

RPCS Quarterly

Developing New Horizons of Knowledge for Islam in the Contemporary World

In This Issue

Seminar Report - Seminar on Muslim Communities of Success in the Context of Secular Societies

Roundtable Discussion Report - The Stature of Ijtihad in Successful Muslim Communities

Event Summary

On 15 June 2021, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) organised the Pre-ICCOS Seminar on the topic of “Muslim communities of Success in the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic”. This was the first among several upcoming events and programmes leading up to the International Conference on Communities of Success (ICCOS) 2022. The seminar discussion revolved around the importance of harnessing religion to cultivate resilience and social responsibility to protect the well-being of members of society in the ongoing pandemic.

Following the successful completion of the first seminar, a second seminar was held on 6 November 2021, on the topic of “Muslim Communities of Success in the Context of Secular Societies”. The seminar aimed to discuss how Muslim minorities can meet the challenges of living in secular states, and how to consider minority contexts in the interpretation of texts and traditions.

SEMINAR REPORT

PRE-ICCOS SEMINAR ON MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS IN THE CONTEXT OF SECULAR SOCIETIES

November 2021

OPENING ADDRESS

By Minister Masagos Zulkifli



In his opening address, Minister Masagos discussed how Islamic history offers models of peaceful coexistence that can guide Muslim minority communities. Examples include Muslims who chose to remain in Abyssinia, which was ruled by the Christian king Negus, even after the Prophet *peace be upon him* had established a community in the city of *Al-Madinah al-Munawwarah*. In a later period, a Muslim minority community in China had also flourished under the Ming Dynasty.

Singapore is a good contemporary case study as it is one of the most religiously diverse societies in the world, where its citizens pledge to be one united people, regardless of race, language, or religion. Singapore's shared principles of mutual respect, trust, and harmony have allowed space for each community to express their cultures and adapt practices for the common good. Singapore's constitution is a secular covenant for its citizens, on which the three pillars of its social compact are founded: (1) justice and equality; (2) self-reliance; (3) cohesion and harmony for its multi-religious and multi-racial society.

At the same time, racial and religious harmony is neither a given nor perpetuity. It requires the persistent commitment of all groups in society to continue to strengthen this common vision. This is especially so when the operating environment today is very different, as we are more exposed to online information that transcends physical boundaries, and which may challenge the transmission of values, and widen fractures in societies.

For Muslims in Singapore, the presence of credible and dynamic religious institutions is key in guiding the community to adapt and thrive in a modern and cosmopolitan society. From time to time, the government makes adjustments to respond to the evolving needs of various communities, while preserving the peace and goodwill among them. An example is the recent policy change allowing Muslim female healthcare professionals to don the *tudung* (headscarf) in the workplace, which is only possible because of the many decades of initiatives and efforts to foster trust and cohesion between communities.

It is hoped that the Singaporean approach can provide useful learning points for other Muslim minority communities, which make up around one-fifth of the world's Muslim population. The success of Muslim communities in multi-cultural and secular states will require a continual pursuit of the common good. Different secular states may have different contexts, and each will still need to find its own approaches and solutions to meet the aspirations of its people, whilst learning from the experiences of others.



ISLAM IN A SECULAR SOCIETY: THE SINGAPORE EXPERIENCE

Ustaz Dr. Mohamed Bin Ali

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AT S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (RSIS), SINGAPORE

In discussing Islam and secularism, Dr. Mohamed started with the differences between philosophical and political definitions of secularism. On a practical level (i.e. how secular states function), secularism in Singapore does not necessarily mean the complete exclusion of religion from public life. The extent of a Muslim community's integration with the state depends on the nature of its secular state, as well as the willingness of Muslims to strike a balance between their religious needs and the secular norms of the state.

For some Muslims, secularism may be perceived as a challenge because of some conflicts between one's identity as a citizen and one's religious practices, especially



because Islam is understood as a complete way of life. A more radical interpretation of this can be seen in some forms of Islamism, but it can be argued this is an aberration in Islam as it advocates very literalistic interpretations of the sacred texts of Islam and the Shari'ah law.

It is therefore more important to reflect on the periods when Muslim communities flourished, especially in the context where they were a minority. There were some important examples in the Prophetic era, such as the Honourable Pact (*Hilf al-Fudul*) in Mecca, and the Charter of Medina.

