Insights and Perspectives
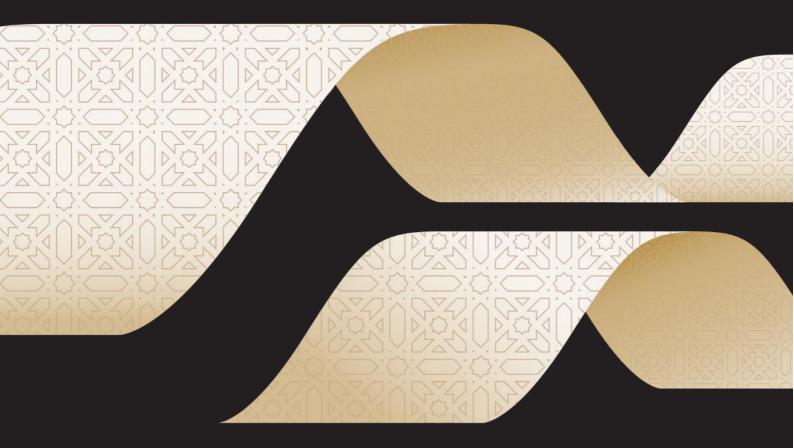
Engaging with Modern Activism:

Empowering Young Muslims Through Creative and Critical Religious Discourse

Ustaz Ahmad Ubaidillah Mohamed Khair
Research Analyst
Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA)

The current state of the Muslim community today leaves religious institutions much to ponder upon, especially with the slew of issues that require collective and comprehensive engagement. Surely, one of the issues at the forefront of the community's consciousness is about facing strands of modern activism that are not aligned with religious and cultural worldviews. One of them would be LGBT activism which has picked up momentum in recent times. It consists of the LGBT community, individuals, and groups seeking change regarding social attitudes and perceptions toward these issues.

Due to their substantial exposure to social media, youths tend to be the largest segment of the population exposed to LGBT activism. This exposure is coupled with their activist spirit that seeks to make a positive change in society. This translate into youths being the most engaged with this type of activism. This engagement has arguably resulted in the younger generation departing from traditional attitudes towards sensitive matters such as sexual orientations and sexual identities. This is a significant development, considering that approximately 61% of the global Muslim population are under the age of 30.[1]

To ensure that engagement with this activism is principled and productive, Muslim youths must be empowered through religious discourse that is both creative and critical. With these two values, youths would be able to engage with complex and contemporary matters substantially and confidently in a way that brings progress to the community. However, to develop a creative and critical religious discourse within the public sphere, we must first reflect upon whether it would be possible within the current socio-religious structure. Therefore, it is crucial to evaluate factors that are crucial to developing such discourse.

 Thus, this commentary seeks to elucidate:

1) the importance of a creative and critical religious discourse, and
2) the current factors that may inhibit the development of such a discourse.

It is important to elaborate why a creative and critical religious discourse within the public sphere must be emphasised in our current context. There are two types of predominant attitudes that may be observed among youths when facing LGBT activism and other activisms that tend to originate from the West. Though these attitudes appear as opposites, they are similar as their approaches are borne out of detachment from both religious and social contexts.

[1] Pew Research Center (2017) "The changing global religious landscape", Retrieved from Hollis, M., & Lukes, S. (1982). Rationality and relativism.

The first is the conformist approach. Though it strongly holds onto aspirations of civil and individual liberties, this approach casts aside established religious values and teachings which subsequently separates it from the predominantly conservative social norms and attitudes of the community without seeking to engage and be empathetic.

The second approach is the antagonistic approach. As opposed to the earlier approach, the antagonistic approach, while believing that it is adhering to religious teachings, adopts a stance that seems to be borne out of animosity, developing rhetoric that may be harmful towards those already in the fringes of the community.

These two approaches are unproductive and are unlikely to result in collective progress and enlightenment. There is no common touchpoint due to disinclinations of holding dialogues. It also pushes marginalised groups further into the fringes of the community, leaving them far from religious spaces. Therefore, it could lead to confrontations that widen gaps between groups within the community.

