

**RPCS**

RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN THE STUDY  
OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS

**Commentary Series:**  
Internship Edition

**Moulavi M. H. Babu Sahib:  
A Scholar's Legacy of Interfaith  
Harmony and Social Activism**

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## **Synopsis**

*This commentary explores the life and contributions of Moulavi M. H. Babu Sahib, a prominent Islamic scholar in Singapore. It covers his early education in India, his move to Singapore in 1947, and his subsequent studies that deepened his Islamic scholarship. Additionally, Moulavi's pivotal role in forming the Muslim Converts Association of Singapore (Darul Arqam) and his active participation in the Inter-Religious Organisation were highlighted. The commentary also discusses his academic work, notably "The Tenets of Islam," and his progressive stance on organ donation. Moulavi's legacy is celebrated as an inspiration for young scholars, emphasising the importance of intellectual engagement, interfaith harmony, and adaptability in a diverse society.*

## **Introduction**

Moulavi M. H. Babu Sahib, also known as Al-Mawlawi Muhammad Muhyiddin Baz al-Ashhab al-Rahmani, was born around 1929 in Kottar, Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu, India. Moulavi was a prominent figure in the Muslim community in Singapore, renowned for his academic excellence and efforts towards promoting interfaith harmony in a diverse society. In the early 1970s, he served as a council member of the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO), playing a significant role in fostering understanding among different religious groups. In addition to his involvement in interfaith dialogues, Moulavi pioneered the establishment of Muslim Convert Association of Singapore (MCAS), also known as Darul Arqam. He made notable contributions to the scene of academia, social activism, and the advancement of Islamic teachings in a modernising Singapore society (Pergas, 2019).

## **Moulavi's journey to Islamic scholarship**

Moulavi M. H. Babu Sahib completed his primary, middle school and secondary education in India before coming to Singapore in May 1947 to help with his uncle's business and pursue private education. At the time, schools were largely influenced by non-Islamic and colonial perspectives, so like many other Muslim children, he did not strongly gravitate towards Islamic education (Singapore's Past Ulama, 2002).

His interest in Islam was first sparked in 1950, when he attended Maulana Abdul Aleem Siddique's lecture during the first-ever Southeast Asia Muslim Missionary Conference held in Singapore. He was particularly intrigued by the criticisms directed against Islam

and the Prophet (PBUH), which prompted him to delve deeper into the study of Islam. He began by reading lecture texts and class notes by Mawlana Muhammad Abdul Aleem Siddiqui, which he reprinted into small booklets. In 1957, he returned to India to pursue Islamic education and enrolled in Madrasah Misbahul Huda, an Arabic language college. He later continued his studies at Madrasatur Rahmaniyyah in Tamil Nadu, India, where he obtained the Mawlawi al-Alim Diploma (Pergas, 2019).

## **Actions against criticisms on Islam: Moulavi's engagement with new converts**

Moulavi spent two years teaching at Madrasatul Islamic College in Tiruvithamcode, Tamil Nadu. Throughout his educational and teaching journey, he was dedicated to addressing criticisms of Islam from anti-Islamic groups. His research involved topics on Islamic jurisprudence and philosophy, and translating Arabic texts into English, as he believed in equipping himself to teach these subjects effectively in English in the future (Pergas, 2019).

Back in Singapore, Moulavi became a member of JAMIYAH, where he oversaw the welfare of hundreds of Muslim converts and worked to correct misconceptions about Islam. He taught the basic tenets of Islam to new converts and organised missionary sessions, debates, and discussions. His approach was dialectic and discursive, encouraging Muslims to engage in critical thinking and intellectual inquiry. His efforts bore fruit with the formation of the *Kumpulan Saudara Baru* (New Converts Group), which formally became the Muslim Converts Association of Singapore (Darul Arqam) in 1976 (Pergas, 2019).

One of his significant scholarly contributions was the book "The Tenets of Islam." This work served as a translation and commentary on "*Jawharatut Tauhid*," a poem originally written in Arabic by Burhanuddin Ibrahim Ibn Haun Al-Laqqani, which summarises the core beliefs of Islam (*aqidah*). Moulavi's approach to this commentary was meticulous; he dissected each line of the poem and employed logic (*mantiq*) to explain the concept of Tauhid. Throughout the commentary, he adeptly tackled criticisms by anti-Islamic groups and emphasised the need for proactive Muslim scholars who actively seek knowledge and remain aware of the criticisms and ideologies.

