

# Religious Leadership and Training for a Successful Muslim Community: A Possible Way Forward

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A community of success requires effective religious leadership, and successful religious leadership requires high-quality training in religion and related matters. In this paper, I focus on training at the university level. First, I reflect on the expectations for a mid-level religious leader in a Muslim minority context, particularly in countries such as Australia or Singapore, and the kind of university-level training currently available to future religious leaders. I highlight where the gaps are between the community expectations for these leaders and the training they are likely to receive. Second, I briefly consider three models of higher education institutions that provide training in Islamic disciplines and present the pros and cons of each. Finally, I will propose a model that could be useful for developing the necessary training for future religious leaders. This model builds on the positive aspects of what is currently available, de-emphasizes the negative aspects and aims to fill existing gaps.

## What is a Religious Leader?

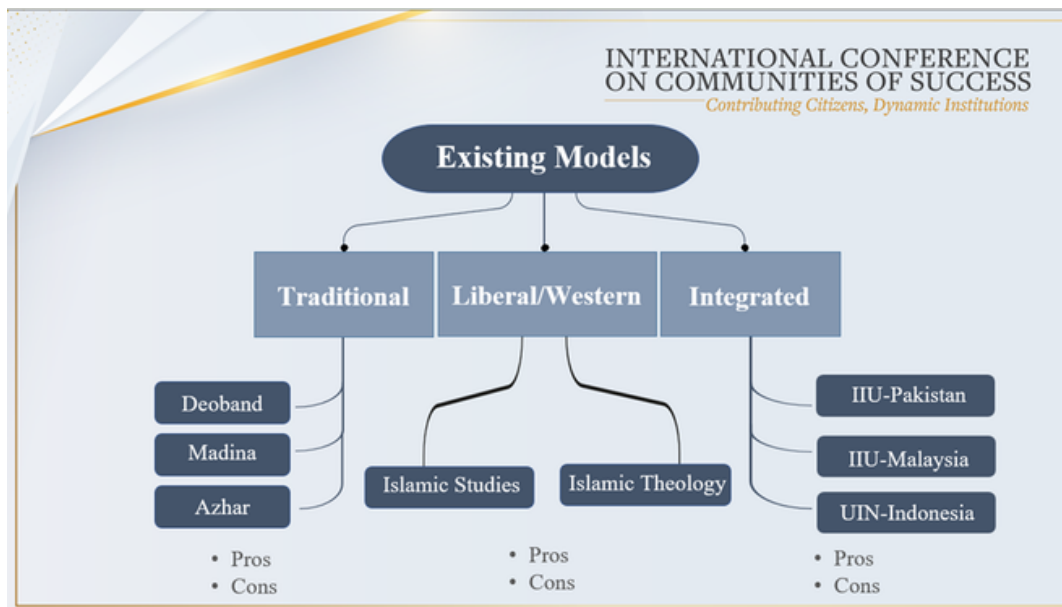
As mentioned above, this paper is primarily concerned with the Muslim mid-level religious leader who has attained at least a Bachelor of Arts degree or its equivalent in traditional Islamic disciplines, such as *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis) and *hadith* (traditions of Prophet Muhammad). After graduation, a person is thus qualified to take some form of religious leadership position in the community. In the Singaporean context, for example, such religious leaders are often referred to as *asatizah*.

In a minority Muslim community, religious leaders are expected to lead daily prayers in mosques; give sermons; teach Islamic religion to young Muslims and other Muslims; manage Islamic institutions, such as mosques; contribute to interfaith activities and dialogue and contextualize Islam for the local community; interact with government and civil society institutions; provide general advice for Islamic legal issues related to marriage, divorce and inheritance; guide the community around issues such as Islamic identity in a non-Muslim context; engage with media; and participate in projects of national interest, such as countering extremism.