The guidance by religious institutions regarding this matter have been clear — the community must be principled yet respectful when engaging with this activism and the individuals associated with it.[2] Both conformist and antagonistic approaches are not aligned with humanistic and religious values. Religious advocates, intelligentsia, and institutions, guided by a much nobler vision for the community — one that is just and tolerant, critical and creative — must look beyond such approaches and adopt a tolerant yet principled stance.

Here, the words of Buya Ahmad Syafii Maarif should be reflected upon, as they contain a vision for an ideal Muslim community:[3]

> Islam demands the birth of an open community that firmly grasps the universal values of prophethood, but also fosters local values that can be compatibly integrated to enrich the price of this religion in collective life.

It is easier to solely adopt an ad-hoc approach towards the matter of engaging with LGBT activism, that is to formulate suggestions and solutions specific to matters pertaining to this activism. One example would be to develop substantial spaces within our religious institutions for the youths to engage in these matters.

[2] See Religious Advice To The Singapore Muslim Community On Lgbtq+ Developments In Singapore, https://www.muis.gov.sg/Media/Media-Releases/2022/8/22-Aug-22-Religious-Advice-on-LGBTQ, Religious Statement And Guidance On Lgbtq+ Developments In Singapore, https://www.muis.gov.sg/officeofthemufti/Irsyad/Religious-Statement-And-Guidance-On-Lgbtq-Developments-In--Singapore. Gunakan lensa rahmah untuk tinjau golongan LGBT, https://www.beritaharian.sg/rencana/gunakan-lensa-rahmah-untuk-tinjau-golongan-lgbt.
[3] Ahmad Syafii Maarif, Islam, Humanity and the Indonesian Identity, Leiden University Press, 2018, p 66

However, to ensure the dynamism of the Muslim community, this issue must be seen as part of a larger whole. Our current context in Singapore, which is modern and pluralistic, means that the youths and the community at large will always be facing activisms and ideologies that do not conform to mainstream religious and cultural worldviews.

For this reason, it is crucial for religious institutions to adopt a comprehensive outlook when engaging with youths. In empowering the youths, what is the specific vision that we seek to achieve? Is it a community that seeks to blindly defend our existing conditions and traditions, ensuring that they remain as they are? Is it a community that always jumpsat the first sign of provocation, to defend the religion as if it may be defeated by a strand of activism? Is it a community that does not reflect if a course of action would result in social conflict and divisions?

Or, is it a community that utilises our religious traditions to develop a principled stance when engaging with contemporary and contentious matters? Is it a community that is assured about the essence and values of the faith, and therefore able to be confidently strategic and contemplative in the face of challenges? Is it a community that is able to engage in constructive dialogues, knowing that there is a larger mission at hand, which is to help those in need materially, spiritually, and intellectually?[4]

> " We can strongly feel now that religious advocation (da'wah) still has the character of creating solidarity on the surface. Simply whipping people to develop commendable characters, following the religious rituals laid down by their respective understandings, and promising the gift of paradise or the punishment of hellfire. Additionally now are "permanent fixtures" (in religious advocation): the fear on the attack of modern culture and a host of other dangers thought to be destroying religious beliefs. "

As we come to grapple with these activisms and ideologies that seemingly originate from the 'West', it is apt to reflect upon what the reformist scholar, Fazlur Rahman, prescribed about the stance of Muslims.[5]

[4] Abdurrahman Wahid, Tuhan Tidak Perlu Dibela, Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2016, p 29
[5] Fazlur Rahman, Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition, London: University of Chicago Press, 1984, p 136

> " The most important and urgent thing to do from this point of view is to "disengage" mentally from the West and to cultivate an independent but understanding attitude toward it, as toward any other civilisation, though more particularly to the West because it is the source of much of the social change occurring throughout the world. So long as Muslims remain mentally locked with the West in one way or the other, they will not be able to act independently and autonomously. "

Religious institutions, if we believe in the endless potential of our religious traditions, must hold onto a vision for the community that is autonomous and independent from these 'trends' — i.e. contemporary activisms and ideologies — but still be grounded in our current local context. Our faith is not one that must be constantly defended from external challenges when we ourselves are the reason for our own fear. Upon observation, we will find that this fear is borne out of the lack of dynamic engagement with our religious traditions, teachings, and principles.

