

RPCS

QUARTERLY

Developing New Horizons of Knowledge for
Islam in the Contemporary World

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EVENT SUMMARY



In May 2023, our RPCS senior research associate, Ustaz Abdullah Al-Muaz, participated in a regional interfaith meeting in Istanbul convened by Dr. Wageeh Mikhail, director of ScholarLeaders International. This event brought together representatives from Christian-Muslim studies centers across Asia, Africa and the Middle East. The primary objective was to explore opportunities for collaborations geared towards strengthening Christian-Muslim relations.

Contact us at RPCS@Muis.gov.sg

RPCS
RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN THE STUDY
OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS



MEETING REPORT - NETWORK OF CENTERS FOR CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

12-14 MAY 2023, ISTANBUL, TURKEY,

Organised by ScholarLeaders International⁽¹⁾

Participation by Ustaz Abdullah Al-Muaz Mohamed Fatris⁽²⁾

Senior Research Associate

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[1] ScholarLeaders International is a non-profit organisation dedicated to equipping and empowering Christian leaders from under-resourced regions around the world. The organisation focuses on nurturing intellectual and spiritual growth among these leaders, recognising that they play a crucial role in shaping their communities and bringing about positive change. ScholarLeaders International offers various programmes, resources, and support to foster leadership development, including scholarships, mentoring, theological education, and research opportunities. By investing in the development of these scholar-leaders, the organisation seeks to contribute to the flourishing of religious and academic institutions and societies globally.

[2] Participation in the event is part of the overall research training plan for RPCS researchers, as well as an opportunity for RPCS branding and visibility. The selection of candidate is based on alignment to RPCS Research Project entitled “The Past, Present and Future of Muslim Religious Regulation in Singapore: Policing of False Doctrines and Theological Deviance Within a Multi-religious Secular State”, under the Social pillar of the RPCS Research Agenda.

Among the key takeaways from the meeting was the discussion concerning the terminology **'shared values'**. Some questioned the narrow focus on equality and human rights while others pointed out that the discourse on rights may seem unbalanced without due consideration of responsibilities, which are equally essential. Alternative suggestions emerged using terms such as 'human values' or 'human dignity' instead of 'shared values' or 'human rights' to better encapsulate the intrinsic worth of every human being. A participant highlighted that the meeting should rightfully be considered as an ongoing exploration of shared values, thus framing the event as a dynamic process of discovery which more accurately captures the intent and collective commitment of the participants.



Another valuable learning point was from an engaging discussion led by Dr Chris Seiple, Principal Advisor for the Templeton Religion Trust's Covenantal Pluralism Initiative, on the concept of **covenantal pluralism**. In this context, the term 'covenant' takes on a secular connotation, signifying an understanding informed by the diverse array of faiths and worldviews globally and even open to individuals of any or no religion. Meanwhile, pluralism is understood as an embrace of the entire spectrum of diversity rather than being confined to a relativist interpretation, which is commonly associated with the term.

For a healthy and robust form of pluralism to exist, three indispensable conditions must be met:

- ***Freedom of religion and belief:*** This involves (a) liberty of conscience to choose, change, share, or reject any belief, and (b) equal treatment of religions/worldviews under the rule of law. This includes the freedom to bring those beliefs into public discussions of the common good.
- ***Holistic religious literacy:*** This includes developing evaluation, negotiation, and communication skills to understand (a) one's own belief system and what it says about engaging the other, (b) one's neighbor's belief system and its perspective about engaging the other, and (c) the nature of specific cross-cultural, multi-faith contexts, along with collaboration with neighbours of different beliefs to serve society.
- ***Embodiment and expression of virtues:*** This includes establishing a platform for discussing deep differences, necessitating the cultivation of virtues such as humility, empathy, patience, and courage, all of which are crucial to enable respectful discourse and acknowledging the dignity of everyone involved.

Author Information:

Ustaz Abdullah Al-Muaz Mohamed Fatris is a senior research associate at RPCS. He obtained a degree in Theology (Usuluddin) from the University of Jordan before pursuing a higher degree in Counselling from Monash University. His research interests include the regulation of religion in secular societies, sectarianism, and the role of inter- and intra-faith understanding in fostering social cohesion.

