaganda or other interpretations that might exist.

The imams are also invited to various short courses on contemporary issues in society. Sometimes religious leaders are hesitant to participate in these programs because they think that the government is trying to curtail and control their preaching voice. There is also fear that the information disseminated from the training institutes is not always real Islamic thought/teaching. Some imams think that the government is modifying Islamic education, and their heart is not always committed to the training programs and its contents. In Dhaka and Chittagong, there are several ITCs where the government is doing a lot of good nation-building work for the betterment of the community.

### **Bedreldin Shutta**

While working in Sri Lanka [with Save the Children, UK], I came across an organization in the north of the country that engaged imams in their programs to resolve problems between Muslim and Tamil communities. I found out that Hindu priests, Muslim imams, Christian groups, and Buddhist priests in Mannar, Vavuniya came to meetings together to talk about how they could build tolerance in their communities. They also addressed how to work out issues related to gainful employment, access to resources, and attacks from government and the then Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). This work, however, did not progress very far

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*Swat Valley in Pakistan, in 2009, there were more than 2 million people internally displaced as a result of the military campaign. The role and response of religious leaders there was tremendous. They are able to reach people before the international NGOs, and even before the local NGOs. The religious leaders are already there and they have earned the trust of the communities. When they have materials or access to nurses and doctors they can provide immediate relief for affected communities.*

- Bedreldin Shutta

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because the secular organizations I was associated with did not consider the work of religious communities particularly valuable.

This example has given me and others a great source of motivation. I became convinced that there is something unique about faith-based organizations because they are able to mobilize communities to engage in social work. In the project I referred to in Sri Lanka, 400 people came together to discuss social issues. From that day on, I took the work of faith-based organizations very seriously.

In Swat Valley, Pakistan in 2009, there were more than 2 million people internally displaced as a result of the military campaign. The role and response of religious leaders was tremendous. They are able to reach people before the international NGOs, and even before the local NGOS. The religious leaders are already there and they have earned the trust of the communities. When they have materials or access to nurses and doctors, they can provide immediate relief for affected communities.

During the recent floods in Pakistan an additional 15 – 20 million people were displaced. The religious groups were largely categorized by the media and governments as extremists. However, some groups have collaborated with UN agencies, providing accurate and up to date information that the government cannot provide. The religious leaders can cross into isolated villages, provide medicines and clean water, and transport people to safety, because they know the terrain and have the trust of the people. The political aspect of all this is quite a different arena, and another dimension from what these groups are doing to help the communities on the

humanitarian side of the wheel.

### **Suhrob Khaitov**

At the Center for Mental Health and HIV/AIDS we hold imam training sessions where usually at least 30 imams attend. Some of the imams are from the capital city of Dushanbe, with a few from the outskirts of the city. On the first days of the training the imams read our training materials. At first, very few were happy with the material and the content of the education sessions. For instance, they did not find the information about “HIV as an illness” useful for them. After the third day of training, however, most imams changed their minds and saw that the larger problems facing our society—whether related to HIV or drugs or prostitution—need to be approached as a community for long-term solutions. Our training sessions are not just lectures where we preach to the imams. Rather, we engage the imams in conversations about the challenges facing our society; change that must come from the engagement of the heart.

Following the training sessions, my team and I visit the mosques regularly to observe how our training sessions have affected the imams’ work with the community and their interactions with the parishioners; it is like witnessing the training sessions put into action. We have been pleased to see that the imams have been successful in implementing the information they have learned, and understand the gravity and scale of HIV infection in our society. The imams play an important role in the community, and through these training sessions, they have taken on a significant role of spreading public information on development issues.

## **Tensions Around Issues of Proselytization and Conversion**

The discussions shed light on the many contributions to development work made by faith-inspired organizations and on the reality that religion and faith can bring out or exacerbate inherent tensions; both within communities, the government, and between specific communities and development practitioners. Participants noted that tensions can arise for varying reasons, notably proselytizing and religious conversion. Tensions around faith-inspired actors in development

need to be more clearly identified, discussed, and acted upon because they can impede the involvement of faith-actors in development more broadly.

Different faiths, and even different actors within the same faith, have diverse viewpoints as to what constitutes proselytizing. Some religions equate evangelism with proselytization, but others see them as different.



Discussions around proselytization focused on education and humanitarian relief. The participants shared the strong view that it is unethical to require religious conversion in exchange for aid; it was noted, however, that some of the most effective aid agencies view evangelizing as a central component of how they deliver development assistance. Defining what constitutes proselytizing, and acknowledging that the actions of one group can affect faith-inspired actors as a whole, were seen as a serious challenge with potentially complex ramifications.

