

RFCS

RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN THE STUDY
OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS

Commentary Series

Muslim Communities of Success: Singapore-Style

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Introduction

The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) has committed itself to success with the Communities of Success initiative. While success is a goal that all societies and nations strive for in our contemporary world, it often does not hold the same prominence in many Muslim societies. MUIS is making commendable progress, yet its self-definition could benefit from alternative visions and perspectives of the contemporary world. This short reflection supports MUIS' vision yet it emphasises the importance of incorporating an ethical dimension to the focus of its research programme.

Professor Ismail al Faruqi is among the few who suggested that a Muslim is definable in terms of his or her economic pursuits (al-Fārūqī 1979). In contemporary times, however, the Tablighi Jamaat has popularised the slogan of “success in this world and success in the hereafter.” It has translated *ḥasana* (the good, the beautiful) as success or salvation, thereby valorising success in this world. However, it would be fair to say that its primary focus has been on reminding Muslims globally about success in the hereafter while legitimating some form of material success in this world. In contrast, the Communities of Success initiative by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) aims to ensure that success in this world is given due importance, particularly in the context of a successful nation-state like Singapore. This initiative, as in other places, aims to engage Muslims in fully realising the opportunities and benefits available in the contemporary world.

The concept of success adopted by MUIS can be considered alongside alternative visions of the world from the present and the Islamic past. I propose that engaging in a dialogue between the visions that dominate the contemporary, and visions of the world from the discourse of Islam – a product of history for more than a thousand years of discourse – can be beneficial.

One alternative yet compelling vision of the world is offered by a general Marxist perspective. In this vision, hierarchy is regarded as the pervasive mode of human existence. Every society may easily be examined through this frame, showing how the strong and powerful tend to dominate and the weak are often taken advantage of. An ethical project or a research programme informed by this vision should aim to rectify this condition by paying attention to the needs and experiences of the poor and downtrodden. It would also be worthwhile for it to also identify the explicit and implicit hierarchies of power and privileges.

In contrast with this vision of hierarchy in social life, the more prevalent vision sees the world as constituted by the progressive exploitation of opportunities. This vision is realised by humans applying instrumentalist reasoning to know the world, to conquer other peoples, to seek new markets, to exploit the power of nature, and generally bend the world to the will of the self. This is a self-understanding often attributed to Western thought and approaches, justifying its position and maintaining it at all costs. Imbalances and inequalities, not to speak of the destruction of nature, has been the unfortunate outcome of such a vision. Its apologists argued that such unintended effects can be addressed using instrumental reasoning with greater skill and care. The world is there to be used and exploited for success. Hierarchies and natural disasters are unfortunate side effects that can be ameliorated.

Multiple Visions of the Modern

Given the visions of modernity between hierarchy and success, how can Muslim communities of success navigate their visions from the past to the present? The visions of the modern can be seen everywhere, and they are deliberated and spread around the globe through media, novels, and economic and political projects. Such visions of the world are dominant and hardly need explicit justification. Some might argue that the Marxist vision is more or less discredited, and a neoliberal modern vision is inevitable. However, I believe that the Marxist vision still holds merit and value in inspiring the downtrodden.

There are, however, other visions of the world that have been less prominent. For the last few hundred years, they may have been overshadowed by either one of the abovementioned visions. The intellectual history of Islam developed comparable visions of history and society that merit deliberation. Over time, at least three grand visions animated the social life of Muslims in general ways. The first vision was the world created by God for the benefit of humankind. As creation (*khalq*), the earth was both malleable and hospitable for humans (Al Fārūqī 1986, 442). It also inspires humankind to explore, to contemplate and sometimes to conquer. Yet, in all respects, the idea of the creation (*khalq*) oriented one to respond with gratitude, service and enthusiasm for being created in the world.

In addition to this, there is another slightly different vision of the world cultivated by the scholars of Islam that directs attention to life in this world as a service to God (*‘ibāda*) for oneself and for others. The ultimate purpose of the world was to bend the will of humans

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to the Will of God (amr) and help others to do the same. While Muslims might partake of the world and its many fruits, their first and final commitment was never diverted from knowing the will of God, ultimately for the hereafter and for salvation. The following verse captures this hierarchy between the world and the hereafter in this vision of the world:

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.....

But seek, through that which Allah has given you, the home of the Hereafter; and [yet], do not forget your share of the world. And do good as Allah has done good to you. And desire not corruption in the land. Indeed, Allah does not like corrupters (Qur'an 28:77)

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.....

Success in this world was not made an end in itself. The world was ultimately a means through which a home in the hereafter is secured.