In other words, our lack of production of a critical and creative religious discourse has led us to our current condition — without a relevant medium to utilise our religious teachings and principles to imbue values of criticality and creativity in the youths. This discourse can be defined as various forms of output, be it artistic or intellectual, written or verbal, that seek to empower the   youths with the two values.

In this context, critical would mean the ability to evaluate and discern contemporary matters based on humanistic religious morals and values. Creative, on the other hand, would mean the ability and commitment to ensure that engagement with these matters brings progress and enlightenment to themselves and subsequently to the community.

At this juncture, it is apt for us to reflect upon whether the youths today, regardless of religious education, are religiously empowered to engage in contemporary matters. Currently, there leaves much to be desired when we evaluate these two values among our youths. These values of criticality and creativity are values that can be found in our religious traditions. **6**

[6] See Hamzah Yusuf, Reviving Beauty, Criticality and Creativity in Islamic Thought, Singapore: Muis Academy, The Occasional Paper Series, Paper No. 14. https://www.muis.gov.sg/-/media/Files/Muis-Academy/MOPS/6507_MUIS_MOPS-14_Final.pdf?la=en&hash=5342E450CD7C3637B81CB0C43D0B9AFB7EAD18AC. Ahmad Ubaidillah, The Legacy of Prophet Ibrahim: Manifesting Criticality and Creativity, Hikaayat: 2022, https://hikaayat.com/the-legacy-of-prophet-ibrahim-manifesting-criticality-and-creativity/

> ‘Verily we have honoured the Children of Adam. We carry them on the land and the sea, and have made provision of good things for them, and have preferred them above many of those whom We created with a marked preferment.’ (Surah Al-Isra’, verse 70)

Regarding the interpretation of this verse, Hamka highlighted that both the elements of criticality and creativity are what distinguish and glorify mankind.[7]

> ‘So much glory was given to the Son of Adam. The main thing is that he was given reason and mind, the creativity to think about his past, present and future times; which inspired him.’

For this reason, with our criticality and creativity being the two values that we have been honoured with by our Creator, one way we can evaluate if we have utilised these values as a community is through the depth and breadth of our religious discourse.

What are the topics that our religious discourse revolves around? Has our religious discourse developed to be relevant and contextual for the youths today? Is our religious discourse engaging enough to instill substantial change among youths? Is our religious discourse based on justice and compassion, criticality and creativity, that therefore seeks to alleviate the spiritual struggle of youths today?

The state of our religious discourse deserves further study on its own.[8] At this point, it would be better for us to reflect upon our socio-religious factors with the objective of developing a creative and critical religious discourse.

This commentary seeks to engage with two factors of the current socio-religious structure:

1) ideology and
2) culture.

[7] Hamka, Tafsir Al-Azhar (Vol 6), p 4093
[8] See Ahmad Ubaidillah, Forging Discursive Presence: The Challenges of the Asatizah Community's Contribution to Contemporary Religious Discourse in Singapore, ed. Azhar Ibrahim and Norshahril Saat, Critical Voices of Young Malays, Singapore: Malay Heritage Foundation, 2021.

The factor of ideology within the context of this commentary is to identify what are the strands of certain ideologies that may inhibit the development of a critical and creative religious discourse that would empower youths. If we observe the literature on religious thought in modern Malay society, we will find that negative elements of religious conservatism and traditionalism have been identified as barriers to positive change in society. **[9] [10]**

> Moreover, in the traditionalist view of social issues, we note a deep-seated objection to change, apart from its inadequacies in understanding the changes taking place in society… More significantly, they ignore the context of the time and the nature of problems at hand, which is clearly neglectful of the proper understanding of their situations.