### **Samia Huq**

When your work is inspired by faith, and you are using it for social mobilization within the public space, what are the tensions you experience vis-à-vis proselytizing? If it is a civic issue, but also coming from a particular ideological standpoint, then what are the issues about conversion? How do you see that as promoting or not promoting plurality in society? It is very relevant for peacebuilding and education, as well: examining values-based education, whose values and why? Is it an ideological value versus a spiritual value; and how do you see that unfolding within a secular space? How do you reconceptualize the secular space?

### **Katherine Marshall**

Education about religion is part of the discourse in Europe and in the United States, where the basic curriculum of public education, and publically-sanctioned education (including private education), has in many cases been stripped of its religious content. People now have an extraordinary ignorance about their religious traditions, whether they practice or not. The acute

issue is the gross misunderstanding of Islam. The ideal is to introduce into curricula basic information about religion. In some cases it involves stripping the curriculum of negative teachings about other faiths—whether in history, sociology, or economics—to make sure that what is being taught does not accentuate religious prejudice. I agree that many institutions are able to teach with values that do not proselytize.

### **Olcott Gunasekera**

I would like to show you a book – It is called *Peoples of the Buddhist World; A Christian Prayer Guide*, a study by World Vision. The book is about communities with Buddhist roots in Asia, and it notes the status of evangelizing in each community, stating whether the community, 1) has heard the gospel and become Christian, 2) has heard the gospel and has not become Christian 3) has not heard the gospel at all. This study is a prayer guide to convert Buddhists into Christians. In Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese are 90 percent Buddhist, but only 60 percent are practicing; Christians thus can come and harvest these souls. This is where problems come up. Proselytization is causing issues and harming the development agenda.

### **Rabia Mathai**

To carry on from my colleague's comments and evaluation of tsunami relief, some large Christian organizations like World Vision, were among the best organizations for tsunami relief. However, in Sri Lanka, Buddhists were made to read the Bible before receiving food.

## **Challenges of Corruption and Governance**

The discussion highlighted the fact that corruption and poor governance, and the interplay between the two, is pervasive at all levels of society throughout South and Central Asia. Faced with corrupt practices, faith-inspired organizations all face moral and ethical dilemmas on how to carry out their work in the face of corruption. What attributes can faith-inspired actors bring to combat corruption and promote good governance? How can groups successfully implement development programs in the face of corruption? Participants debated this gamut of questions, looking

to reasonable responses and the nature of tradeoffs. The group discussed the role that faith-inspired organizations can and should play to tackle corruption and practical implications that corruption and poor governance have on their work.

### **Farida Vahedi**

Governance in India is very poor. Plans and policies are made, and they are always very well articulated, but they are rarely well executed. There are problems with the budget and there are problems with the application

of programs. However, the core problem is that the money and programs are not actually reaching people in need. Most of these programs and policies fail because of corruption and poor governance. I am not aware of any faith leaders who are addressing the issue of corruption; however, I know that there are programs that focus on the importance of good governance for long-term sustainable development.

### Swami Agnivesh

In Kashmir, the active role of political parties and open elections display the success of the democratic process. Even in the midst of snow in the valley, people waited in line in the cold to vote – 62 percent of the total population cast votes. But unfortunately, the government is not performing the full task of governing the people to the best of their ability. The lack of progress from the government has, I think, alienated the people.

Corruption undermines trust in the government. If elected elders would reach out to people in these difficult times I think it would help to dissipate some of the hard feelings; the chief minister can help to assuage tensions by personally visiting the people in Kashmir, but as of yet, they have not. When I have been able to visit and empathize with the people they are amazed and appreciate the support. They tell me that I am the only person to have reached out from the mainland. They say that no one visits or comes to their house to talk to them and find out how they feel about the current socio-political problems. Instead, these government officials have passed resolutions to say that Kashmir is part of India, though they say that they support the people of Kashmir.

### Ruby Singh

Faith-inspired institutions in northern India have not been able to deliver what they promised. People in those positions have, in many cases, only been accumulating more and more wealth for themselves or their clan. That has been a problem in northern India.

## Evaluation and Evidence: Necessities and Challenges

Evaluation has many goals and is increasingly a focus in development work; evaluation is a practical tool to link goals and actions to outcomes and results. Donors

### Francis Halder

Corruption is a serious concern in Bangladesh. I think the time has come for moral ethics-building in Bangladesh because corruption is almost everywhere, irrespective of levels of development and religious communities. Corruption creates pain for all, particularly the poor and marginalized groups of the community. Due to corruption, their [poor and marginalized] share of wealth is being gradually reduced, finally almost to nil. The Anticorruption Commission started playing a vital role during the caretaker government and now is starting to make new rules, but it is facing challenges from the political government. The University of Dhaka is the biggest educational institution in Bangladesh and recently introduced a development center under the banner of “moral development.”

I think our current non-ethical values and greedy attitudes are jeopardizing our society and its progress. There are many factors for this; the youth feel that they are the victims of greed. As a result, their frustration is high. The time has come to integrate morality with academic education. We have to make an effort to teach common moral ethics and honor the traditional values, which we all hold through common practice from our forefathers.