Acknowledging these expectations for Muslim leaders raises the question of whether Islamic higher education institutions prepare their graduates to deal with these issues. As shown above, the bulk of the training that many graduates receive from Islamic universities or seminaries focuses on Islamic religious disciplines, such as traditional Islamic jurisprudence, *fiqh*, the Qur'an, *hadith*, Islamic theology, Arabic language and some closely related disciplines. It is necessary to ask whether existing institutions are providing future religious leaders with the necessary training.

### Three Models of Training Institutions

Islamic training institutions can be categorized according to three different models: traditional, integrated and liberal/Western.

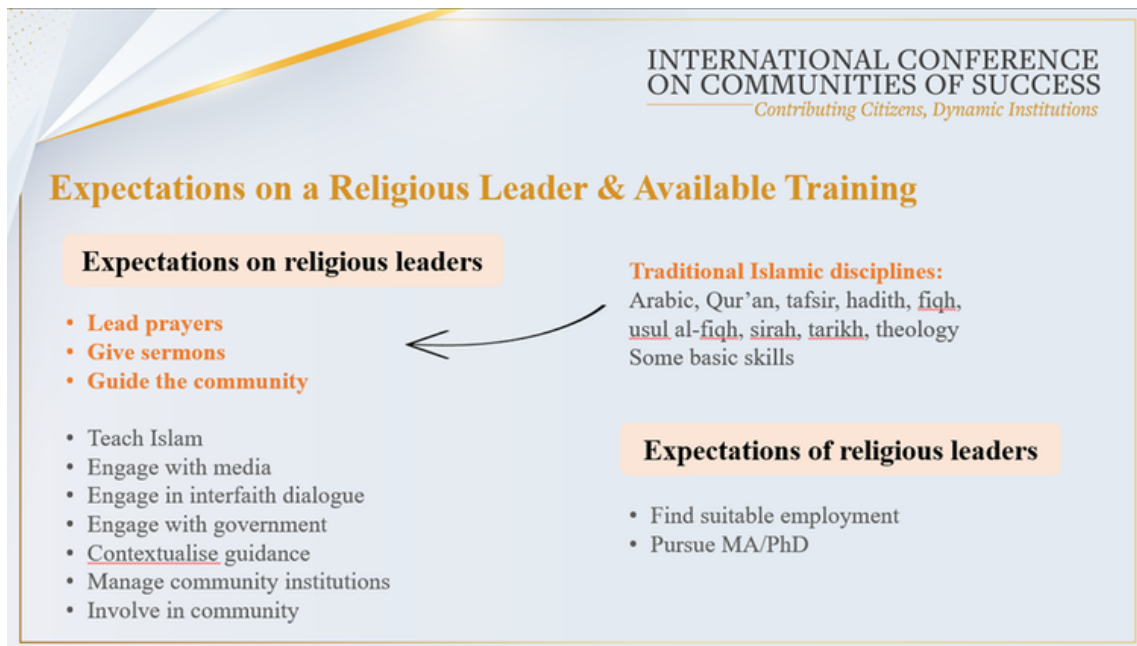


#### *Traditional Model*

The traditional model covers a wide range of *Sunni* and *Shia* institutions. In the *Sunni* context, there are *madrasas* or *jamiahs*, for example, on the Indian subcontinent, such as the famous *Darul Uloom* of Deoband, and the thousands of *madrasas* that follow the *Deobandi* model in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. There are also *darul ulooms* in Western countries, such as the UK and Australia. Other examples include the Islamic University of Madina (Saudi Arabia) and the Islamic faculties at Azhar University (Egypt). In the *Shia* context, there are *hawzas* in Iran and Iraq. This paper, however, focuses primarily on the *Sunni* context.

There is no question that thousands of Islamic education institutions around the world could come under the label of the traditional model. They vary from institution to institution in terms of their curricula, teaching methods, emphasis on particular Islamic disciplines, such as *fiqh* or *hadith*, and the skills they focus on. There are some common characteristics of the traditional model, regardless of location or educational priorities. For example, these institutions tend to focus on traditional Islamic disciplines or sciences, including *fiqh*, *tafsir*, *hadith*, Arabic, *sirah* (biography of Prophet Muhammad) and *kalam* (Islamic theology). In the *hawzah* model of the Shia tradition, rational disciplines, such as logic and philosophy, are also emphasised.