Some of the invaluable lessons and useful principles we can extract from the early days of Islam include:

- *The concept of unity as a nation*, where Muslims placed their country's safety, security and defense as paramount above all other considerations;
- *The versatility of Islam*, which could guide Muslims through changing needs and various contexts; and
- *The continuous process of ijihad*, as shown by efforts of past scholars and Muslim communities in harmonising religious teachings with the changing world.



The experiences of Singaporean Muslims living in a secular state have shown that secular states can function both as a facilitator to religious life, and to ensure neutrality towards, and fairness in treating, all religions in the state. In this regard, rhetoric and high emotions triggered by complex and sensitive social issues, should give way to rational and intelligent conversations between the state and its minority groups. For the Muslim community, its efforts to be resilient and adaptable begin with a strong religious thought leadership. Its religious leaders should not only be conversant on religious matters, but also understand current issues and remain open and empathetic to the diverse needs of the larger society.



THE COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS: A RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE

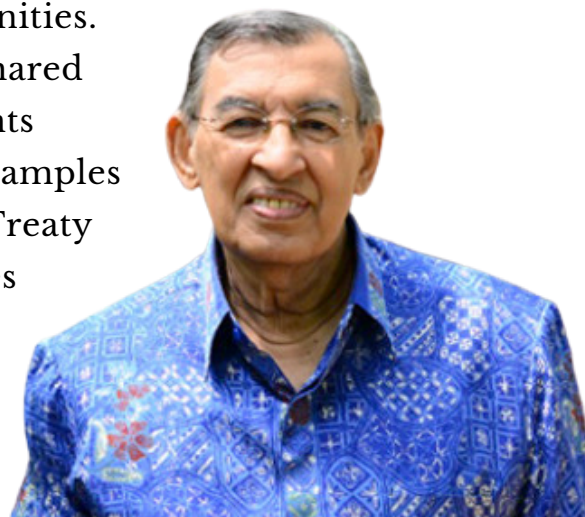
Professor Dr. Muhammad Quraish Shihab

EXPERT ON QUR'ANIC EXEGESIS, AND FORMER MINISTER OF RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS IN THE FOURTH DEVELOPMENT CABINET, INDONESIA

At the start of his presentation, Professor Dr Quraish discussed the seminar topic, i.e., Muslim Communities of Success in the Context of Secular States, by highlighting how Singapore is a secular state that is not hostile towards religion as it aims to provide equal opportunities for its citizens to uphold their respective religious teachings. When referring to community or society, Allah uses the Arabic term *Ummah* (instead of *Qaum*), which carries at least 9 different meanings when mentioned in the Qur'an. Similarly, the term *Ummah* was also used by the Prophet such as in formulating the Medina Charter. Mainly, it refers to a community that:

- Upholds *common* and *shared values*;
- Makes a lot of *compromises* and *sacrifices*; and
- Is *flexible* and *adaptive* to changing times and contexts.

There are also some practical examples from history on how Muslims can be more tolerant in their religious practices when co-existing with other communities. This includes looking at commonalities and shared values, and negotiating and making adjustments where possible and necessary. Indeed, such examples were shown by the Prophet s.a.w. during the Treaty of Hudaibiyah, where there were compromises which involved some aspects of worship, whilst the core values and principles of Islam were upheld.



On the issue of *fatwas* or religious advisories, one must not rely solely on past *fatwas* issued for different communities living in different conditions and contexts as the determinant for finding solutions for today. Part of the problem is when such past opinions are not understood together with their social contexts and the audience or recipients of such *fatwas*. For example, Imam Al-Shafi'i had different opinions when he was in Egypt and Iraq. A contemporary scholar Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, also reviewed many of his opinions when these were needed by minority Muslim communities in Europe. He was asked by Al-Azhar University to write on *Fiqh for Minorities for Muslims in Europe*, where many of the rulings he issued were differed from the popular opinions in Muslim majority countries like Egypt. In the same vein, Muslims in Singapore do not experience the same conditions as those living in countries like Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, due to the unique laws and social circumstances.

While Islam as a religion is complete and perfect, religious knowledge and teachings will continue to evolve and develop, based on the ever-changing social contexts and conditions Muslims are in.

