



## REPORTS / RAPORTY

### **The nature of the academic study of religion in Dhaka University and the role of Professor Joseph T. O’Connell**

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#### ABSTRACT

Academic study of religion, embracing what at the University of Dhaka is called World Religions and Culture, is a relatively new field of scholarship in the world. It is only beginning to emerge in Bangladesh and other South Asian countries. As distinguished from the theological study of religion, which favours one’s own faith tradition, academic study of religion uses the same descriptive, analytic and critical academic criteria and methods to study any form of religious life, including one’s own. In this paper, there has been an effort to discuss the basic differences between these two sorts of study. The paper then explores the brief history of academic study of religion in the modern world and how it came into being at Dhaka University (DU) as the Department of World Religions & Culture (WRC) under the faculty of Arts. Finally, the crucial role of late Professor Dr. Joseph T. O’Connell (1940–2012) in forming the Department and its affiliated Centre for Inter-religious & Intercultural Dialogue (CIID) as an academic place for the study, teaching and doing research on the different religious issues for the promotion of multi-religious and multi-cultural peace and harmony in Bangladesh is discussed. The paper has been written on the bases of the official documents of Dhaka University as for the existence of WRC and CIID, academic activities and works of faculty members of WRC, especially of Professor Dr. Joseph T. O’Connell, along with other primary and secondary literary sources relevant to the academic study of religion.

#### KEYWORDS

confessional study of religion; scientific study of religion; comparative religion; holistic approach to the study of religions; Dhaka University; Department of World Religions and Culture; South Asian Universities; Kazi Nurul Islam; Joseph T. O’Connell

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## INTRODUCTION

Academic study of religion is comparatively late development in the field of modern educational and research system, though religion has been studied from the very beginning of human civilization and that method of study was mostly subjective based on a particular faith tradition. Needless to say, in the early educational system of religion, priority was given to a particular faith, while other faiths were totally ignored or given very little place regarding their beliefs and practices. As a matter of fact, people could not study other faith traditions in detail, and that's why they could not fully respect the followers of other faith traditions in the manner they deserved. It is unfortunately true that the purpose of that sort of religious education was to belittle others, even though real theological knowledge never sought to underestimate and hate others. Ironically, it is also true, consciously or unconsciously, that such narrow ideas about other faith traditions were in the minds of most theologians, excepting a very few, and these were reflected while they used to think and work. As a result, people could easily consider other faiths to be invalid, false, baseless, *etc.*, because they had no proper knowledge of them; and thus, in most cases, conflicting attitudes among different religious communities arose, instead of a peace seeking mentality. In this way, there has been a distance and gap among the followers of religions in the past, which unfortunately continues to the present in many ways, though not in such an automatic fashion.

Conversely, there have always been broad minded people who deeply wanted to find the essence of all religions from an ethical or moral point of view, and who have emphasized such issues more than the ritual sides of religions so that followers of all religions could envision a common platform for social harmony and world peace. Moreover, by the various efforts of some academicians in the middle of the nineteenth century, through their valuable speeches and works, drew public attention to this new perspective, and, thus, managed to help establish the academic study of religion within government sponsored universities in some western countries. In the middle of the twentieth century, south Asian people accepted this sort of study from the west as a missing branch of knowledge, and Indian several universities began to open their doors for the academic study of religion in various names. In Bangladesh, the University of Dhaka responded in 1999 to this necessity of study on religion, launching the academic study of religion in 2000, in the name of Comparative Religion, which later on became World Religions, and then World Religions and Culture. Behind such initiatives at Dhaka University, Dr. Kazi Nurul Islam played the vital role with assistance from the late Professor Dr. Joseph T. O'Connell in developing this Department as a core functional one.

Thus, as a result of long process and procedure, an opportunity was created in Dhaka University (DU) for the academic study of religion, in which

religions are being taught in scientific method. This sort of study is a modern phenomenon in which religions are seen to be studied in the highest academic level, at government sponsored universities and privately owned universities as well, with comparatively neutral way and with possible impartial approach. Truly, in it religions are being examined as an important aspect of human life. Fortunately, at the newly established Department of World Religions and Culture (WRC) in DU, religions along with their cultural traditions are being taught with scientific method which is very rare in other Asian universities. The present paper deals with the historical background of the academic study of religion in DU and then focuses on the pioneering role of our esteemed Professor Dr. Joseph T. O'Connell towards the present formation of the Department and its affiliated Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (CIID). In addition, because of his outstanding role playing, the department has become an academic centre for higher studies on religions.

Here, in this paper, the official records and other documents of WRC, CIID and DU will be taken under consideration to write on this subject matter. Apart from these, the relevant academic works and activities of faculty members and Professor Dr. Joseph T. O'Connell's two research articles, *Academic Study of Religion in Bangladesh: Challenges and Opportunities* and *Introduction to Religious Studies in South Asia: The Dhaka Initiative* will highly be consulted. Other source materials include various websites and information available on the internet concerning the academic study of religion. Thus, the methods will be the survey study and the analysis of those sources.