Students often start the first year of their programme with introductory standard texts in the relevant disciplines and gradually move on to more advanced texts. In many traditional institutions, a subject or module is equivalent to a standard text or textbook. In some cases, a lecturer's notes (*mudhakkirat*) which is essentially a simplified digest of the subject can often become equivalent to a textbook. A student who might not understand the text can still commit large parts of it to memory, which means that it can be relatively easy to pass written examinations by relying on memorization of set texts.



In the traditional model, there is a strong emphasis on memorization, familiarization and grammatical analysis of specific texts and a focus on religious disciplines at the expense of rational disciplines and natural sciences. These aspects and the lack of interest in vocational training can be considered hallmarks of the traditional model. In traditional institutions, the skills considered extremely important in modern university settings are generally considered as not necessarily that important. For example, academic skills such as problem solving, analysis, research, writing, and presentation are not essential in these traditional institutions. One of the key advantages of the traditional model though is that it keeps students closely connected to classical Islamic traditions and texts. When students immerse themselves in classical texts, they faithfully preserve the classical Islamic texts in Arabic and observe the importance of the Arabic language for the continuation of these disciplines.

### *Integrated Model*

The integrated model emerged in the 1970s and 1980s due to concerns that traditional institutions, such as Islamic faculties of al-Azhar University, Islamic University of Madina and *Darul Uloom* of Deoband, were not equipping their graduates to deal with the many modern challenges faced by Muslims. The thinking at the time was that, to meet these challenges, traditional Islamic disciplines would have to be integrated with other modern disciplines and focus on the necessary skills and needs of the period.

Several universities were established to meet the challenges of modern times, as clearly indicated in their missions. The International Islamic University of Pakistan (1980), the International Islamic University of Malaysia (1983) and the state Islamic universities of Indonesia are examples of such universities. These institutions share certain characteristics. They are interested in bringing Islamic disciplines into conversation with other relevant modern disciplines, such as sociology and anthropology, and they discourage rote learning and memorization. They commit to teaching the critical thinking skills that modern universities aim to foster in their students' development; however, the extent to which this exists in practice varies from institution to institution. While they all aim at contextualization, it is unclear how extensively this occurs within each institution.

Institutions falling under the integrated model emphasize fluency in Arabic, English and, where needed, the local language, such as Urdu, Malay or Bahasa, but they all find that their students' proficiency in Arabic and English varies, most likely because students are attempting to study in too many languages simultaneously.

An area that is not emphasized enough in this model is the development of critical engagement with classical Islamic traditions and texts. As with the traditional model, there is also often no explicit emphasis on the spiritual, ethical, and moral development of the graduates. It is left to the individual to find their own way, and there is no conscious attempt on the part of the institution to foster the ethical, moral and spiritual growth of the student. Because the students function in an overall Muslim environment, the assumption appears to be that they will develop spiritually, ethically and morally as they progress in their degrees.

### *The Liberal/Western Model*

The Liberal/Western model includes secular universities that teach Islamic studies in one form or another in the West and have been doing so for centuries or decades. In this model, an undergraduate student is introduced to Arabic and other Islamic languages such as Farsi, Urdu or Bahasa. Students may also enrol in related subjects such as Islamic history, philosophy, law and theology.

Teaching is often from an outsider's perspective. Often, historically, neither professors nor students were Muslim. In this model, the focus is on teaching about Islam, not teaching in Islam. Teaching about Islam is concerned with training in Islam and its disciplines from an outsider's perspective, whereas teaching in Islam studies Islam from within, that is, from an insider's perspective. Only recently have many Muslim professors begun teaching or taken charge of some of these programmes in Western universities.