It is important for members of the Muslim community to understand the rulings as well as the objectives behind various Islamic practices and rituals. Having the required knowledge and understanding about these aspects of the religion would help us make informed decisions on how Muslim communities can best achieve the said objectives within their respective contexts.

PLENARY DISCUSSIONS



The key themes of the discussion were as follows:

1 *Religious leadership and Asatizah can instil confidence in the religious life of the community through a robust understanding of our religious teachings, values, and objectives. This includes recognising our unique context of living in a secular state with a multi-religious society, and as a minority community.*

2 *A strong vision of the common good is important but requires a collective effort and continuous commitment from all members of society. For Muslims, in working towards integrating with the larger society, they can continue to help towards managing and addressing misperceptions or mistrusts.*

3 Recognising that being adaptive and contributing to nation building are not mutually exclusive. As we adapt, we must make adjustments so that we can contribute beyond a particular environment or our comfort zone.

4 The prophetic guidance is for Muslims to become a community that brings the most benefits to all. This requires for Muslims to look beyond the binary of what is Islamic and what is secular.

5 Equality is an important principle. We ought to view ourselves as equal citizens. However, the objective of using the term Muslim minority is to allow us to look at the unique challenges in comparison with the Muslim majority contexts.

6 There have been negative examples or incidents in the way the minority communities in these Muslim majority countries were treated, as second-class citizens and hence, it begets the question—what is the Islamic guidance and response to this?

7 Jurisprudential issues should not stand in the way of Muslims contributing at a level beyond ourselves and our own little communities. It is a process and a journey, and this seminar and subsequent conference is meant to help us discuss the way to get there.

8 In managing the complex challenges and issues, a holistic and interdisciplinary approach involving not only the clerical class, but also various segments of the community, is most effective and comprehensive.

CLOSING REMARKS

BY MUFTI DR. NAZIRUDIN MOHD NASIR



In discussing the theme of the seminar, Dr. Nazirudin began by sharing his view on the importance of looking at our Muslim identity and tradition in the context of our lived realities. In our discussions about Muslims in secular societies like Singapore, we also recognise how we are not isolated from global developments, ideas, and perspectives on various issues. Unfortunately, in the traditional and conservative circles, the idea of context is often not well understood, and some people equate it to liberalism and laxity, which requires the dilution of our religious faith, and weakens our religious identity, thereby making us less Muslims. This is in contrary to the views of many scholars who have discussed the importance of context, including Syeikh Abdullah bin Bayyah.

CLOSING REMARKS

BY MUFTI DR. NAZIRUDIN MOHD NASIR

Dr. Nazirudin then highlighted how we have been operating in a very heavily legal and juristic (fiqh) realm that governs many aspects of our life, and this is opposed to the principles and values of Shari'ah. He explained that while we do not want to underestimate the importance of fiqh, we must ensure that we get it right, given its limitations, especially in addressing multifaceted and complex issues that involve moral and ethical dilemmas. He then gave some examples of how past Muslim scholars came up with solutions that took into consideration their respective contexts and challenges, as well as how some have also adopted fundamentally new approaches in their thinking about religion.

Dr. Nazirudin then talked about two very broad areas, i.e., social and religious diversity, as well as the secular systems. On social and religious diversity, he placed emphasis on the ethical principles and values that guide us to interact, to honour and respect others, as well as to collaborate on the common good. In discussing Islam in secular spaces, he stated that our actions and contributions as Muslims should not be limited to our own community, because our religion requires us to contribute in ways that bring goodness to all of humanity. He then concluded his speech with two important points that we must prioritise in educating our community, which were:

- *How context (al-waqi') can be addressed and incorporated in the study of Islam in robust, sophisticated, and credible approaches; and*
- *How the study of our Islamic intellectual traditions could be broadened to transcend traditional categories, and explore a new epistemology, especially in developing ethical thought in Islam.*

REFLECTION BY RPCS FELLOW

USTAZ FATHURRAHMAN BIN HJ. M. DAWOED



Ustaz Fathurrahman began his reflection by highlighting some of the questions raised by Dr. Mohamed, which he found to be pertinent and relevant when discussing various issues concerning our community and the society at large. In discussing the perception of Islam as a complete way of life, Ustaz Fathurrahman reflected that it is crucial for us to not narrowly interpret it as an incompatibility between Islam and secularism, or that Muslims can thrive in secular contexts only when they have successfully created an alternative reality that does not require much convergence between them and that of the larger society. Ustaz Fathurrahman argues that it is hence important for us to be clear of the definition, objectives, and outcomes of this concept of completeness, based on our understanding of the Prophetic examples and traditions.