He represented the Harmony Centre and RPCS at an interfaith meeting in Istanbul, which brought together academic scholars and community leaders from institutions studying Christian-Muslim relations across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Amongst others, the meeting discussed conditions for effective interfaith dialogue, and the centrality of religious literacy in promoting cooperation and understanding amongst people of faith in plural contexts.



FOSTERING CONTRIBUTIVE CITIZENRY: PROMOTING FAITH-BASED CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN MUSLIM-MINORITY COMMUNITIES

BY DR BAPTISTE BRODARD

Ph.D SWISS CENTRE FOR ISLAM AND SOCIETY

23 June 2023

I. INTRODUCTION

The closed-door roundtable discussion was attended by 13 participants from MUIS who oversee governance, religious thought leadership and guidance, community funds, and a non-governmental organisation. The focal point of the discussion revolved around understanding the landscape of Islamic social work in Europe, which broadly aligns with one of RPCS' key research areas- society. Additionally, the discussion delved into the dynamics within and between Muslim civil society organisations (CSOs), in Switzerland, France, and the UK.

In his presentation, Dr. Brodard underscored the critical role and challenges of religious leaders in engaging social issues, particularly those related to inequality and poverty. He also explored how CSOs potentially serve as a gateway for Muslims' civic participation. These organisations, according to Dr. Brodard, play a key role in facilitating cross-community engagement and providing opportunities for contributive and active citizenry. By creating gateways to civic and political involvement, CSOs contribute to the common good. Overall, the discussion can be distilled into the following points.

II. DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH OF ISLAMIC SOCIAL WORK

Dr. Brodard began the discussion by providing an overview of the growth of Muslim organisations in Europe that primarily focused on meeting the worshiping needs of European Muslims and engaging communities in which Islam has limited historical presence. Notably, Islamic social work grew significantly after the turn of the twenty-first century, which saw the rapid emergence of an Islam-based social welfare services. These initiatives include the provision of material aid, distribution of Zakat, mediation and counselling, and undertaking of projects aimed at preventing crime and violent extremism.

These charitable projects serve as a conduit for Muslim welfare organisations to demonstrate their loyalty and belonging to the country and society in which they operate. According to Dr. Brodard, this accelerates the acceptance and integration of Muslim organisations in Western societies, an aspect that has historically posed challenges for European Muslims. However, Dr. Brodard emphasised the need for caution as these developments should not be necessarily viewed positively. Contrary to the assumption that Islamic welfare organisations are primarily motivated by ideological factors, they are often driven by strategic considerations aiming to establish partnerships with authorities and civil society organisations.

III. PRIORITISING MUSLIMS FOR STRATEGIC REASONS

Dr. Brodard contended that there exists an implicit understanding within the Islamic social work sector that Muslims are expected to focus on specific social issues, such as violent extremism and poverty, in order to be considered for funding opportunities by public and private institutions. This expectation stems from the assumption that these issues are inherently linked to religious and cultural background, thereby implying that Muslims should deal with their 'own' issues and determine what would enhance the effectiveness of these social interventions. Furthermore, this assumption may wrongly attribute Muslims' perceived inability to assimilate and attain social mobility solely due to their religion and culture. This reductionist approach to social work is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it overlooks systemic inequalities and simultaneously perpetuates stereotypes that would stigmatise an already marginalised group within society. Secondly, it can be argued that these strategic partnerships may inadvertently lead to the state to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' Muslims by trying to profile and distinguish between Islamic organisations. This tendency would consequently lead to the exclusion of other Muslim stakeholders.



IV. COMPETITION “IN THE NAME OF ISLAM”

The allure of funding opportunities accelerates the proliferation of Muslim welfare organisations that inevitably creates a competitive landscape that may prioritise short-term outcomes rather than long-term impact and sustainability. In the quest for financial support, organisations may prioritise achieving immediate results to secure funding rather than investing in sustainable solutions to help address the root causes of social issues. Moreover, Dr. Brodard contends that this competitive environment contributes to a failure in recognising the unique needs of recipients as organisations, being more focused on their organisational goals, may overlook the importance of understanding the unique needs and circumstances of their clients. As an illustration, he shared an example of how the marketing focus of these welfare organisations is often centred on accumulating funds rather than strategically identifying deserving beneficiaries (*asnaf*). This approach may result in inefficiencies in zakat distribution and lack of transparency, potentially diverting funds towards unnecessary purposes that may deprive those who are really in need of zakat.