## THEOLOGICAL OR CONFSSIONAL OR TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS STUDIES

It goes without saying that religion is part and parcel of human life, culture and civilization. From time immemorial human beings have been practicing their religious beliefs along with rituals and ceremonies. Concurrently, it has been accompanied with various kinds of teaching and studies, both by the founders and followers of respective religious traditions. Moreover, it is true that in most cases, such studies and teaching have been subjective rather than objective; in other words, theological study. Such studies can also be called the confessional study of religion, in which particular faith based knowledge is given focus and the highest priority. Furthermore, such traditional systems of religious education are conducted by particular faith based communities, or religious institutes, for example, the Church in Christian communities or something similar in other faith based communities. In the case of a Muslim perspective, it is definitely traditional *madrasah* educational institutes circling the Islamic theology and its relevant issues. Thus, each and every community

has in the past, and even in this present time as well, utilized such religious educational systems and institutes of their own only for the teaching, learning, and doing research from a particular community's religious and cultural point of interest.

Here only theological knowledge of a particular faith is taught, discussed and researched. Generally, the term 'theology' (etymologically) means 'theory about God', but its well accepted meaning is taken as 'the systematic formulation of religious beliefs' (Hick, 1987: 1). However, such conventional systems of religious education usually include ideas, concepts, nature, characteristics, *etc.* of the Creator; His messages and commandments towards human beings; religious books and holy men, *etc.* Unfortunately it is true that in such confessional studies of a particular religion, there was and is hardly scope to know other religions and traditions. As there was no opportunity for knowing others, misunderstandings about others developed. These misconceptions and misunderstandings regarding the religious beliefs of others than one's own were evident, excepting in very rare cases. Criticism within the tradition itself, and critical understanding and analysis were not encouraged and considered as part of the system. Though, sometimes criticism was allowed and that only for other traditions and against heresy; generally it was forbidden for one's own faith. Even constructive things and thoughts, which are now appreciated by the faith community itself were not tolerated in the past confessional study system. Religion was not taught and researched from a scientific view, *i.e.* from historical, sociological, philosophical, psychological, and anthropological points of view. Thus, there was no scope to know religion from a holistic approach. It was, indeed, one sided study of a particular religious and cultural tradition.

#### ACADEMIC STUDY OF RELIGION: BRIEF HISTORY

However, in spite of this, from the very beginning of human civilization, human efforts were not totally motionless in terms of knowing others, be it religious faiths, inherent cultures, social norms, cultural heritages or other forms of practices. Though they were very few in number, some did significant work in this regard. For example, some historians like Herodotus (c. 484–425 BCE), Al-Shahrastani (1086–1153 CE), Max Müller (1823–1900 CE) and others spent their whole life knowing others and writing books about what they knew of others. They tried their best to know different religious and cultural traditions from a very grass roots' levels. Their methodology of study on religions and cultures was significantly different from the traditional system of confessional or theological study of religions. In spite of their human limitation and adherence to their own faiths and traditions, they acquired

knowledge of others in a neutral and unbiased manner, and wrote about it accordingly. They collected knowledge of religious beliefs and practices from the sacred books and other religious literatures. For this purpose, they learnt the respective languages in order to read and understand. They used to talk with respective scholars, as well as the general followers of the religions on which they worked, in order to obtain clear explanations of religious beliefs and instructions. Their study covered some important methods of study from reading and analysis of books and literatures to the survey study of particular groups of people. What they followed and did in the past resembles the study system of our time in the field of religions. Their approaches have led us to accept and practice the scientific approaches to the study of religions, though it is being done now everywhere in the present world in different names, comparative religion, religious studies, study of religions, science of religion, philosophy of religion, history of religion, psychology of religions, sociology of religion to mention just some names. In sum, it is called the academic study of religion that incorporates all scientific approaches of study to the study of religious beliefs and practices. In it religions are viewed and analyzed from historical, sociological and philosophical contexts. Religions are seen here as an important factor and a very influencing subject for human behaviour within society. Thus, all human feelings, objects, and behaviours, *i.e.*, human reflections on religions, divinities, sacred books, and prophets are independently and significantly thought, taught as well as researched in line with the scientific method.

Such study of religions, though not attached to the confessional study of religions, is gaining popularity among modern educated people and in modern educational institutes all over the world. This kind of study is being seen as an important tool to increase tolerance among the followers of different religions in order to promote pluralism and multiculturalism in this modern world, and finally, world peace through peaceful co-existence among nations, cultures and religions. That is why, government sponsored academic institutes are taking the initiatives to open the academic departments and research centres, under the different names mentioned earlier for the higher studies and research of religions. Such academic enterprise for the study of religion started in the western world more than one century ago<sup>1</sup>; but it took time

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<sup>1</sup> German philologist Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900), by his series of works, managed to convince European academic scholars for opening an academic department for scientific study on religions. However, by his persistent efforts a teaching center of the general history of religions at the Geneva Faculty of Theology was established in 1869. The first professional chair of the academic study of religion was established in 1873 by the same Faculty. Then, this kind of study on religion came into existence in Holland in 1877, after then in France in 1880s and then in other western European countries. In North America, it was only in the late 1950s when Harvard University opened its graduate Center for the Study of World Religions.

