

# RPCS

## QUARTERLY

Developing New Horizons of Knowledge for  
Islam in the Contemporary World

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## EVENT SUMMARY

On 23 October 2023, the Research Programme in the Study of Muslim Communities of Success (RPCS) held its annual seminar, featuring esteemed guest speaker, Dr Ebrahim Moosa, the Mirza Family Professor of Islamic Thought and Muslim Societies at the Keough School of Global Affairs, University of Notre Dame.

Dr Ebrahim Moosa delivered an insightful lecture titled "Religion in the Digital Age: Navigating the Challenges and Opportunities". He shed light on the challenges and opportunities presented in the digital era, with a particular focus on artificial intelligence (AI). His presentation explored the implications of AI for society, ethics, and Islamic scholarship, highlighting both the potential benefits and the ethical dilemmas posed by these technological advancements.



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**RPCS**  
RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN THE STUDY  
OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS



## RELIGION IN THE DIGITAL AGE: NAVIGATING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

*Dr Ebrahim Moosa*

*Mirza Family Professor of Islamic Thought & Muslim Societies,  
University of Notre Dame*

*23 October 2023*

### I. THE DIGITAL ERA AND ITS IMPACT

In his presentation, Dr Ebrahim Moosa explored the multifaceted impact of artificial intelligence on contemporary society. The rapid advancement of technology in the information age has led to various challenges and concerns surrounding ethics, the commodification of information, societal division, depersonalisation, and the exponential growth of data. A central theme of discussion was the ethical considerations inherent in AI development and deployment, particularly within the framework of Islamic ethics. The shift in perception towards information as a capital in the modern era was highlighted, contrasting it with traditional notions of value. The discussion also addressed the transformative effects of technology on communication patterns, including the prevalence of text-based interactions and the emergence of information silos. While technology is now able to provide personalised content to users, it may

inadvertently deepen ideological divides, contributing to the erosion of shared knowledge and values in communities.

### II. CLASSICAL SCHOLARS ON CRAFTS AND TECHNOLOGY

Drawing from classical Islamic scholarship, the presentation underscored the importance of integrating traditional wisdom with the demands of the modern world. Dr Moosa emphasised the historical and cultural evolution of human culture, technology, and knowledge, as exemplified by insights from scholars such as Ibn Khaldun and Shah Waliyullah Al-Dahlawi. Ibn Khaldun saw tools, such as technology in our context, as supplemental intelligence which leads to the acquirement of new knowledge. In this sense, modern developments including technology should be seen as interdependent and cumulative. Meanwhile, the concept of *Irtifāqāt*, articulated by Shah Waliyullah Al-Dahlawi defined the role of science and technology as drivers of human progress and civilization.



### III. ISSUES AND CONCERNS ON ISLAMIC STUDIES AND FATWA

In addition to exploring the implications of AI on society, Dr Moosa addressed critical issues within Islamic studies and fatwa-issuing practices. Concerns were raised regarding the lack of connection between knowledge traditions and contemporary realities, as well as the compartmentalisation of knowledge into distinct disciplines within Islamic studies. On the other hand, there is an opportunity to offer a more integrated approach to knowledge. The discussion also

emphasised the importance of equipping scholars with both traditional and contemporary knowledge, particularly in the context of issuing *fatwas*. It highlighted the need for *ijtihad* to embrace new conceptualisations and language, emphasising the principle of *tawaqquf* (withholding decision) in *fatwa*-issuing practices, particularly given the rapid developments in this age.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Overall, the seminar provided a nuanced understanding of the intersections between tradition and technology. Dr Moosa's presentation underscored the importance of navigating the challenges and opportunities presented by the digital era while remaining grounded in timeless principles and values. Moving forward, continued dialogue and collaboration will be essential in addressing the ethical, societal, and scholarly implications of AI within the Singapore Muslim community and beyond.