V. THE CONFLATION OF AID AND DA'WAH

Dr. Brodard also raised another crucial concern within the Islamic social work sector which is the conflation of aid and Da'wah, wherein social work or aid is used as an instrument to attract beneficiaries to convert to Islam. While there is a strong religious basis for providing welfare in Islam, the primary goal should be serving humanity and not conversion. However, the prevailing approach in the sector today tends to be atomistic, lacking consideration for holistic human well-being. As a result, welfare can devolve into a form of abuse, used to fulfil self-serving motivations, neglecting the actual needs and dignity of the beneficiaries. Dr. Brodard attributed this issue to a parochial understanding of Islamic principles that predominantly focuses on the performative aspects of the religion rather than the formative, i.e., the unconditional nature of aid to protect the sanctity of human life. To rectify this misunderstanding, Dr. Brodard proposed the need to invest deeply in Islamic education centered on human development and transformative social change. In this regard, the *maqāṣid* methodology can be a helpful tool that acknowledges the importance of Islamic principles and values in guiding social work practices while emphasising the need for practical and effective solutions to social issues.

RPCS FELLOWSHIP TRAINING

The RPCS Fellowship Training plan encompasses a selection of identified courses and workshops that establishes, at a minimum, graduate-level foundation in research methods and skills. This training plan aims to equip RPCS research fellows and research officers with the necessary tools and skills for the development their respective research projects. RPCS participated in five training programmes conducted by the National Library Board, the National University of Singapore (NUS), Republic Polytechnic (RP) and Aventis Learning Group as follows:

ACADEMIC RESEARCH SKILL WORKSHOP

National Library Board, 28th February 2023



The workshop is tailored to help researchers identify credible and factual sources through a combination of search engine strategies and digital resources from the National Library Board.


MAKING THINKING VISIBLE

**Republic Polytechnic Problem-based Learning Institute (PBLI),
27 & 28 April 2023**

This workshop introduced researchers to visual thinking processes, techniques, and tools. It allowed researchers to explore problems from divergent perspectives, improve their observation skills and enhance their ability to distill key themes from



complex information. With this skill set, researchers will gain the ability to examine issues from different perspectives, generate novel insights and communicate their solutions persuasively. This in turn, would help them identify helpful approaches and mental models that build resilience and cultivate a growth mindset, thereby promoting personal growth and effectiveness.



THE RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN THE STUDY OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS (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 focuses on developing new understanding, interpretations and application of Islamic principles, values and traditions to contemporary issues and challenges through its research and publications.

The RPCS aims to bring together local scholars and senior practitioners to study current and future issues in the socio-religious life of the Singapore Muslim community. Through RPCS seminars, workshops and roundtable discussions, it serves as a platform to nurture the right intellectual ecology and environment to facilitate the growth and development of its own group of religious leaders, scholars and thinkers who are seen as authentic and credible to guide the local Muslim community.

Aside from conducting research, the RPCS also aims to develop future thought leaders through its fellowship programmes and research training workshops to familiarise with the evolving religious discourse and analysis of issues relevant to the theme of Muslim Communities of Success. Its research agenda encompasses three broad areas:



GOVERNANCE

Islam, Secularism & Diversity

Study and develop new understanding on the relationship between religion and secularism, identify models of successful citizenship and contribution, and formulate a robust and credible framework of successful living drawn from Islamic traditions, history and experiences.



SOCIETY

Family & Social Cohesion

Identify ways of supporting and strengthening the family institution and review laws as society evolves so that they remain resilient amidst these challenges, and how religions can be an effective resource in enriching further the common space and common good in any pluralistic society.



SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Biomedical ethics, new food technologies, digital technologies and ethics, crypto-currencies

Develop Islamic thought and ethics to provide new guidance on issues such as new food technologies, digital and financial technologies, environmental challenges and others.

If you are interested in the topics and discussions covered in our RPCS Roundtable Discussions, do keep a look out on our website and related platforms for upcoming sessions. We look forward to providing a safe space for collaborative learning and the building of new bodies of knowledge on the range of topics covered. Please visit

www.muis.gov.sg/officeofthemufti/RPCS

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