in other areas of the world to be recognized as a regular academic discipline. South Asia, though it was familiar with multicultural and multi-religious activities and communications long before, responded to it later. It was torn into confusion and doubts about the outcome of the academic activities, while western world started it with full spirit and speed. On the other hand, it is true that at that time the leadership for conducting south Asian nations was not at the hands of south Asian people; rather they were being ruled by the British. Ironically they were not sufficiently educated and familiar with the modern system which generally came from the western world; rather, they were completely dependent on the colonial people. Earlier modern educational institutes, ranging from the primary schools to the universities, in the soil of Indian sub-continent were built by European people. Though, there were some departments or centres in those institutes for giving higher degrees on particular religions; it created misunderstandings and misconceptions among the followers of different religions instead of religious peace and harmony among them, creating distance in the place of unity among Indian people, especially among Hindus and Muslims. Though, this hostility and enmity between Hindus and Muslims enabled the British rulers to rule India for a long time; ironically it was unfortunate for the Indian sub-continent itself. British power ended in 1947, but left south Asia into divided nations. It is said that because of the British policy 'to divide and rule' and South Asian backwardness in the modern educational system, academic study of religion took a long time to emerge as an academic discipline. In spite of all these limitations, several south Asian universities received the challenges of the time, took encouraging initiatives in this regard step by step and finally managed to launch some departments and centres for the academic study of religions. Some of these universities are Visva-Bharati (Santiniketan, West Bengal), Banaras Hindu University (UP), Punjabi University (Patiala), Jamia Millia (New Delhi), University of Madras, Jadavpur University (Kolkata), Eastern University of Sri Lanka, and University of Dhaka (Bangladesh) (O'Connell, 2011a: 7). Needless to say, the opportunity for the academic study of religion at university levels in South Asian countries is still insufficient compared with the long and rich heritage of religious diversity. Here the remarks of Professor O'Connell seems relevant to mention, concerning:

[...] the striking disparity between the richness of human religious phenomena in South Asia and the scarcity of institutional bases for academic study of religion in all but a handful of South Asian universities (O'Connell, 2011a: 16).

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Government-sponsored universities in the United States of America introduced courses in the academic study of religion only in the 1960s after a Supreme Court decision distinguishing academic teaching of religion from confessional teaching of religion (O'Connell, 2009: 76).

## ACADEMIC STUDY OF RELIGIONS IN DHAKA UNIVERSITY

In Bangladesh the history of the academic study of religion is only of 17 years with the University of Dhaka under the faculty of Arts in the Department of Comparative Religion. Behind its birth as an academic department, Dr. Kazi Nurul Islam, along with his dedicated associates, persistently spent eighteen years convincing university administration to open such a department to provide an opportunity for the academic study of religions. Finally, he was successful in his efforts and the university administration considered his proposal and approved it on 1 December 1999 as an independent department with Dr. Kazi as its founding chairman. The new department was allowed to initially take M.A. students from the same academic session. Then it was allowed to take research students at M.Phil. and Ph.D. levels, and since 2006, it has been taking students at undergraduate programs (O'Connell, 2009: 73)

Now, it is a full department with undergraduate and postgraduate research students. In 2008, a research and study centre in the name of Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (CIID) was opened and affiliated with the Department.<sup>2</sup> The center (CIID), since then, has been working as a complementary part of the Department, though it has the very specific purpose to regularly organize and conduct academic seminars, discussion meetings, and dialogues among multi-religious communities in Bangladesh (Rozario, 2010: 7–8). The ultimate purpose of both, the Department and the Center, is to promote mutual understanding and friendship among different cultural and religious communities in Bangladesh and thus, to promote peaceful co-existence among them.

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<sup>2</sup> About the short history of the CIID's establishment in Dhaka University, here Professor Kazi Nurul Islam's statements are relevant; as he mentions: 'Between 2000 and 2007 I went to the United States more than 25 times for international conferences and for my studies. I studied religious pluralism while I was in University of California Santa Barbara. I studied Islam at the US State Department. Then as a senior Fulbright fellow I went to study Judaism and interreligious dialogue at Temple University. I was very impressed with the interfaith activities of the Dialogue Center and this is how the idea of a center at Dhaka University came to my mind. I talked to Jewish scholars, Christian scholars, particularly Dr. Leonard Swidler who is one of the founders of the Dialogue Center. He is truly a legendary figure in the field of interfaith dialogue. So he inspired me and he pushed me to open a center of my own. I realized that without a hospital, a medical college would be worthless and it follows that without a center for interreligious dialogue, the Department of World Religions would be worthless. I came back, submitted a proposal, and believe it or not, within two months, my proposal was approved, and the center came into being'.

See for details <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/interviews/a-discussion-with-kazi-nurul-islam-head-of-the-department-of-world-religions-dhaka-university> (18.12.2014). Also see [http://www.du.ac.bd/research3/research\\_centre\\_details.php?id=32](http://www.du.ac.bd/research3/research_centre_details.php?id=32) (08.12.2014).