In Bangladesh, the role of faith-inspired actors in combating corruption needs to be distinct. It is true that in the churches there is a platform for motivating against corruption in the light of Holy Bible during sermons. The priests are doing this, without hesitation, through their service from the altar. But in mosques there is frequent debate on what to say about corruption and how to say it, because the imam receives a salary from the community share, particularly from the wealthy's contributions. Further, the imam of the national mosque is selected to serve for a certain period by the government, so he also cannot move with that noble cause as per his own way.

increasingly require that organizations evaluate their programs to receive funding—both to ensure the quality of programs and data and to see that targets and

goals are attained. The group acknowledged that the common observations about faith-inspired organizations and evaluation prevailed in situations they knew best: in short, a wide range of practices and a general weakness. There are no known systematic efforts to assess the impact and efficiency of work by faith-inspired organizations at country or regional levels. Reasons for the pattern vary, and include the difficulties of measuring the influence of spirituality on development, the disconnect between the evaluation requirements of the donors and the on-the-ground realities and the bureaucratic style of the evaluation forms used. Nonetheless, there was a general consensus that some form of evaluation is necessary to measure the effectiveness of programming. Participants highlighted a study of faith-inspired and secular education systems, but as of yet there is no clearly established methodology. Many agreed that well-researched case studies on faith roles in development would be useful.

**Jena Derakhshani Hamadani** spoke about the need for evidence and her role as a researcher working with

children. She described a study of 2,000 rural children, and differences in IQs of students that attended different types of pre-schools: private pre-schools, madrasas (some of which combined secular education), and non-formal schools (BRAC or other NGO schools), government primary schools, and maktab (purely religious education). She found that children going to private pre-schools had the highest IQs, following those in public primary schools, and followed closely behind by those in madrasas and other non-formal schools. Students attending Maktab had IQs equivalent to students who had never attended school. **Rabia Mathai** stressed that evidence on faith roles in development is “a much needed breath of fresh air.” She emphasized, however, that we must be careful to avoid sweeping statements because faith roles and institutions are diverse. She suggested the creation of a broad base of data from which to draw. **Katherine Marshall** and **Farida Vahedi** noted that some good case studies would be very useful. There is a tendency to talk about generalities, they said, but there are different approaches to peacebuilding and development.

### **Progress within Muslim Aid Organizations**

#### **Accountability and Transparency**

Participants stressed that faith-inspired organizations must be held accountable both to the communities where they work and to the donors that fund their projects. While a culture of accountability and corresponding assurance mechanisms exist within many organizations, they are often less developed and less transparent in faith-inspired organizations than in their secular counterparts. Two representatives of Muslim-inspired organizations described efforts within their organizations to ensure transparency, accountability, and proper codes of conduct.

#### **Beldreldin Shutta**

It has been an exciting time to be involved with Islamic Relief Worldwide. I believe that the organization has an opportunity to fill gaps in the development community. I had never seen an Islamic-inspired organization working in an organized and accountable manner. Islamic Relief Worldwide has great understanding about the codes of proper conduct.

#### **Fadlullah Wilmot**

I have worked for two Islamic faith based organizations, and both have migrated from a strategy of collecting and giving away money to become mainstream development organizations with standards and international obligations to keep. Within Muslim aid agencies there are efforts to become more accountable, transparent, and adhere to international principals.

## Theory and Practice in Development; Perspectives working with Muslim-Inspired Organizations in Asia

Fadlullah Wilmot

I have worked for two Islamic faith-based organizations, and both have emigrated from collecting and giving away money to become mainstream development organizations adhering to international standards and obligations; generally, within Muslim aid agencies, there are notable efforts to become more accountable and transparent.

Both organizations I have worked for, Muslim Aid and Islamic Relief, are struggling with their concept and idea of their values, vision, and missions. Both organizations are in the midst of discussing these issues and both are starting from the fundamental Islamic principle of justice. If there is no justice, there is no development. Islamic Relief starts from a rights-based approach coming from a Qur'anic imperative that the poor have a right on the wealth of the rich. What we are doing is not charity; it is their right. If we have been given something, then we have to share it with the less fortunate.

In a rights-based approach, there is an obligation to help, and this is where I see empowerment taking place, to enable communities to stand on their own feet; that is a common theme I have seen with the two organizations. Both organizations emphasize the goal of reaching the most marginalized, needy, and remote communities—the people left out of mainstream development. In Bangladesh, for example, twenty percent of the population are what is identified as ultra poor (from BRAC studies); traditional microfinance schemes will not work for them, nor are they brought to the table for discussion. How can you help someone become self-sufficient if they do not have enough food on the table? How can we help those who have been forgotten by most NGOs? Both Islamic Relief and Muslim Aid are looking at efforts to reach the most marginalized.