There is an interesting recent development in relation to Islamic disciplines in at least some of these Western universities. Over the last two decades, governments in several Western countries have provided significant funding to leading universities in their countries to establish what is often referred to as "Islamic theology" programmes. For example, the universities of Berlin in Germany and Leiden in the Netherlands have introduced programmes that function in tandem with the Islamic studies programmes of these universities. The aim of these Islamic theology programmes is to train the next generation of Muslim religious leaders in their home countries. Muslim citizens or students can study and receive training in Islam in their local contexts without going to Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East, for example. Muslim professors are employed to teach Islam to Muslim students. This new development is quite different from programmes designed to teach about Islam, which these universities historically practiced in their Islamic studies programmes.

One positive aspect of this model is that the curriculum emphasizes traditional Islamic disciplines and encourages thorough familiarity with the classical Islamic traditions. This allows students to complete an in-depth study of Islamic theology, law, *hadith*, *tafsir*, philosophy, history, and Arabic, much as a traditional Islamic university would. A significant part of the focus is on academic skills that are important in today's universities, such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication, presentation, research and writing skills. These universities must maintain the same high level of

quality in these programmes as they do for other non-religious disciplines. Teaching staff are often highly skilled Muslim professors who have obtained PhDs from these universities and have completed their undergraduate degrees in a traditional Islamic institution.

In Western countries, at this stage, relatively few students are enrolled in these Islamic theology programmes. There is still a belief that an authentic and high-quality Islamic higher education can only be obtained in a traditional institution in an Arabic-speaking country. By way of example, in Singapore, almost all Singaporean students interested in Islamic higher education go to one of three universities: al-Azhar University, Islamic University of Madina or University of Jordan.

### **Necessary Training for the Next Generation of Religious Leaders: Basic Considerations**

When training the next generation of religious leaders for successful community impact in a minority context, I believe the positive aspects of each of the three models must be retained. Immersion in classical Islamic texts, broad familiarity with different sources of classical Islamic disciplines, gradual introduction of key Islamic texts and methodological and conceptual foundations of the disciplines are strengths of the traditional model. An emphasis on high-level Arabic language proficiency and skills of the traditional model is also important because classical Islamic texts are written primarily in Arabic. Combining Islamic disciplines with other relevant disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology and philosophy, should be adopted from the integrated model and it is also necessary to explore the historical development and interrelationships of Islamic disciplines in different contexts. High-level academic skills, such as problem solving, communication, presentation, research and analysis in the liberal model are important, as are the internationally recognized standards of scholarship, particularly at universities that are considered among the top in the world.

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### **Additional Areas Important for Training Future Muslim Leaders**

#### *Contextualization*

One of the key concerns of many Muslims today, particularly in Muslim minority contexts, is the extent to which classical Islamic disciplines from tafsir to hadith to fiqh can be contextualized by considering the important concerns and challenges that Muslims today face. There are two aspects to this contextualization. The first brings Islamic disciplines into conversation with relevant modern disciplines in teaching/learning approaches. There should be a dialogue between Islamic disciplines and other areas of knowledge. For example, when we teach traditional Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), there will be some level of conversation with modern ideas and theories about jurisprudence in general. The teaching of tafsir should engage in conversation with theories of language, meaning and hermeneutics. Similarly, when teaching Islamic history, it should be put in conversation with the

methods and models employed by historians and schools of historical thought. Arabic linguistics and language should be taught in conversation with modern linguistics, for this reveals the significant contributions many of our classical scholars have made to these disciplines, as well as how these disciplines work in the modern period. Although it could be argued that this model may lead to a very crowded curriculum, this is not what is being proposed. The focus is still on traditional Islamic disciplines, but the aim is to teach them in such a way that students will have some basic understanding of the relevant topics to gain a better sense of them. When students graduate from such a programme, they should have a broader understanding of contemporary discourses around issues of significant concern to the community.