## METHODOLOGY OF TEACHING, STUDY AND RESEARCH IN DHAKA UNIVERSITY'S DEPARTMENT OF WORLD RELIGIONS AND CULTURE

The teaching and study method of the department is different from other departments of Dhaka University. Here religions are being taught and studied neutrally as well as objectively. Each and every religious tradition is given equal importance in an unbiased way. Religions are analyzed here from scientific and holistic approaches. The teaching strategy is also unique in the sense that religious tradition is also being taught and guided by the academic scholars of the same faith community. For example, Islam is being taught here by a famous Islamic scholar and professor of Islamic studies, Hinduism by a famous Hindu scholar and professor of Sanskrit, Christianity by a Christian Father, and Buddhism by a famous Buddhist professor. Not only religions are being taught here but also many other subjects like history, sociology, anthropology, political science, *etc.* are given equal importance by the respective professors. About the teaching method of the Department, its founding chairman, Dr. Kazi Nurul Islam, categorically mentions in an interview with the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs of Georgetown University:

I want to emphasize that our approach is objective — it is a purely academic study of religion. All the religions of the world — major, minor, living, dead, are taught in this department. I call it a scientific study of religion and in order for the approach to be scientific we need to teach the history of religion, sociology of religion, anthropology of religion, psychology of religion, and philosophy of religion. Only if you have all of these elements will you have a scientific study of religion. Max Müller originated this approach and later on scholars like Edgar Brightman supported it. It is purely objective. There is not subjective bias. We do not favor any religions and we do not condemn any religion. This is our method of teaching.<sup>3</sup>

## PROFESSOR O'CONNEL'S CRUCIAL ROLE IN FORMING THE DEPARTMENT AS AN ACADEMIC PLACE FOR STUDY OF RELIGIONS

Before going to discuss about his contribution to the department of World Religions and Culture, first of all, we should know Professor Joseph and be familiar with some of his outstanding academic activities. However, according

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<sup>3</sup> <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/interviews/a-discussion-with-kazi-nurul-islam-head-of-the-department-of-world-religions-dhaka-university> (18.12.2014).



to the author's knowledge from the various conversations with him in Dhaka<sup>4</sup> and many other sources,<sup>5</sup> some important events of his life and academic works are presented here. It is known from him that his forefathers went to USA from Ireland more than one century ago for the better life and settled in the region of Boston. So, by this line of genealogy, he was Irish-American. He was born in Boston, USA, in 1940 into a very noble and highly educated family. His father was a lawyer and his mother was a nurse. As he was an only child to his parents, so grew up with their endless attention. His father wanted to make him a priest, while mother wanted to see him a medical doctor. He started his primary education at the local Church based educational institute. For his undergraduate college work, he studied math and history at the Holy Cross College. He developed an interest in eastern religions and was admitted to a Ph.D. program in Comparative Religions at Harvard University, choosing Chaitanya Vaisnavism, a branch of Hindu religion for his thesis. For the field study and research visit of his Ph.D. studies he came to eastern India (West Bengal and Bangladesh) in the 1960s. He fell in love with the soil of India and Bangladesh,

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<sup>4</sup> The author is always a humble student of Professor Dr. Joseph T. O'Connell. First, he came to visit the Dhaka University's Department of World Religions and Culture in 2002 when the author was a student of M.A. (Second Part). Then, from the following year, 2003, to 2012 he was regular Visiting Professor to Department. In 2004, he visited to the native village of the author and since then he was also very intimate with author's parents and family. In 2005, the author joined the Department as a lecturer and at the same time he continued his M.Phil. research study under the regular guidance of Professor O'Connell. From 2010 to 2012, while he was in Dhaka, O'Connell used to have his launch at the author's residence in International Hall of Dhaka University, and became very close and intimate to author than others in Dhaka. Author and his family considered Professor Joseph as a senior member of the family and he also regarded author's wife, Jibon Nesa, as his daughter and author's daughter, Sarah Maliha, as his grandchild. During such interaction of long time author got the opportunity to know many things from Professor's personal life to academic activities.

<sup>5</sup> Just after hearing the news of the death, the Department held a condolence meeting (May, 2012) at the Arts Auditorium of Dhaka University where many famous scholars, intellectuals, academicians and higher administrative officers including vice-chancellor of the university were present, among others. At that meeting the author was given the responsibility to present some important parts of his life and works. For this purpose, the author prepared his speech from his own knowledge and understanding which he got from Professor O'Connell during the conversation at home and Department, and also collected some data from such websites as:

<http://www.newcollege.utoronto.ca/news/in-memori-am-professor-joseph-oconnell/>

[http://www.faculty.utoronto.ca/arc/in\\_memori-am/oconnell/](http://www.faculty.utoronto.ca/arc/in_memori-am/oconnell/)

<http://www.ochs.org.uk/lectures/by-name-sorter/Professor%20Joseph%20T.%20O%2E%80%99Connell>

<http://iskconews.org/remem-bering-joseph-t-oconnell,3280/>

<http://jagadanandadas.blogspot.de/2012/05/passing-of-joe-oconnell.html>

[http://www.sikhchic.com/people/prof\\_joseph\\_oconnell\\_a\\_tribute](http://www.sikhchic.com/people/prof_joseph_oconnell_a_tribute)

[http://www.cssrscer.ca/sites/default/files/Press\\_Release.pdf](http://www.cssrscer.ca/sites/default/files/Press_Release.pdf)

<http://v1.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/Deaths.20120512.93293895/BDAStory/BDA/deaths>

and was impressed by the works of the famous Bengali poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1879–1940), and continued his visits to India and Bangladesh, and thus, fall in love of the soil of South Asia (O’Connell, 2011b: 17).