In the development discourse, there is still some suspicion of faith-based organizations and perceived agendas, particularly towards Muslim organizations, among mainstream development organizations, secular organizations, and the UN. Due to the difficult history of Bangladesh, Muslims organizations come under the microscope more than other organizations. A Muslim organization in Bangladesh has to work doubly hard to prove its credentials.

What we have found working with other secular international institutions is that if you look at the

head offices in cities such as London or New York, the principles are there; they do not mind working with faith-based organizations. Christian organizations do not have a problem working with Muslim organizations, and neither do secular organizations. However, at the local level, stereotypes still hold and there are questions:— can we really trust faith-based organizations? Are they really going to deliver without regard to gender or ethnicity; are they serious? In both Bangladesh and Pakistan I have heard development organizations ask “What is the added value of having a faith-based organization?” These are the types of issues that Muslim-inspired organizations have to face.

From our Islamic perspective, if somebody taunts you or starts accusing you, you should pass by them with dignity; in short, you should not react. The Prophet Mohammad said if you feel angry, you should take ablution (water) because anger comes from the devil, and he comes from fire; if you take water, it will calm you. All of us, from all faith traditions, need to avoid hostile action. People of all faiths and beliefs need to put compassion at the front of their actions. All of us around the table have demonstrated this through our work, but people like us have to convey this message to the United Nations, the European Union, and other secular organizations; the message needs to be heard that faith-based organizations are serious and do have compassion for all, regardless of faith or creed.

Militant piracy (aggressive evangelizing) is a danger; I have seen it in Bangladesh, and in Pakistan with my own colleagues. I also saw it following the Jakarta earthquake. Some organizations from the West in Jakarta said, “If you convert to our religion, we will build a house for you.” This is not conducive to inclusive development. We have to be honest about our problems, and we have to be honest and frank about them in a spirit of openness.

That takes me to the next point, which is pertinent to all of us - we have to accept criticism. No faith-inspired organization is perfect. We have to be able to criticize ourselves and be willing to accept criticism from others. We are all talking about practical action, and we must be able to show what we are doing in the world.

There is a danger that religious organizations tend



to have sympathy for their own groups. Muslims get excited about Kashmir and Palestine, but then we neglect places where we are not affected. Buddhists do not get excited about what is happening in southern Thailand, nor do Catholics in the southern Philippines. We tend to sympathize with our religious group and we ignore the things affecting people of other religious groups. Sometimes “our” religious people are those causing hardship and harm. This discourse has to be a civilized discourse. The current context in Pakistan has shown the danger of a vehement and dangerous discourse. One group is not willing to listen to another; there is a political discourse demonizing other people. We as religious organizations have to fight against this discourse.

Religious organizations have to be involved in building peace. I was involved in efforts in Sri Lanka and Indonesia, and I am confident that children are the key. If we can get education systems—whether Islamic, Buddhist, or Christian—to incorporate peaceful conflict and dispute resolution in curriculum, we will start to bring about meaningful change. Faith-inspired organizations have to take the lead in mainstreaming the knowledge that all religious

traditions are proponents of peaceful conflict resolution. We have the message of peace in all of our traditions, but it not mainstreamed enough.

On gender issues, all religions have tended to be patriarchal. All religious scriptures have been interpreted by men. The men are sincere and have integrity, but they come from a different background than women. From an Islamic perspective the Islamic legal tradition puts women in second place. We have to look in our traditions, at the big picture of the Prophet Mohammed, who gave women an equal status to men, and mainstream this perspective into popular Islamic practice.

Lastly, we have to take up religious issues without denying our scriptures; we must understand culture, background, and local wisdom. In Aceh, where my wife is from, the word for women in the local language means “owner of the house” and if there is a divorce the wife receives ownership of the house. Gender issues are important, but we do not have to deny our religious traditions in order to empower women. If we develop our agenda properly, we can have a big impact in finding peace.



This Sri Lankan Buddhist Shrine was left untouched by the 2004 tsunami and these local monks assisted in the humanitarian efforts after the disaster.

## Faith Actors and Public Health

Though not a specific focus of the consultation, the roles of faith-inspired actors in public health were a common thread in the discussion. Faith-inspired actors play diverse roles on issues of public health. Faith-inspired NGOs, religious leaders, education institutions, and transnational organizations are all active across a wide spectrum of activities and programs related to health. Religious leaders—notably imams—are particularly active in disseminating information on HIV/AIDS prevention, care, and fighting social stigma.

Participants looked at how faith-inspired organizations approach the topic of health and where they are best able to make lasting contributions. Examples of imam training programs in Bangladesh and Tajikistan were cited as two successful and replicable examples.