Another aspect of contextualization concerns specific issues that arise in the context of different Islamic disciplines. For example, in *fiqh*, when dealing with the question of the testimony of women in a court of law, the traditional understanding of Islamic jurisprudence can be contextualized and applied in a way that is relevant to our time. Similarly, many other rulings that exist in traditional Islamic law about the inequality of men and women or the inequality of Muslims and non-Muslims can be contextualized for the current situation. Both aspects of contextualization are part of the proposed model.

### *Intellectual freedom*

In this model, students should also have the freedom to explore these ideas and adopt views that they feel comfortable with. We should always expect to have religious leaders who may be conservatively or liberally inclined toward various issues. Differences of opinion must be respected. It is not the job of the institution to enforce a particular interpretation of Islam on its students, although in practice, the ethos of the institution would be in line with the broader expectations of the Muslim community within which the institution exists. Intellectual freedom is essential for the training of future religious leaders and so students should be given significant freedom to explore, challenge, discuss, debate and adopt varying positions. The texts selected for study, the professors who teach them, the administrators who manage the institution and those who are in charge of extracurricular activities can all function within this broader ethos.

### *Intra- and Interreligious Relations*

A gap that exists in all the models described above, but particularly in the traditional and integrated models, is the area of intra- and interreligious relations. Where subjects on other religions or Islamic sects exist, often they are likely to be rather brief and unhelpful overviews of other religions, with the aim of discrediting them rather than developing a genuine understanding of these religious traditions.

As the focus of this paper is Muslim leaders in minority contexts, it is essential to emphasize the need for them to understand other religions, particularly those that exist in the local community, and to develop a good sense of the sensitivities, norms, and cultural practices of those religious communities. Also, it is important for these leaders to familiarize themselves with different schools of thought in Islam. The objective is to understand the followers and philosophies of other religions. Ultimately, religious leaders in minority contexts must engage and interact with people of different religious backgrounds in their communities.

*Training in Thinking about Islam and Muslims from a Historical Perspective*

Another noteworthy gap in both the traditional and integrated models is the lack of emphasis on the historical understanding of how Islam developed as a religious tradition. This history involves the social, political, cultural, economic, and intellectual contexts of Arabia in the early seventh century and how Islam evolved in the first two centuries of its existence. Furthermore, the emergence of various Islamic disciplines and the factors that led to the development of their methods and conceptualizations are essential to Islamic history. In both the traditional and integrated models, subjects such as the history of Islamic law are offered, yet the way such courses are taught can prevent students from gaining a good sense of the historical development of the disciplines. Often these courses are merely a list of events without reference to how the events are related to specific periods or people. This lack of this historical context can lead to significant problems in the area of contextualization.

*Effective Learning Methods*

Memorization has often been criticized in contemporary literature on traditional Islamic education. However, memorization has vital, practical value in Islamic education. A religious leader is expected to give talks on Islamic topics, lead prayers or undertake various religious functions. There is always a requirement to have significant texts from the *Qur'an*, hadith or even Arabic poetry readily (and not digitally) available in memory. Therefore, a certain amount of text must be memorized as part of the training. Memorization, however, must always be associated with understanding. As long as the two go hand in hand, there is no reason why certain basic texts should not be memorized. The problem is that texts are often memorized without any understanding.

Beyond memorization, the focus should be on meaningful learning or understanding. Knowledge gained in this way applies to new learning situations and stays with students for life. It is 'active, constructive, and long-lasting, but most importantly, it allows students to be fully engaged in the learning process.' Meaningful learning is achieved when students are able to 'remember the material at a later time' (retention) and are able to 'use prior knowledge to solve new problems' (transfer).