After completing his Ph.D., he moved to Canada in 1968 and taught at St. Michael’s College and the Center for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto till his death, though officially he was retired in 2000. He lived in Toronto, Canada, in the status of permanent resident for more than 43 years, but never applied for Canadian citizenship. In this sense, he was Canadian as well. Apart from his teaching job in Toronto, he voluntarily served the local people and became a dedicated social worker. Thus, his acquiring theoretical knowledge brought him into practical fields with a strong social conscience. From his arrival in 1968 to his death in 2012, he involved himself with numerous local causes in order to make his adopted city, Toronto, a better place for all. This social awareness might be summed up in his 15 year work with the homeless in the Out-of-the-Cold program at St. Peter’s and St. Matthew’s churches, Toronto.

He was always sensitive to any sort of injustice done anywhere on earth to anyone. So, during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971 he worked in the support of Bangladesh and tried to create a positive response in North America for the freedom fighters, this at a time when the USA was pro-Pakistan and anti-Bangladesh. Again, during the gulf war in 1991, and war in Iraq in 2003, as well as Palestine–Israel wars, he was always critical of the invaders and attackers. He used to see all human beings with an equal eye and treat them equally irrespective of their caste, creed, colour, nationality, ethnicity, and gender. He vehemently criticized the oppressors, whoever they are, while showing utmost empathy to the oppressed ones. In fact, he was a fine example of humanism and a true bearer of humanist approach (O’Connell, 2007: 123–146). Truly, it is very rare to have an egalitarian man like him in this present world.

Apart from his multi-faceted academic works and social welfare activities, he engaged himself with such universities as Oxford University (UK), Visva-Bharati University (West Bengal, India) and the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. He was instrumental in the establishment of the Department of World Religions and Culture in the University of Dhaka for ten years from 2003 to 2012.

Thus, he was always busy with multi-dimensional works; even he could not take time to properly take care of himself due to his continuous activities. Many of his well-wishers warned him about his health but he did not heed about it rather he continued his works. He is the man who did not give the brain rest for a bit and so; he suffered from the massive brain haemorrhage on 4 May, 2012, and died on 6 May, 2012 in Lenox Hill Hospital, Manhattan, in New York, USA. He left behind his wife, Kathleen O’Connell, herself a Rabindranath Tagore scholar, two sons, one daughter, two grand children

and endless devotees, students and well-wishers from all over the world. At his death, the whole world mourned and paid utmost respect and honour to his departed soul. The loss the scholarly world has faced at his death never recovers.

The Dhaka University's Department of World Religions and Culture was blessed and graced by the presence of respected Professor Dr. Joseph T. O'Connell for more than one decade, from 2002 to 2012. He actively played his crucial role in forming the Department into research and knowledge based academic place for the study of religions. On his own will and expenditure, he used to come every year to Dhaka from Canada and spend two–three months in Dhaka University campus only for building up the new Department as a learning, teaching and research place for the study of religions. He used to take some important classes both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, conducted a weekly English gathering for the students so that they could easily learn English language and literature, organized weekly seminars, guided and supervised research students, and invited many other scholars of various disciplines to the Department for scholarly discussion on different issues of religions. Thus, he tried his level best to make the Department as a multi-disciplinary academic place. He himself used to train up the young faculty members and encourage their research. He always tried, whether in Dhaka or outside Dhaka, to link the departments with other academic departments or research centres. It was his efforts and endeavours by which Dhaka University's Department of World Religions and Culture is now connected with the Visva-Bharati's Department of Philosophy and Religion. In 2008, with Dr. Asha Mukherjee of Visva-Bharati, he organized an international conference in Santiniketan, West Bengal, India, on the academic study of religions in India and invited there prominent academic scholars of Indian religions, including the faculty members of Dhaka University's Department of World Religions and Culture. In 2010, he also organized another international conference at Dhaka University campus on the academic study of religions in South Asia and invited South Asian academic scholars of religious studies, and the conference was attended by 20 scholars from India, Srilanka, Nepal, and USA. Thus, by his utmost and sincere efforts the Department came to become distinct from other departments of Dhaka University in terms of fruitful discussion and meaningful works on different religious issues.

He always wanted the Department to have competent teaching staffs and research fellows. He was of the opinion that without the qualified teachers and researchers no department can execute its basic minimum performances in academic levels. As the Department of World Religions and Culture is a very sensitive academic place for the study of religions, so its teaching staffs and researchers should be well informed about the other religious traditions including their own religions; otherwise, they will not be competent and qualified for being attached with the Department. He clearly mentioned about it:

At advanced specialized levels of scholarship, it is professional competence, not personal religious confession, which determines who should or should not be teaching or doing research on technically demanding subjects. Obviously, for comparative topics that require knowledge of more than one tradition of religious faith, scholars will of necessity be treating subjects and drawing upon evidence from religious traditions other than their own, if indeed the scholar claims ('confesses') adherence to any particular's religious tradition as his or her 'own' (O'Connell, 2009: 79).

According to him, the most important priority task for the department of world religions and culture is research and teaching on religion in Bangladesh and the wider Bengal region. As he stated:

One salient way by which world religions scholars in Bangladesh could make a distinctive contribution to national self-understanding and to foreign appreciation of Bangladesh and its people is through teaching, research and publication about religious life in Bangladesh itself. This would include both the contemporary religious situation in Bangladesh and the millenniums-long history of religious life and institutions in the Bengal region as a whole (O'Connell, 2009: 92).