### Batir Zalimov

We recently began a new project entitled, “Islam is Against Stigma and Discrimination.” Within this project we train religious leaders about HIV/AIDS, their role in society, and their role in preventing HIV and fighting stigma; our overall HIV/AIDS work has become easier with their participation. We regularly conduct classes with religious leaders, visit mosques, and speak to parishioners and openly explain our activities.

In Tajikistan, religious leaders have power; even they do not understand the extent of their influence. The government of Tajikistan wants to control the religious lives of people and religious communities; at the same time, religious leaders have nearly absolute power through their influence in many communities. This is a challenging environment for our work. Traditional attitudes of religious leaders towards those infected with HIV/AIDS and some HIV prevention methods (including safe sex practice), do not always complement our programs. The imam training programs are effective in changing attitudes and teaching imams to use their influence for positive social development.

Within our programs, we have a special focus on women because women are often victims of HIV. It used to be that intravenous drug use and sharing needles were the main ways of spreading HIV. Today the economic and social situation pushes many people go to Russia for work, and an increasing number of HIV cases are being

spread by those infected in Russia, and then returning to Tajikistan and infecting their wives; many of the women infected have never even heard of HIV. This is where we start our work with women, sensitizing them to the issue and offering psychological assistance when possible. We also organize self-help groups to share experiences and challenges.

To summarize the role of religious leaders in our country is huge and we need to maintain good relations and encourage cooperation; it is a clear way to change social attitudes on sensitive issues like HIV and drug addiction.

### Baba Iqbal Singh

We have established a modern 280-bed hospital at Baru Sahib that provides medical care to the rural poor. We have also established a de-addiction centre in Punjab, an orphanage, and a women’s care center. Each year we organize four medical camps in Punjab and Himachal Pradesh where doctors from Mumbai, Delhi, Haryana, and Punjab participate and provide free medical care and surgeries to the rural poor. In the spring of 2010 a team of 27 doctors belonging to a Canadian organization called Operation Rainbow visited Baru Sahib and performed 300 plastic surgery operations (largely for cleft lip) on patients who came from Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and Punjab. We are now establishing an institute in alternative medicine, including yoga and Theravada medicine. Our body is a divine temple. We enjoy our body, but we need to remember it is divine.

### Abdurahim Nazarov

The mosque that I lead is located in a central area of Dushanbe. A few years ago, it was quite small, with only a few regular parishioners; now it is one of the biggest mosques in Dushanbe. We provide informational sessions on social issues, including HIV, to our parishioners. Most people that come to our mosque are very well educated, including doctors and teachers, which is an identifying characteristic of our mosque.

I began my activities with the Center on Mental Health and HIV/AIDS three years ago with the goal of providing training on HIV-related issues to imam khatibs from different parts of Tajikistan (khatib refers to one that delivers a prayer service). We now provide five-day training sessions that include scientific facts as well as information

from Islamic teachings on prevention, treatment, care, and support for HIV. It is also an opportunity for the group to network with other imam khatibs working on similar issues.

Generally, it is easy to educate and teach people about HIV prevention, though it has at times proven difficult to keep the imam khatibs together, to adapt information to their needs, and to find role models for them to follow. For the past two years, the Center—with my assistance—monitored the imam khatibs and evaluated their progress. As a result of the training sessions, the imam khatibs have started to connect with HIV-infected people. We see that people are beginning to change their attitudes about HIV. Religion is very important in changing attitudes. There are a number of educational TV programs on HIV/AIDS issues, but the people in Tajikistan also look to the religious community and leaders for guidance. I am very moved by my involvement in the program; I can see real change developing in our society. It is important that we continue to invite imam khatibs into social life.

### **Moulana Abul Kalam Azad**

The Masjid Council is working in many sectors with a broad range of partners. One sector is in the field of HIV awareness building, where we have engaged local community imams. We have trained imams on HIV/AIDS and have developed a sermon guide that enables the imams to give lessons at Friday congregation on HIV/AIDS prevention. The sermon guide has twelve sermons to cover a period of twelve months. There are at least 500,000 mosques in Bangladesh; in every small village, you will find at least one mosque. Through our imam training program, most people attending Friday

congregations in the mosques listen to sermons and learn about HIV/AIDS prevention and care. Presently, we have about 4,000 imams working in this field of HIV/AIDS prevention and education.

We have also collaborated on WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) programming; we trained 200 imams as “master trainers” and through those imams, we trained about 19,000 imams in 40 districts in Bangladesh. We have also developed a sermon guide on WASH issues for disseminating information during weekly prayer. Imams are playing a very important role in the society on health-related issues.

### **Bedreldin Shutta**

In western Sudan in the 1980s we introduced an expanded immunization program for the five killer diseases of children, which include whooping cough and measles (I was with Médecins Sans Frontières at the time). We spent a few million dollars to establish the program, and when we went to the villages we were shocked that nobody accepted the immunizations. There was a rumor in the communities that the immunizations were intended to reduce the population. This was the case across all of Sudan. The only way to actually get around this was to convince religious leaders to be leaders themselves in expanding the immunization program to the communities, teaching their parishioners that the program was intended to help and not harm them. After the intervention of the religious leaders, the program was successfully implemented. From that day onward, I realized the importance of religion in the daily lives of people.