In his commentary, he criticised the scarcity of such scholars among the Muslim community in Singapore. He stated:

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We have a number of after-care associations and institutions to take care of the dead bodies of Muslims and to do funeral services. But do we have sufficient number of the scholars of the required stature to defend the cause of Islam against the onslaught of the ideological warfare unleashed against Islam? We do not have such men at the rate of even a 0.001% of the Muslim population here. What a deplorable condition is this! How can we fight against false doctrines being spread? (Moulavi, 2000)

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Moulavi emphasised the importance of nurturing a generation of Muslim scholars equipped to confront criticisms and ideological obstacles encountered by Islam. He highlighted the significance of cultivating critical thinking among Muslims, especially in a diverse society like Singapore, where different cultures, civilisations, and ideologies intersect. Moulavi recognised the necessity of having a community of qualified Muslim scholars capable of defending Islam through intellectual engagement and discussion.

### **His passion for interfaith work and social activism**

Moulavi Sahib stood as a respected figure within the Inter-Religious Organization (IRO) of Singapore. He was active in engaging with various faiths and advocating for religious harmony. Renowned for his deep understanding of Islam and his prominent role as a leading Muslim missionary, he was consistently selected to represent Islam in numerous interfaith dialogues and international religious conferences, both within Singapore and beyond. His role as a representative of Islam in the Inter-Religious Organization (IRO) showcased his forward-looking mindset and his belief in promoting harmony between different beliefs.

Moulavi, in his stance on the selection of council members for the Inter-Religious Organization (IRO), mentioned that individuals who wish to join this interfaith organisation should possess an open-minded disposition, considering the sensitivities of various religious groups.

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We believe those who wish to become members of the inter religious organisation should be broad-minded, have had some training from their respective religious bodies on inter-religious etiquette, to appreciate what each religion holds up as sacrosanct and what each condemns as profane. This will ensure that we get people who understand inter-religious harmony and can contribute positively to the activities of our association and the religious community, the nation and the world at large. (Said, 1987, p.10)

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The above highlights Moulavi's commitment to fostering respect, understanding, and harmony among different religious groups, highlighting his role as an advocate of inter-religious tolerance. His active involvement in the IRO stands as a testament to his progressive stance, demonstrating his dedication to interfaith understanding, contributing to a more united and inclusive society in Singapore.

### **An interdisciplinary approach: Moulavi's contributions to public discourse on Organ Donation and Transplantation**

Moulavi's visionary outlook was evident when he delved into the subject of Organ Donation and Transplantation. At a time when the Medical (Therapy, Education and Research) Act of 1972 had just been passed by the Singapore government, legislating the process of organ donation through the opting-in system, there were debates among Muslim scholars surrounding the permissibility of organ transplantation.

In 1973, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) issued a fatwa declaring that kidney donation was impermissible. This decision was based on the belief that one does not own one's body, and thus does not have the right to donate one's kidneys. At that time, information on kidney functions and alternative treatments was insufficient, which influenced this decision. There was also uncertainty about the effectiveness of such transplants due to limitations in medical sciences and technology. Thus, the fatwa committee took the position that it was impermissible for Muslims to be included in the Human Organ Transplant Act (HOTA) (Office of the Mufti, 2007).

Between 1973 to 1986, The National Kidney Foundation (NKF) conducted intensive public education campaigns, reaching religious groups, community and grassroots organisations, and educational institutions to advocate and generate public awareness and support for kidney pledging (Mohamed, 2009). One of the events conducted during that period was the Religious Symposium on Organ Donation in 1983, where NKF approached the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) seeking support for its cause. The Muslim Council Members of the IRO unanimously recommended Moulavi to participate in the symposium to represent Islam and Muslims. During the symposium held at the World Trade Centre Auditorium, he presented his first paper on the subject, named “Organ Donation – An Islamic Point of View”.