Ustaz Fathurrahman then presented the background of his

research, which is inspired by his observations on the increasing demands for halal consumerism and lifestyle, most probably stemming from the desire to revive a more 'Islamic identity'. He further added that while this may seem like a demand that is only affecting the Muslim community exclusively, the reality is that this may have a larger, wide-reaching implication on our social life, especially given the multi-religious and multi-racial society that we live in. Unlike past studies on the impact of local halal consumption in dining, Ustaz Fathurrahman plans to explore the viewpoints of the Asatizah regarding the issue, as he believes that religious leadership also plays a very important role in shaping the thinking and religious practices of the Muslim community.

REFLECTION BY RPCS FELLOW

USTAZ MUHAMMAD SAIFUL 'ADLI BIN AYOB

Ustaz Saiful 'Adli shared with the audience some key learning points from the presentation by Professor Dr. Quraish Shihab, which includes the different terminologies used in the Qur'an to describe various meanings, e.g., the differences between the terms *Qaum* and *Ummah*. As mentioned by the speaker, from the linguistic point of view, the Arabic word *Ummah* carries at least nine different meanings and connotations, and contrary to popular belief, some scholars have suggested extending the meaning to include *al-Ummah al-Insaniah* (the entire humanity), although in other contexts, it may be limited to *al-Ummah al-Islamiah* (the Muslim community). Similarly, in Professor Dr. Quraish's discussions about the Charter of Medina, he mentioned that its foundation was not based on any specific religion, because at that time, there were both Muslims and people of other faiths living side by side, and the Prophet s.a.w. initiated a social



agreement based on their equal identity as citizens of the country.

Ustaz Saiful 'Adli then shared the background of his RPCS research project on the Treaty of Hudaibiyah, which was also mentioned by Professor Dr. Quraish in his speech. While many past studies have explored various questions pertaining to the treaty, Ustaz Saiful 'Adli hopes to suggest practical aspects of policy-making and its implementation in discussing religion and secularism in multi-racial and multi-religious Singapore. This is especially important when it involves policies that are related to certain religious groups and practices, which then invite various responses and reactions from different segments of society.

"THE STATURE OF IJTIHAD IN SUCCESSFUL MUSLIM COMMUNITIES"

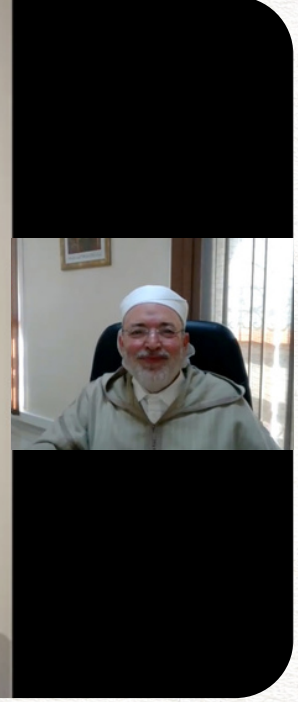
رابعاً: التعايش هو الأصل في العلاقة بين المسلمين وغيرهم:

قال الله تعالى: ﴿يَأْتِيهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ﴾ [الحجرات: 13]. وهذا هو خطاب الله تعالى للناس جميعاً، والذي سوى فيه بين الناس جميعاً، وهو الذي يدين به جميع المسلمين ويتلونه تعبداً، وهو الأصل الحاكم على علاقاتهم بغيرهم من أصحاب الملل المختلفة. وهو التعارف والتعايش.

وقد بين الله تعالى فوق ذلك جماعة المؤمنين أنه ما لم يكن هنالك تعدد ولا اضطهاد؛ فإن العلاقة، ولو مع المشركين، هي علاقة عدل وانصاف، وبر وإحسان. قال الله تعالى: ﴿لَا يَنْهَاكُمُ اللَّهُ عَنِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يُقَاتِلُوكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ وَلَمْ يُخْرِجُوكُمْ مِنْ دِيَارِكُمْ أَنْ تَبَرُّوهُمْ وَتُقْسِطُوا إِلَيْهِمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُقْسِطِينَ﴾ [الممتحنة: 8].