## **Issues of Networking and Coordination**

The range, breadth, and scope of faith-inspired organizations in South and Central Asia are vast; as are the diversity of their activities and programs. Some organizations work throughout the region, while others maintain a very local and specialized focus. Some work and activities overlap, while some are freestanding. Some work within specific faith communities, others within the context of society at large. Problems of poor coordination and possible avenues to address it were a constant theme through the discussion. Most partici-

pants agreed that increased coordination is essential to improve efficiency and effectiveness. Coordination was discussed particularly in the context of complex disaster response and relief efforts.

### **Katherine Marshall**

An issue that comes up often, and on which we welcome your views, is what networks are useful for you? Networks are ancient, but we have a tremendous new power with electronic communications. However,



networks are also easier said than done. Unless a network really serves the needs of those who it is supposed to benefit, it can be an inefficient use of time. Some networks in the peace area are working extremely well, including both closed and moderated networks, small, and very large.

Within the aid community, aid harmonization is the name of the game. There is a sense that chaos in the aid community—with everyone stepping over each other and reinventing the wheel—is a major impediment. Some faith institutions, like World Vision, are very much part of aid coordination – including meetings, sector working groups, etc—but most are not. There is also, what I would almost call a schizophrenia: a sense that in diversity there is creativity, that governments are suspect, and therefore there is unease about coordination. The debate is very much alive and pertinent to the work faith-inspired organizations do on both the practical and policy levels.

### **Keshab Chaulagain**

Since development organizations do not invite us to network meetings regularly, we participate only occasionally, but whenever they invite us we do participate. What we think is that development agencies do not usually recognize religious organizations as their partners.

### **Olcott Gunasekera**

In 2005 the Red Lotus organization was founded as an immediate response to the tsunami, though much of the initial work was done through partner organizations. The constitution was developed and agreed upon at an international conference in 2007. What Red Lotus is now engaged in is to develop a five-to-six day program to train volunteers attached to temples in disaster relief. We noticed that with the tsunami there was immediate response by the Buddhist monks who

worked relentlessly to save people and provide safe refuge. We found it unbelievable how they worked. They gave refuge in their temples to people of any faith. At times of disasters, the state usually comes late and people spontaneously help themselves; the Buddhist temples and monks showed an extraordinary spontaneity in their response in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami. We are developing a program to help support the temples and monks with training on disaster management leadership, first aid, and traumatic counseling training. We also help them to link themselves with other organizations that are experts in certain fields. The Red Cross Society provides intense training on immediate first aid, for example.

Following the tsunami, when the Red Cross Society wanted to link with the temples, there was no formal link for them to build upon. Red Lotus hopes to continue assisting better coordination. Being an organization in its infancy, there is still much to learn. The government has increased its response capacity; there is the newly formed Ministry of Disaster Management, and I recently visited the government nerve center in order to coordinate disaster relief. As a country, we are more prepared now.

### **Bedreldin Shutta**

An important gap I have witnessed concerns standards, frameworks, and coordination. Most organizations and their work were not streamlined. Islamic organizations, in general, were not involved in many forums due to the perception that links whatever is Islamic to terrorism; Islamic Relief, however, entered into the United Nations cluster system and used that framework to coordinate with the general body of development organizations. This has helped our work tremendously. Before, our work was seen as ad-hoc and that we work in isolation, but now there is room for strategic and organized coordination with stakeholders.

## **Reflections and Closing Comments**

The concluding session elicited reflections and ideas on how to move forward from each participant and identified gaps for further exploration and research. Several common themes emerged. Education as a vital issue across all aspects of development, was seen as pivotal,

including by promoting gender equality and peace-building. The values that faith-inspired actors bring to their work are their key attribute. Religious leaders can and should be important partners in community level development but their strengths are not yet well utilized.



## Closing Thoughts

Katherine Marshall

I come away from this event inspired by the complexity of this region; the deep roots of its history and its diversity and the ways in which religion is interwoven into every dimension of society. I had feared that perhaps all the work that we are doing had already been done. That is not our conclusion. The diversity of faith-inspired organizations, institutions, leaders, and program, do not seem to have not been the focus of systematic academic or practical research. Much of this work seems still to escape the radar screens of the people talking about policy. In other words, your voices and experiences are not well integrated. This is not universally true, but to a degree, the idea of mapping, in the sense of finding out who is doing what, from a Millennium Development Goal context, has a long way to go. Your comments highlight the degree to which your experience is both relevant and important for looking at the challenges of development. That is especially true for education, which for many here is the leading issue.