It will not be possible to develop a critical and creative discourse in our current context without welcoming changes to our socio-religious structure. Currently, though we see positive administrative and structural changes unfolding in our religious institutions, as well as efforts to empower our asatizah, there must be a conscious push for ideological and intellectual changes as well. There is inertia for much-needed changes due to the existing mode of thinking prevalent in the religious structure.

Though we see pockets of individuals and institutions that are progressive in their output, the dominant mode of thinking has led to intellectual stagnation within our socio-religious structure. We can see this upon observation of the current intellectual output — or the lack thereof — which is dominated by creedal, ritual, relationship-oriented, financial, and spiritual topics. There is no denying   that these are important for Muslim youths, but there needs to be a balanced output that includes engagement with social, cultural, and artistic topics from a creative and critical lens.

The negative elements of traditionalist thought have led to the perception that religious spaces are unsuitable for critical and creative engagement due to the 'sensitivity' of certain contemporary topics. Or rather, the fear that such engagement will lead to a negative impact such as further openness to certain practices. This would include LGBT activism and the like. Upon reflection, we can observe that the lack of spaces within our religious structure to incorporate these matters into our religious discourse has disconnected and disempowered the youths as the current discourse does not imbue in them criticality and creativity.

[9] See Azhar Ibrahim, Chapter One: 'Religious Traditionalism in Contemporary Malay Society', in Contemporary Islamic Discourse in the Malay-Indonesian World: Critical Perspectives, Selangor: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2014.
[10] Ibid, p 23

This conservatism will only lead the youths into a state of unclarity as our current religious discourse does not imbue in them values that allow them to engage productively in contemporary matters. The need for this is urgent due to the existence of external spaces that allow youths to engage in these matters. These spaces do not operate under a religious framework. Therefore, they might not be aligned with certain religious teachings. As Syed Hussein Alatas wrote, 'If the men of learning disdain to provide a system of values and meanings on the basis of their scientific disciplines, others will do it.**11**

It should be asked if the current religious output is empowering for our youths and whether it imbues in them progressive values. To develop a critical and religious discourse, our religious institutions must shed their conservatism and provide public platforms for intellectual engagement within a socio-religious framework among youths. This discourse must be comprehensive and have both short-term and long-term objectives. This means that the agents of religious discourse — religious advocates and institutions — need to be conscious of developing criticality and creativity while simultaneously engaging with current issues of the day.

Bringing ideological changes may be futile if we do not attempt to engage in the culture of our current context which hinders the development of a critical and creative religious discourse.**12** Here lies the role of both religious institutions and advocates — to develop a culture of critical and creative religious discourse among youths, we must first develop such a discourse internally within the religious structure.

Currently, there are existing concentrated efforts to develop such a culture within the religious structure, such as the Postgraduate Certificate in Islam in Contemporary Societies (PCICS) program, the *Asatizah* Recognition Scheme (ARS) Continuous Professional Education (CPE) courses, and the International Conference on Communities of Success (ICCOS) by MUIS. Local publications such as PERGAS' *Ar-Risalah*, *MuslimSG*, and RIMA's *Karyawan*, also include numerous writings that are of much relevance in the current social context. We also have a few local *Asatizah* who are actively publishing. Although the quality of the output can and should be improved, there is negligible engagement with the current output within the religious structure. A critical and creative religious discourse in the public sphere can only occur if there is an existing discursive culture among the *Asatizah* and religious institutions. An internal discourse that engages critically and creatively with the output of *Asatizah* themselves will develop a dynamic culture within the religious structure.