وقد ضرب المسلمون في خلال تاريخهم الطويل أمثلة حية على الامتثال لهذه الوصايا الخالدة. ويكفي شاهداً على ذلك ما كان عليه المسلمون في المغرب والأندلس ومصر والعراق والشام والهند ومختلف بقاع المعمور من التعايش بين مختلف الأديان، والاحترام لاعتقادات أهلها. وهو أمر واقعي إلى الآن. والمحكمة العربية في المغرب تتولى منذ تأسيس الدولة المغربية وإلى الآن الحكم في الشؤون الخاصة بالشرعية اليهودية، ويتولى تعيين رئيس هذه المحكمة أمير المؤمنين، باعتباره راعياً لشؤون جميع المؤمنين في المملكة المغربية.

والتعايش كما تقدم هو مقتضى الأخلاق. وهو أساس التراحم، والتعاون، والتواصل، والنجاح.



By: Dr Idris al-Fassi al-Fihri,

Professor and Vice President of University of al-Qarawiyyin, Morocco

Background

This roundtable discussion (RTD) was conducted by the Research Programme in the Study of Muslim Communities of Success (RPCS). It is part of a series of engagements leading up to the International Conference on Communities of Success (ICCS). The series is in line with the RPCS's aims to develop new horizons of knowledge that will lead to contemporary and effective guidance on socioreligious issues for Muslim communities living in secular states and advanced economies.

A. Introduction

In his presentation, Dr Idris al-Fassi al-Fihri outlined three key themes of discussion, namely: Main concepts surrounding issues relating to *ijtihād* or legal reasoning, the compatibility of Islamic ethical conduct with modern systems of governance, and principles of successful coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims, especially in the context of Muslim-minority populations.

B. Concepts of Religion & Legal Reasoning (*Ijtihād*)

Our religious understanding comprises definite knowledge (*thawābit*) and indefinite knowledge (*mutaghayyirāt*). The former refers to the immutable aspects of the religion, which includes our core beliefs, general obligations and prohibitions, principles of jurisprudence, and objectives of the Shari'ah. On the other hand, the latter concerns indefinite or ambiguous texts, new developments, and changing circumstances, which allows room for *ijtihād* or legal reasoning, and therefore ensures the compatibility of Islam throughout any place and time.

C. Issues Surrounding *Ijtihād* and the Nation State

Our interactions with the Shari'ah comprises of *iqtidā'* (emulation), *tabaṣṣur* (provisional acceptance), and *ijtihād* (independent reasoning). The latter may take place in the form of *ijtihād taṣīlī*, which is reasoning on issues that can be referenced to religious texts, or *ijtihād tanzīlī* or new reasoning, which constitutes deriving religious law pertaining to new issues and contexts.

In this light, the traditional definitions of *Dārul Islām* and *Dārul Ḥarb* are not compatible in today's context, especially as it implies hostility as the default in Muslim and non-Muslim relations. Therefore, there is a need to develop an understanding and acceptance of the modern state which preserves the freedom of religion whilst adapting an open and progressive view. In doing this, we can derive our references from Constitution of Madinah and the Peace of Westphalia.

D. Principles of Successful Coexistence

Compassion or *ihsān* can be described as the measure of success for any community and encapsulates all forms of reasoning (*ijtihad*). It transcends the principle of justice or *‘adl*, which requires merely giving something its due. Overall, compassion within a community in accommodating different beliefs is paramount to its success.

Islam considers unity (*tawāfuq*) and affinity (*ta’āluḥ*) as the default positions in intra-Muslim relations. At the same time, it acknowledges the concession of disagreement and difference of opinions.

In these situations, Islam also affirms the need to reconcile between contesting parties in a process which requires compassion in addition to justice. In cases where such unity in opinion cannot be achieved, coexistence takes precedence as the minimum benchmark in our social relations, thus enabling the cultivation of respect, kindness, and cooperation. Similarly, Islam encourages coexistence and cooperation even with people of different cultures and beliefs. Therefore, we find a resounding truth in the saying,

***"A person is either
your brother in faith,
or your equal in humanity"***
- Ali ibn Abi Talib r.a.



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