The discussion on conflict was thought provoking and tantalizing. Thinking on approaches to conflict seems still to be rather disparate. There may be a more coherent peacebuilding community and network in some other parts of the world than in South and Central Asia. The gender issue was confirmed

again and again as fundamental to life and justice, and very much on people's agendas. There is a keen awareness of the issues and challenges, and of many paths to solutions, but there is still a very long way to travel; both to grapple with the doubts and unease that people have about what inequality means, and also on what means will take us beyond the barriers.

We were concerned that by focusing on three topics only we might miss other important questions. Some of these emerged frequently. Most striking was the common concern about governance and corruption (the global integrity movement has not yet succeeded well in bringing religious voices into the discussion). Health is another vital issue, especially in the many gaps in service. Finally, concern about climate change is mounting: what will it bring, or what is it bringing (for example, movements of people into Dhaka – or the Pakistan challenge with floods)?

In closing, I convey our gratitude and appreciation for the quality, honesty, and forthright nature of the conversation. We come away with a sense that we have many friends. I thank BRAC, as well, for their support and partnership in what was in many ways a remarkable consultation.

Participants appreciated the opportunity to share their experiences and to develop networks with a diverse group that shared common concerns. They hoped that similar events could become a regular feature in the region, including meetings led by participants in their home countries. The challenges surrounding interfaith and faith/secular collaboration on development were

debated and possible avenues and issues to facilitate cooperation were suggested. All sought ways to bridge the gap between the on-the-ground experience and expertise of faith-inspired organizations and policy decisions at the local, regional, national, and international levels.

## Participant Comments, Perspectives, and Suggestions on Next Steps

**Swami Agnivesh** felt challenged and humbled by the wide ranging experiences of the consultation participants. He recommended the Parliament of All Religions, an organization he has founded, as a model to bring together faith-inspired organizations on the basis of a common minimum program and seven point charter. Future consultations should include government officials who interface with faith-inspired actors on issues where there is real disagreement. **Suhrob Khaitov** echoed the need to organize beyond the consultation because two days are too short for sustained dialogue. He suggested a network to connect, discuss, and start sharing ideas ahead of subsequent meetings.

**Rabia Mathai**, highlighted a need for greater Hindu representation in such forums. Hindu-inspired organizations have many successful models of education, with the Art of Living one prominent example. Looking forward, she recommended the creation of a broader knowledge base of case studies and data on faith and development work; consultation participants, she said, could take the lead in forming small action groups. **Jena Derakhshani Hamadani** suggested that consultation participants take initiatives to form country-specific interfaith fora to build upon consultation findings; she saw particular opportunities in Bangladesh between BDI and consultation participants.

**Olcott Gunasekera** reflected on how this forum can most effectively influence senior policy levels. The Buddhist perspective, he noted, is not heard at the United Nations level. He suggested that further in-depth research be done on the role of faith-inspired actors for specific development issues. Tobacco, alcohol, and excess are three common issues where faith-inspired organizations could organize and cooperate that would help alleviate poverty. He said disaster management and climate change are two additional issues that deserve greater attention by faith-inspired actors. The experiences of the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka showed that faith-inspired organizations at the national level were not prepared for immediate response, but have since expanded their capacities.

**Francis Halder** emphasized the importance of public

institutions in ensuring sustainability of development projects; they need to be included in the conversation with faith-inspired organizations. Environmental implications of migration, particularly in a densely-populated country such as Bangladesh, need much more focus. **Younis Alam** stressed a need for increased cooperation between South and Central Asia and called upon participants to further transnational partnerships drawing on common faith and cultural traditions.

**Dr. Muhammad Amjad Saqib** planned to organize a similar dialogue in Pakistan—bringing together representatives from faith-inspired organizations, secular organizations, and government—concluding in a tripartite arrangement. Development, he said, cannot be achieved alone. He said capacity training on development issues for imams has special importance, citing successful examples from Bangladesh.

**Fadlullah Wilmot** challenged the group to themselves improve cooperation and collaboration between faith-inspired organizations, government, and international organizations. Organizations such as UNICEF and the World Health Organizations are making significant efforts, he noted, but they should be enhanced. Mr. Wilmot highlighted hesitancy by some to include faith-inspired actors in policy discussions. He also saw opportunities for greater cooperation among faith-inspired organizations. Best practices should be more widely disseminated.

Speaking about education, the need is to be practical when discussing reform; the madrasa system is a permanent institution that needs to be engaged, and not marginalized. He presented an example from Indonesia that teaches madrasa students practical vocational skills.

On gender, violence against women needs much more focus and women's voices need to be highlighted in education and peacebuilding. He is deeply concerned about high levels of gender based violence in Bangladesh (a majority Muslim country), as violence against women is against the teachings of Islam. Local dispute resolution mechanisms and religious leaders are not effectively combating gender-based violence.