[11] Syed Hussein Alatas, Philosophy and Practical Life in Southeast Asia, Kuala Lumpur: Dept. of Malay Studies, University of Malay, 1964, p 11
[12] See Azhar Ibrahim, 'Recreating Culture for Progressive Religion' in The Making of Progressive Religion, ed. Azhar Ibrahim, Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, et al, Islam, Religion and Progress, Singapore: The Print Lodge, 2006, p 17

As of now, there is a noticeable lack of consistent and substantial intellectual synergy between the young and older generations of *Asatizah*. Though there are mediums that allow for intellectual engagements between these two generations, it remains to be seen whether a formalistic approach is an effective way to organically develop a culture of critical and creative discourse.

We can take heed from the dynamism of the religious structure in Indonesia that engages with the works and writings of their fellow religious advocates — the young from the old, the old from the young — as can be seen in their discourse. This constant engagement has led them to develop a culture of religious criticality and creativity, which has manifested in the public sphere in various unconventional forms. The religious institutions and advocates are actively engaging with and producing arts, music, films, and literature.

Thus, among religious institutions and advocates, there must be a concentrated effort to collaborate and cooperate through intellectual engagement. The religious advocates and institutions are a small community in Singapore — a minority within a minority. For this reason, it is vital for the religious community to band together their resources — time, energy, and intellect — in developing our religious discourse for youths. At the same time, it must embrace the willingness and open mindset to cooperate and learn from other communities. This spirit of cooperation is already evident in our religious community as evident in the legacies of past generations. The accomplishments of our elders are due to their commitment and cooperation with one another and the wider society. As Allah decrees in the Quran,

> '... And cooperate in righteousness and piety...' (Surah Al-Mai'dah, verse 2)

In our prophetic traditions, it is clear that cooperating with fellow Muslims is part of our faith as can be seen in the life of our beloved Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), who worked together with his Companions in advocating the faith and helping those in need.

It would be of much benefit to end this commentary by utilising the wisdom of Ahmad Syafii Maarif, who spoke about the science of 'salt and lipstick,' which was inspired by Muhammad Hatta.[13][14] It bears much relevance in the context of developing a creative and critical religious discourse for our youths.

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[13][14] Ahmad Syafii Maarif, Ibid, p 200

> ‘With his sincere belief, Hatta was unwilling to witness Indonesian Islam as lipstick, visible but not tasteable, occupied with ceremony but lacking in substance, bellowing "Allahu akbar!" while wrecking and defaming other people. For Hatta, faith was something subtle that teaches humankind to be civilized and to possess an elegant courtesy in human intercourse.’

The science of salt and lipstick is an analogy for two sides of Islam. The science of lipstick is for the side of the faith that can only be seen on the surface, superficial and obtrusive, but severely lacking in substance. While the science of salt is for the side of the faith that may not be seen on the surface, invisible and subtle, yet even a small amount of it can be impactful.

This should be the vision for a creative and critical religious discourse for our youths which will have a significant impact in shaping our Islam for the future. Though the asatizah who engage in it might be few in quantity, the impact of such a discourse can reverberate in our Muslim community. It should be our vision to produce a religious culture that enriches the community with both intellectual and artistic pursuits. To do so, the seeds of creativity and criticality must be planted among our youths today.

About Author

Ustaz Ahmad Ubaidillah Bin Mohamed Khair is currently a Research Analyst at Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA). He holds an Islamic Jurisprudence degree from Yarmouk University, Jordan. His areas of interests are religion and literature. He has written articles on literature and socio-religious issues on various platforms, such as Muslim.SG, Karyawan, Ar-Risalah and Berita Mediacorp. He has also contributed book chapters, such as for Malay Heritage Foundation's Heritage, Culture and Society: Critical Voices of Young Malays and GarajBuku's Mahasiswa & Universiti. He has presented papers in past editions of Poetry Festival Singapore and Singapore Writers Festival. He is also the translator of the short book, Tok Sumang, originally written by Malay literary pioneer Muhammad Ariff Ahmad. Currently, he is a Sahabat Sastera under the Malay Language Council, Singapore, as well as a member of the Malay organising committee for Poetry Festival Singapore.

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