Yet a third vision emerged among Muslims who conceptualised the world in various ways, sometimes viewing it very negatively, and at other times seeing it as a source of contemplation. In this vision, the world, or *dunyā*, was sometimes shunned or de-prioritised. However, more generally, the world, just like the verses of the Qur'an, was a multitude of signs (*āyāt*) that invited ethical reflection and practice through contemplation. The following quotation from Ibn 'Ajība on the Qur'an (6:108) captures this vision of the world:

“

.....

The real knower does not neglect any of God's creation, and he does not belittle that which God has determined. He grows his ethical self (*yata'ddabu*) with everything, as he sees God's creation (*ṣun'at*) in everything.¹

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[1] Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-Madīd*, Accessed 14 March 2023, at <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asptMadhNo=3&tTafsirNo=37&tSoraNo=3&tAyahNo=14 &tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&Languageld=1>

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The world is an opportunity to come closer to God. The snares and temptations of the world are not neglected, but something more than its power and riches is sought. In contrast to the second vision of duty, the world was not divided neatly between good and evil. Above all, the world was an opportunity for uncovering its true nature and, thus, the true nature of the self.

Today, such visions from the past might inspire communities and societies as cultures and religions in limited spheres of life. But they have been displaced by the visions of hierarchy and free competition, the more prevalent visions of the world. In recent times, as the crises of these two visions loom due to environmental degradation and unequal economic development, visions derived from religions and cultures should be given due importance as it can offer alternative modes of engagement and practices.

Partaking in Dialogue and Acknowledging *Amanah*

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I believe that what Muslims require is dialogue with the Islamic intellectual tradition mediated through the visions of modernity (Farahat 2019). I chose dialogue carefully as an engagement that recognises the reality of the dominant visions while drawing on values and practices that may be learnt from the past.

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The dialogue might begin by examining the commonalities and differences between the visions of the past and contemporary realities. The pursuit of economic success and the knowledge of the world are present in the visions of the world developed in the intellectual history of Islam. However, rather than being guided by a spirit of freedom, they are mediated by the ethics of creation (*khalq*), signs (*āyāt*) and service (*‘ubudiyya*). Similarly, hierarchy is not ignored in an Islamic vision of the world, but unlike in Marxist visions, it is not made the focus of attention for elimination. Hierarchies are consecrated (Qur’an 16:71), and from time to time overturned (Qur’an 3:140). Hierarchies are not permanent.

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Beyond finding common grounds, research programmes that are firmly set on success such as the RPCS should not ignore the grounds on which successful countries have been founded but can benefit from keeping an eye on the values that I have mentioned in general above. Opportunities provided by technology have exceeded what has been seen in history, but these must not overlook the world as a trust (*amāna*) for which humanity is responsible. Individual pursuits of wealth and opportunities cannot be artificially limited, but individuals could also benefit from guidance that the ultimate destiny of humans is to be embody the highest values (*sifāt*). Such values cannot be achieved at the expense of the environment, the global society and most of all, the self.

The vision of MUIS for developing a model of communities of success is to be welcomed. Success is no doubt a goal for many, but in a societal or national context, it can be undermined by a vision of asceticism that may be found in the intellectual history of Muslims. Broadening the understanding of success to encompass values of service and the ultimate success of the hereafter are highly significant. The economic development of Muslim societies raises the question of whether MUIS's notion of success can be necessarily replicated elsewhere.

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About Author

Professor Abdulkader Tayob is Emeritus Professor at the University of Cape Town's Department for the Study of Religions. He has published on Islam in South Africa, modern Islamic Thought and Islam and the History of Religions. He has led a number of research initiatives and projects and convened numerous workshops and conferences. He completed a PhD (1989) at Temple University (Department of Religion, Philadelphia, USA) with a dissertation entitled: Islamic Historiography: The Case of al-Tabari's Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk on the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad. Over thirty years, Tayob has left an intellectual legacy through publishing widely, setting up networks of scholarly engagement, and training a new generation of scholars. There is hardly a Department for the Study of Religion in Africa that has not been impacted by his scholarship and academic citizenship.

His research outputs over the last eight years include nine peer-reviewed journal articles, nine book chapters and four edited journal issues. During this time, he was also invited to deliver seven keynote lectures. In 2019, Prof Tayob was awarded the George Foster Prize for a lifetime of academic achievement by the Humboldt Foundation in Germany. In the same year, he was made a member of the Tunisian Academy of Sciences. In 2023, Prof Tayob was honoured by the National Research Foundation with the Hamilton Naki Award and in 2024, Prof Tayob was appointed as the first Visiting International Fellow of the Research Programme in the study of Muslim Communities of Success (RPCS). During his distinguished fellowship, he led workshops on secularisms, ethical life trajectories, and economic ethics, chaired and inaugurated the esteemed RPCS Ahmad Sonhadji Reading Club, and conducted pioneering research for the RPCS, significantly advancing the program's academic and intellectual contributions.

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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