**Tatiana Kotova** appreciated that Central Asia was included in the discussion, as it is often omitted. Central Asia, she said, should no longer be referred to as the post-Soviet region, but rather seen for the unique identities of each country. Consultations like this one are important to help Central Asia overcome stigma and engage in needed development discourse.

**Melody Fox Ahmed** saw the consultation as only the beginning of a sustained dialogue on faith and development in South and Central Asia; the Berkley Center is committed to supporting faith and development initiatives. The Berkley Center website is a valuable portal for information and knowledge sharing.

**Farida Vahedi** underscored the need for further research and documentation around the involvement of faith-inspired actors in development, particularly to demonstrate their contributions and relevance to policymakers. Case studies can show results, but are not sufficient. Turning to education, the wide range of activities of faith-inspired actors outside of traditional instruction is striking, but not well-known. Institutional capacity building, distance education, and informal education deserve more focus. The background report should discuss crosscutting factors in education, as well as issues of governance and corruption.

**Chintamani Yogi** said the meeting reinforced his conviction on the importance of values in education; we need to look beyond the well-known organizations, particularly to the wide range of transnational religious movements and their education initiatives.

**Keshab Chaulagain** ranked the consultation among the top meetings he has attended; it was equally scholarly and practical and he hopes to see future consultations following similar methodologies. It is important to introduce the topics of faith and development in higher education institutions; so far most attention goes to primary through secondary levels. For **Visaka Dharmadasa**, this was her first experience as a participant at a conference focused on faith and development. Much work is still needed on religion and peacebuilding; religious leaders have an important role to play. Focusing on cross cutting issues between religions to promote cooperation is a place to start. It is also important, she noted, to understand how religions define security as a starting point for discourse.

For **Bedreldin Shutta** as well, this was his first experience in this type of forum; similar initiatives in other regions are needed. He suggested that European development agencies lack an important lens through which to view development, with religion largely excluded from policy discussions. His concern is how to take this forum forward? The Islamic Relief founded “International Humanitarian Forum,” a possible model linking governments, faith-based organizations, and other foundations. Both UNDP and the World Bank have acknowledged the work of international faith-based organizations, but the trend needs to move to the political level, including bodies such as the African Union and European Union.

**Syed Hashemi** emphasized that distortions and misinterpretations of religion are responsible for much violence and civil strife, highlighting examples from Pakistan and India. There are, however, real opportunities for faith-inspired organizations to contribute to development work. Bangladesh has important examples of successful faith-inspired development work, including that of the Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB), Ahsania mission, Islamic Relief, Muslim Aid, and the AKDN. Disaster response in Pakistan and Bangladesh have successfully brought together different faith groups to collaborate around common development issues.

**Ravinderpal Singh Kohli** echoed Dr. Hashemi that faith has been abused and not used properly by some, and that faith-inspired actors should be preacherless, and more practice. Baba Iqbal Singh said that faith is good, but it often is misused. Values-based education, he said, is necessary to educate people to be responsible citizens and have a global outlook.

**Amir Ali** noted that while we have had conversations about what works and does not work programmatically, the conversation needs to expand to which actors are not at the table, including the decision and policymakers, without whom the forum cannot be effective. Individual organizations can make positive contributions through small steps and individual programs. It is important to focus on tangible results and not try always to effect large-scale change.

**Michael Bodakowski** highlighted the need for more discussion around the tensions surrounding madrasa

reform. Capacity-training programs for imams described during the consultation offer successful examples of engaging imams in dialogue on social issues, notably HIV/AIDS and gender roles. He will

help form an online network for consultation participants to share experiences and perspectives following the consultation.

## Next Steps

An important next phase is to support and engage the network of colleagues formed and to disseminate the main lessons and ideas learned to a range of actors in the region; including faith-inspired organizations not represented in Dhaka, national and international secular development agencies, government officials and ministries, religious leaders, academics, and think tanks. A main goal of the consultation is to bridge the gap between practitioners and policy to further engage faith-inspired actors in international development. Specific actions include: creation of online network portal to share ideas and experience, dissemination of reports to local partners and governments; and participant collaboration in home countries to support or host similar consultations with region specific focus. The background study prepared for the consultation will be updated and published based on

conference material and participant feedback to serve as a reference “mapping” the landscape of faith and development in South and Central Asia.

WFDD will continue its cooperation and collaboration with BDI, looking for points of mutual interest and for how to best use the partnership to expand upon and disseminate consultation outcomes.

As this consultation was the final in a series of regional “mapping” projects, WFDD and the Berkley Center plan to hold a separate “capstone” consultation bringing together faith and development actors from all world regions, highlighting global themes and lesson learned, tentatively scheduled to take place in late 2011.

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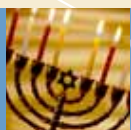
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