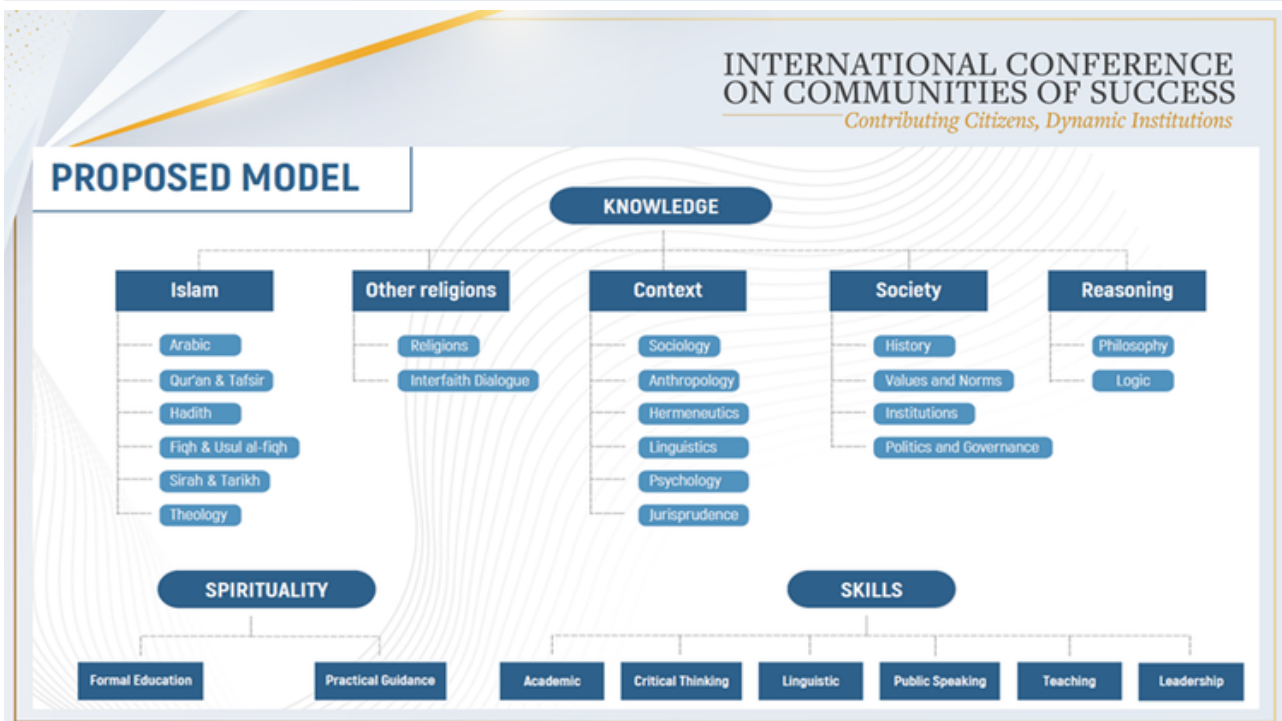
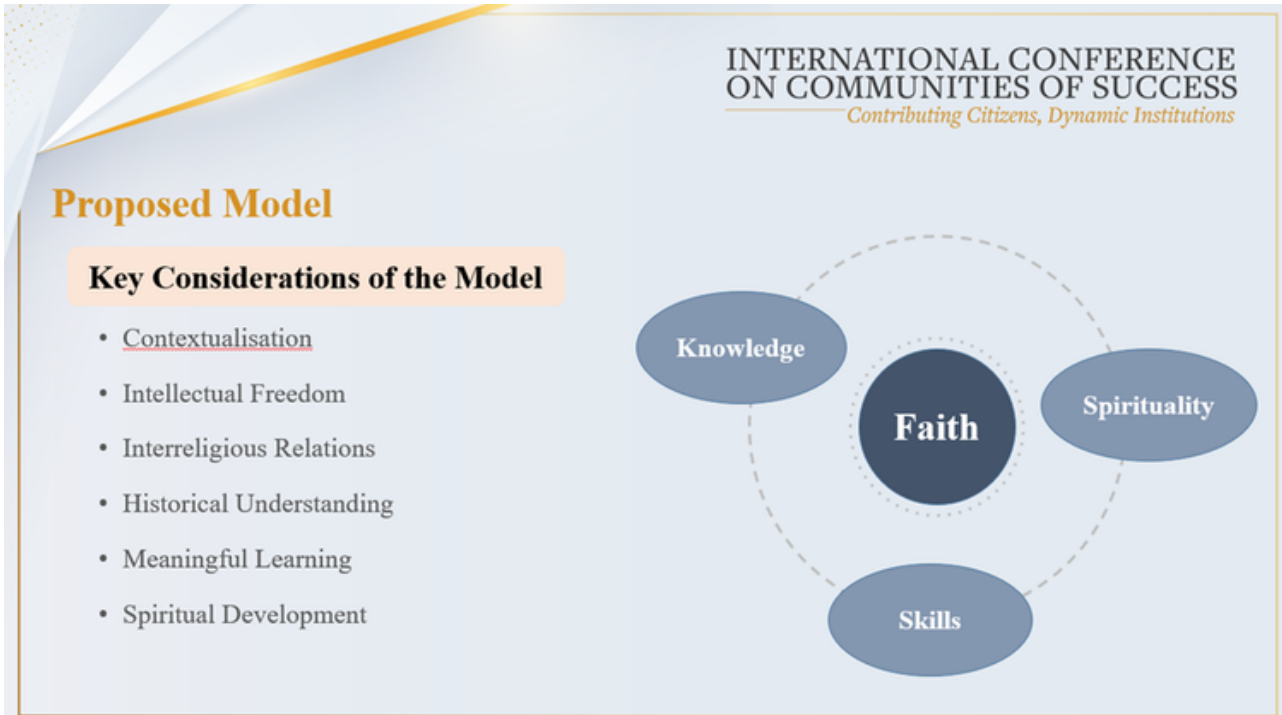
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*Training in Spiritual Growth and Development*