The subsequent year, NKF conducted another seminar, titled “Kidney Diseases and the Moral and Religious Implication”. During this event, Moulavi delivered a remarkable talk on the "Islamic Point of View on Organ Donation with Reference to the Doctrinal Aspect of Islam." This Seminar garnered significant attention, was widely publicised, and Moulavi's talk was published in the NKF Newsletter (Vol. 1 No. 4) under the title "THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS SAY YES (sic.) - The Muslim Viewpoint."

Moulavi's dedication to sharing his insights extended globally. These two talks, along with his further research, were shared in a conference titled "The Islamic Point of View on Transplantation Of Organs." in Weligama, Sri Lanka, as part of the Centenary Celebration of the Madrasatul-Bari Arabic College in 1984. He also distributed copies of his work at the 9th International Conference on Seerat in Islamabad in 1985. Renowned scholars, including Sayid Hamid, Ex-Vice-Chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University, praised his analytical approach and scholarship.

He also presented a talk on "A Muslim View on Organ Donation and Transplantation" to a diverse group of participants, including medical professionals and healthcare coordinators, hailing from Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Singapore. The event was organised collaboratively by the Department of Surgery and the Training and Education Department at the National University Hospital (Moulavi, 1991).

A year later in 1986, the fatwa stating the impermissibility of organ donation was reviewed. In that year, the Fatwa Committee issued a fatwa permitting organ transplantation out of dire necessity, that is, to save human lives. This decision aligned with the position adopted by many other Fiqh councils and internationally accepted scholars. It was also based on a legal maxim in Islamic jurisprudence which states that “exigencies (*darurah*) change the forbidden into permissible”. There had also been a vast



improvement in medical knowledge, which showed an increase in the success rate of organ transplants in treating patients with organ failure.

### Note

Between 1973 and 1986, a period marked by contrasting legal fatwas on the permissibility of organ transplants, Moulavi's public discussions and presentations played a pivotal role in shaping the discourse on this matter.

Moulavi's presentations began by encapsulating the potential concerns regarding the legalisation of organ transplants and subsequently offering counterarguments to justify this practice. He clarified that the prohibition against the mutilation of the body after death could be overridden by the higher objective of saving lives, while adhering to specific ethical guidelines. These guidelines include obtaining the consent of the donor or their family, ensuring the safety of the donor, and conducting the procedure with the intention of saving or significantly improving the recipient's life.

He concluded by discussing the permissibility of both living and deceased organ donations, provided the procedures are conducted respectfully and ethically. While preserving the dignity of the human body is important, the imperative to save lives and avert harm holds significant weight in Islamic ethics and law. Even with a supportive stance towards organ transplantation, he encouraged continued research in this field to uncover potential improved alternatives that could enhance the quality of human lives (Moulavi, 1985).

Moulavi's active participation in NKF's symposiums, discussions, and contributions on this topic have been a significant source of inspiration for the Muslim community to harmonise their faith with the advances in science and technology. His progressive mindset and profound knowledge of Islamic principles have helped equip the community to navigate the evolving healthcare scene without compromising their religious beliefs.

### Conclusion

Moulavi Sahib is a remarkable scholar whose contributions to the Singapore Muslim community and the society at large span academia, interfaith harmony, and social

activism. His visionary approach to contextualising Islam, commitment in interfaith understanding, and interdisciplinary contributions showcase his significance as a scholar.

Moulavi's life and work stand as a beacon of inspiration for our local young asatizah of today. It encourages them to pursue knowledge rigorously, engage in critical thinking, and actively contribute to advocating inter-religious understanding and harmony in our diverse and ever-evolving world. His embodiment of these five values—Religious Resilience, Inclusiveness, Contributiveness, Adaptiveness, and Progressiveness—serves as a guide for aspiring asatizah in their pursuit of religious scholarship. Moulavi's example inspires them to not only deepen their understanding of Islam, but also actively participate in fostering a more harmonious coexistence among different races and religions.

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**RPCS internships** provide young budding researchers with a 3-month opportunity to hone their research and writing skills alongside the core research team. From 2023 to 2025, interns will contribute to the RPCS Islamic Intellectual Heritage Project, exploring the works of past *asatizah* in the areas of Governance, Society (Social Cohesion and Family), and Science and Technology. As part of their internship deliverables, interns are encouraged to write a commentary piece on scholars of their choice.

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*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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