[...] Bangladesh has the potential for performing a pioneering role in adapting a beneficial field of scholarship to historical contexts beyond the West. But this potential for developing the academic study of world religions currently is limited by political pressures, limited resources, institutional constraints and above all pervasive insecurity. It remains a challenging role, nonetheless, a role with real opportunities to accomplish something of value for the peoples of Bangladesh and countries akin to it (O'Connell, 2009: 103).

He always expected to see the balance between insiders (the followers of the tradition which is being studied and done research) and outsiders (those not adhering to that tradition) in the Department. In it, according to him, cross-traditional and cultural knowledge can easily be grasped and known to all participants, not only through teaching method but also through interaction among the students, researchers and teachers of different religious and cultural traditions. Professor O'Connell was a humble follower of Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000)<sup>6</sup> in this regard and so being influenced by his balanced policy, he always suggested DU's Department of World Religions and Culture to follow Dr. Smith's 'insider-outsider' balance, as he mentioned:

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<sup>6</sup> W.C. Smith was a Canadian Islamic scholar and Professor of Comparative Religion who taught in British India, Canada and USA. He was the founding director of McGill's Institute of Islamic Studies, where he brought together Muslim and non-Muslim Islamic specialists in a bold new venture — the study of a common subject by scholars of different religious and cultural traditions. He authored numerous outstanding publications (see *e.g.* Smith, 1957; Smith, 1977; Smith, 1981; Smith, 1987). For more details about him and his academic activities see <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/2001/11.29/27-memorialminute.html> (08.12.2014).

This policy may be even more readily acknowledged and made operative in Bangladesh than in many Western countries in view of the significant presence and widespread recognition of religio-communal diversity among its populace. In fact, pronounced diversity of religious understanding is evident even within the large Muslim population of Bangladesh. With Smith's desideratum of 'insiders-outsiders' balance in mind, it is, however, a matter of serious concern that far so few non-Muslims are to be found among the small cadre of research students in world religions at DU (O'Connell, 2009: 80).

Moreover, he considered the mutual learning from one another's different religious and cultural backgrounds as the suitable and appropriate way of acquiring knowledge in religions. As he mentions, 'Mutual learning from one another among a diverse student contingent is one of the best ways of deepening students' knowledge of and respect for persons of other modes of religious faiths, cultural values and loyalties' (O'Connell, 2009: 80). However, he was concerned when saw among the first batch of honours' students in the academic session of 2005–2006 very few were from outside Islamic tradition. As Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim majority country where more than 90% are Muslims (Bangladesh Census, 2011), it is very difficult to maintain balance among the numbers of faith groups' students. Usually, Muslim students are expected to be more than the students of any other religious communities in Bangladesh.

Similarly, Professor O'Connell talked about the gender balance among the students and teachers alike of the Department, though he was aware of the fact that in a country like Bangladesh it is difficult to maintain due to many reasons. One prime reason is that in higher studies and research female students are still far away from male students. Nevertheless, he persuaded faculty members to inspire female students to study religions as an academic discipline. He continued to inspire the female students of the department for further higher studies and doing research on the different living issues of religious life from women perspective, understanding and experience. According to him, as a result of female engagement in the research study in religion, some unexplored but very practical issues would come into light about which academic scholars of religions should come forward collectively to think and work for sustainable solution, addressing the problems being frequently faced by females of every religion. However, he clearly mentioned about it in the following lines:

Women's experience of life religiously tends to differ from that of men and women may bring different sensitivities to the study of religions. They also have better access to other women for dialogue and research. Women, thus, can make a distinct and substantial contribution to the academic study of religion that males cannot provide (O'Connell, 2009: 80).

Thus, he promoted the academic study of religion from female perspective in the line with the ongoing normal and traditional process of study in religion. Dr. O'Connell continuously encouraged the research students and teachers of the Department to pay attention to different issues of Bangladesh in terms of religions and culture, and thus, to bring those pertinent issues in the ongoing theoretical debates in home and abroad. There are many prominent issues on which foreign scholars and people are expected to hear Bangladeshi voices. It is a primary duty of Bangladeshi scholars to think and work on those unexplored and hidden rich heritage like religious diversity, religious tolerance and respect for the religio-communal diversity. It is true that Bangladesh has the long heritage of peaceful co-existence among multi-religious and multicultural communities. Professor O'Connell wanted research students and scholars of the department to seriously work on the relationships between traditional expressions of religious faith, modernist interpretations and humane secular values. Other issues found elsewhere likewise need to be examined in their Bangladeshi form: for instance, religion as condemning or legitimating extreme socio-economic inequality versus religion as protesting or mitigating the same, religion as influencing politics and law; religious perspectives on environmental ethics, sex, health and gender relationships, and so on. Bangladeshi reflections on these and other contemporary issues by scholars of world religions-among so many other responsible individuals-could have impact within the country itself and possibly be applicable on regional and global scales (O'Connell, 2009: 82). Therefore, Dr. O'Connell especially encouraged the new M.Phil. and Ph.D. students to select their research project or topics on salient features of Bangladeshi religious and cultural grounds. Conversely he never encouraged them to follow the fashionable topics in western universities. According to him, the basic duty and responsibility of world religions' scholars are to study and do research on different religious issues from Bangladeshi perspective.