Interestingly, none of the models described above considers formal instruction and practical support for the spiritual development of the student. Often, this is left to the individual, and it is not a concern for university/seminary administrators. However, when preparing graduates for religious leadership, it is important to formally provide this training as part of the education system. Spiritual development is an important aspect of being Muslim. Along with intellectual and skill development, the spiritual

development of students should be a key part of the curriculum, as should extracurricular activities. This is not about the adoption of some kind of asceticism but rather about spiritual development, which can be defined as, in part, ‘a constant, ongoing and dynamic interplay between one’s inward journey and one’s outward journey,’ and it involves three core elements: self-awareness and world-awareness, interconnecting and belonging, and living an integrated life.

**Conclusion: Finally, the proposed model**





In summary, the model I am proposing in this paper is centred on faith and based on knowledge, skills, and spirituality. Knowledge covers traditional Islamic disciplines, other religions, context-related disciplines such as sociology, society-related areas such as values/norms, and reasoning-related areas such as philosophy. Skills cover areas such as critical thinking, advanced linguistic skills, public speaking, and leadership. Spirituality covers formal instruction and practical guidance/support. This, I believe, is a more holistic view of training the next generation of leaders.



### ***About the Author***

Professor Abdullah Saeed is currently the Sultan of Oman Professor of Arab and Islamic Studies and Redmond Barry Distinguished Professor at the University of Melbourne, Australia. He also serves as a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities, a Member of the Order of Australia, and an advisor to the Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies Programme of Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Professor Abdullah holds a PhD in Islamic Studies from the University of Melbourne. His research focuses on contemporary Islamic thought with particular reference to negotiation of text and content, ijihad (independent reasoning) and interpretation. Among his recent publications are: *Contemporary Approaches to the Qur'an and its Interpretation in Iran* (co-author, 2020); *Islam and Human Rights* (2018); *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century* (2014); *Islamic Political Thought and Governance* (edited, 2011) and *The Qur'an: An Introduction* (2008).

### ***About RPCS***

The Research Programme in the Study of Muslim Communities of Success (RPCS) is developed as part of Muis' efforts in advancing religious thought leadership for the future. The programme seeks to develop contextualised bodies of knowledge on socio-religious issues that are typical for Muslim communities living in secular states and advanced economies. The RPCS focus will be on developing new understanding, interpretations and application of Islamic principles, values and traditions to contemporary issues and challenges.

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