Professor O'Connell was very pragmatic scholar in the academic study of religion. He always wanted that majority of public and private universities in Bangladesh to open their doors for the academic study of religion. For this noble purpose, he himself regularly communicated with some influencing persons (for instance, Professor Addul Haye of Bidya Sagar Society in Dhaka; Professor Muinuddin Ahmed Khan, former Vice Chancellor of Southern University in Chittagong; Professor Golam Dastagir of Jahangir Nagar University in Dhaka; Professor Sayyed Anowar Hossain, former Vice-Chancellor of Darul Ihsan University; Professor Abdul Momen Chowdhury, former Vice-Chancellor of National University; Professor Shamsur Ali, former Vice-Chancellor of Open University, so on and so forth) and frequently visited to such institutions as Southern University in Chittagong, Eastern University in Dhaka, Independent University in Dhaka, Atish Dipankar University in Dhaka, Jahangir Nagar University in Dhaka, Darul Ihsan University in Dhaka, Rajshahi University

in Rajshahi and Islamic University of Kushtia. He was of the opinion that for at least two basic reasons the academic study of religion should be opened. The first concerns the detailed higher study and research on human religious behaviour: since religion is always associated with human actions, so religions should be studied from different angles and approaches, for instance, from anthropological, sociological, historical, political, environmental, philosophical, psychological, *etc.* Thus with every single department within at least the faculty of humanities, social sciences and business studies, one or several other courses of religious studies can easily be accompanied, studied, taught and researched from the different views and approaches related to the particular course or subject. The second reason is to provide further opportunities for the graduates of Dhaka University's Department of World Religions and Culture (who are really experts and have tremendous interest to do further research study on different thematic issues of religions) in other higher educational and research institutions, so that they can continue their further works on religions. By this way, they become employed based on their academic merits, and other students will be drawn to the academic study of religion and do research works on religion. He tried to make us understand that if there is no employment opportunity for the graduate students of World Religions, no meritorious students will come in future. So, as guardians or big brothers or senior students of World Religions, each and every faculty member of World Religions and Culture must encourage employment opportunity for the graduates of World Religions and Culture. As he stated:

A pressing need now is to recruit and train well highly competent scholars-teachers in world religions. Provision should be made for their employment upon completion of studies. Talented students need to be attracted to the field, taught rigorously and supported financially to enable them to attain the necessary level of professional expertise (O'Connell, 2009: 102).

In this regard he discussed about the 'service to the profession' which is a crucial component of any academic career and deserves acknowledgement and reward. Along with teaching, research and publication, service to the profession typically is one of the criteria for merit assessments in most universities. However, service to the profession by Bangladeshi scholars of world religions includes such practical logistical tasks as producing teaching resources that will enable others new to the field to teach effectively. To support effective teaching on religion a pre-university and introductory university levels, scholars in world religions should be encouraged to prepare suitable textbooks, course guidelines and other teaching aids (O'Connell, 2009: 94).

Joseph T. O'Connell always was in favour of acquiring knowledge of religion from two opposite sides, academic approach of religion and confessional

approach of religion. In this field, he presented a new formula of study, as he stated below:

There is, however, scope for fruitful dialogue between scholars of academic and confessional approaches to the religious study of religion, provided there is competence and good will on both sides. It might even be worth exploring whether scholars (especially younger scholar) who teach about religion other than their own from a confessional perspective would be willing, if resources and facilities could be provided, to study religious traditions other than their own for limited time in a non-confessional academic settings. They would still be free to develop confessional theological or other interpretations of the other types of religious life, but would be enabling to do so better informed and, one would hope, in a more appreciative way. Conversely, a case could be made for scholars in the academic study of religion to spend some time studying within confessional institutions of other religious traditions (theological schools, *vibars*, higher *madrasas etc.*), thereby learning more extensively and intimately how adherents of those other traditions think, feel and do their traditional type of scholarship. Either way, the potential for constructive dialogue across communal, traditional or orthodox-secular 'borders' would seem to be considerable, given the opportunity and good will. Bangladesh is a country where such internal 'cross-border' dialogue is urgently needed and could be carried out at relatively little expense, were there the will to do it (O'Connell, 2009: 85–86).

Bangladesh is a country of religious-cultural diversity about which Joseph T. O'Connell was aware of from long before. Most of the people are familiar with this kind of cultural heritage and are living peacefully side by side in spite of their religious and cultural differences to one another. Thus the country remains unique in terms of diversity in unity or unity in diversity. Considering this unique point of Bangladeshi society, Dr. O'Connell always wanted the prospective scholars of world religions to do their research works and activities highlighting such religio-communal diversity and peaceful co-existence among multi-religious communities of Bangladesh. As he clearly stated:

This, I suggest points to a need and also a potential receptivity for scholars of ability and integrity trained in world religions to address the pressing issues of religio-communal diversity that are endemic in Bangladesh (O'Connell, 2009: 86).

Furthermore he said:

World religions scholarship can help the nation's leadership and general public to appreciate and constructively cope with the religio-communal diversity that is integral to Bangladesh (O'Connell, 2009: 86).

However, he considered this sort of study as a challenge and opportunity for the scholars of world religions and culture. It is one kind of challenge, because



the task is neither easy nor free of risk. It is a great opportunity because in such works and activities scholars of world religions can show the ways to solve the problems still faced by Bangladeshi people.

Academic study of religion is thoroughly an objective study of religion, endorsing its aims of accurate description, analysis and criticism. It is, in principle, comparative study where the same criteria for study and research for all religious traditions, including ones' own, is used. About such well-known characteristics of academic study of religion, Dr. O'Connell reminded the prospective scholars of world religions and culture so that they cannot go to the wrong direction in terms of research study on Bangladeshi religious traditions, as he said: 'I also stressed the need for realistic adaptation of these objectives to conditions in Bangladesh' (O'Connell, 2009: 87).

With a view to make the Department of World Religions and Culture as a stable and sustainable place for the academic study of religion, Joseph T. O'Connell talked about 'eternal vigilance' of the scholars and academicians of world religions and culture. Dr. O'Connell was aware of activities of some fanatic Muslims of Bangladesh, though they are very few in number. He was concerned about the possibility of unexpected pressures which might come from those fanatic Muslims for stopping the Department of World Religions and Culture, though he never found any such pressure from any corner of Bangladeshi Muslim societies during his tenure in the Dhaka University. It is true that no one from Muslim groups tried to subvert academic world religions into a confessional Islamic interpretation of other religious traditions. However, according to Professor O'Connell, if there is any effort from any side, be it from a particular community group or from a religio-politically motivated administration, to distort such academic study of religion, then the formula 'eternal vigilance will be needed, combined with courage, caution, dialogue and building up support for world religions among responsible leaders and the public' (O'Connell, 2009: 88). Thus, he was always optimistic about the promising future of world religions and culture, and he was of the opinion that the department of world religions and culture is 'a type of study and research that has potential for easing and solving the religio-communal and religio-political tensions in Bangladesh' (O'Connell, 2009: 88).

Professor O'Connell opined that without interdepartmental collaboration within the same university and with the other universities in home and abroad, completeness of academic works and activities cannot be performed and gained. That's why he was not very pleasant with the policies of Dhaka University and other Bangladeshi public or private universities, where such academic collaboration is almost absent. He criticized such existing policies, saying:

This policy is unreasonably restrictive and seriously detrimental to intellectual growth and professional development. Academic parochialism and inbreeding are bad enough

in large departments with a wide range of professors to learn from. But for a small fledgling department like world religions it is simply unrealistic and self-defeating. Even in large departments, much is lost by preventing competent scholars (professors and students) in other departments and learning in some depth pertinent languages and related disciplines and methods of research beyond the walls of their home department (O'Connell, 2009: 99).

However, after knowing such unfortunate practices of Dhaka University, Professor O'Connell himself took some initiatives for research and study collaboration with other departments and distinguished scholars of different fields. Unfortunately his efforts of such good enterprises could not come to light because of our higher educational system and policy. In spite of it, he kept the Dhaka University's department of world religions and culture connected with the Visva-Bharati University's department of religion and philosophy, though he wanted that the department of world religions could function as a focal point for collaboration with other departments. He believed collaborative program would strengthen the training and research of the students, teachers and scholars, and thus to increase professional advancement.

Joseph T. O'Connell thought there is a wide range of prospective sources of support for the academic study of religion within Bangladesh and abroad. Behind every source there may be a dominating perspective. So, according to him, those supporting sources should be explored first and then utilized judiciously, if possible. Because, for the greater interest of the stable academic study of religion, any improper political, religious or other extraneous influences should not be allowed to compromise the integrity of world religions scholarship (O'Connell, 2009: 86). Professor O'Connell always emphasized the training of junior teachers of the Department. He wanted the junior teachers to take special training from the senior teachers of the same and other departments of Arts and Social Science faculties of Dhaka University. As he stated: 'Until and unless they become much more qualified in their subjects and more experienced as teachers, it will be desirable that they serve under the mentorship of senior scholars' (O'Connell, 2009: 100).

Besides, he talked about research training for doctoral students of the department, and proposed and recommended creating the regular opportunity for post-doctoral research within the department. Thus, he whole heartedly wanted to make the department a research based academic place for the academic study of religion along with its teaching job.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Academic study of religion is a relatively new field of scholarship in religion worldwide. The department of world religions and culture in Dhaka University

has been trying best, since its inception in 1999, to play vital role in different issues of religion from various perspectives and approaches. The Dhaka University's initiative in the field of academic study of religion is only beginning to emerge in Bangladesh and other south Asian countries and in Muslim-majority countries elsewhere. The Dhaka University's department of world religions and culture really deserves the appreciation and credit from the academic worlds for its unique and distinct system of teaching, learning and doing research in religions. Undoubtedly, it will not be an exaggeration to say that Dhaka University's Department of World Religions and Culture is a model for the academic study of religion in South Asia and other regions of the globe to some extent. However, behind its such development, Professor Joseph T. O'Connell had seriously worked as an influencing functional for one decade and played his crucial role therein to make the department a true academic place for the study of religions.

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