### THE MANY WORLDS OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE SINGAPORE MUSLIM COMMUNITY

*Sheikh Mohamad Farouq*  
*Associate Research Fellow, RPCS*  
*Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis)*

*Hao Guang*  
*Senior Manager in the Smart Nations and Digital Government Office*  
*Prime Minister's Office, Singapore*

*James McGrail*  
*PhD candidate on the One Among Zeroes project*  
*Leiden University, Netherlands*

*8 November 2023*

#### I. AI IN RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The roundtable discussion brought together three distinguished speakers to explore the multifaceted impacts of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on the Singapore Muslim community. In his presentation, Sheikh Mohamad Farouq focused on the

intersections of AI technology, Muslim cyberspace, and the development of a critical Islamic epistemology. He explored the impact of AI on religious discourse and the challenges it poses to traditional Islamic knowledge-building practices. Farouq discussed the "Death of the Author" concept, highlighting how AI challenges traditional religious discourse by prioritising efficiency and utility over morality. He discussed the "McDonaldisation" of religious discourse, where predictability and calculability overshadow deeper theological discussions. The use of AI, such as Chat-GPT, in religious discussions raises concerns about the dilution of spiritual depth.

Farouq stressed the need for a critical epistemological framework that integrates traditional Islamic principles with modern technological advancements. He contextualised these challenges within the Muslim Communities of Success initiative<sup>[1]</sup>, which seeks to navigate the complexities faced by Muslim communities in secular contexts, such as inter-communal tensions and the COVID-19 pandemic. The presentation called for a balanced approach that integrates traditional Islamic knowledge with modern advancements, addressing the evolving landscape of Islamic epistemology in the digital age. It also underscored the importance of maintaining religio-ethical considerations in the face of technological influences on religious discourse.

## II. SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF GENERATIVE AI

Next, Hao Guang's presentation delved into the transformative impact of Generative AI (GAI) on various aspects of society, including its integration into consumer applications, the rise of low code solutions, and the development of multimodal models. As GAI becomes mainstream with applications like Microsoft Office incorporating GAI capabilities, it revolutionises how software is developed and used. The emergence of low code solutions, where GAI can co-write and review codes, raises questions about the future roles of software engineers and the democratisation of coding. Future models will enable input/output across text, image, video, and audio formats, opening new possibilities for AI applications, including digital twinning of humans. In the education sector, GAI could bridge

[1] The Communities of Success Initiative by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) is a positive and forward-looking articulation of a vision of Islam and Muslim communities that are compatible with the modern world and thrive in and actively contribute to contemporary societies.

existing educational divides but may also create new ones, necessitating government intervention to ensure equitable access to educational GAI. Enhancing information literacy skills is crucial to navigate the evolving GAI landscape.

GAI's use in creating digital representations of religious figures raises ethical and theological debates. Data that is not reflective of a particular society may influence its norms and values, potentially disrupting established forms of organised religion and lead to new expressions of spirituality. Overall, this presentation highlighted the vast and multifaceted social implications of GAI, stressing the need for stakeholders, including the Muslim community, to engage in discussions on the ethical, cultural, and regulatory aspects of GAI. It emphasises the importance of proactive engagement to shape the responsible and inclusive integration of AI technologies within Muslim communities.



### III. AI, AUTHORITY, AND INTENTION IN RELIGIOUS DECISION-MAKING

James McGrail's presentation focused on the critical examination of AI, authority, and intention within the realm of religious decision-making, drawing insights from Islamic teachings and ethical considerations. It emphasised the pivotal role of intention or *niyyah* in religious practices, drawing from the teachings of Imam Al-Ghazali. *Niyyah*, according to him, encompasses both knowledge and action, highlighting the importance of internal states in religious observance. In this regard, it is critical for us to engage with AI technologies, especially regarding how authority is established and maintained in religious decision-making processes. Similarly, integrating ethical considerations into the discourse on AI is crucial for a comprehensive evaluation.

The presentation advocated for a holistic curriculum addressing the technical and social aspects of AI in Muslim religious life, reflecting a forward-thinking approach to navigating technological advancements. The connection between simulation and intention was explored, shedding light on how virtual experiences can impact one's intentions. Overall, the presentation called for a nuanced understanding of AI within the framework of Islamic ethics and ensuring that ethical considerations are integral to discussions on technological advancements.



#### IV. CONCLUSION

The roundtable discussion provided a platform for in-depth exploration of the impact of AI on the Singapore Muslim community. The presentations underscored the importance of balancing traditional Islamic knowledge with modern technological advancements, engaging in proactive discussions on the ethical and cultural implications of AI, and developing comprehensive educational frameworks to navigate the complexities of AI in religious and societal contexts. By addressing these key themes, the discussion highlighted the need for a forward-thinking approach that integrates ethical considerations and promotes the responsible use of AI technologies within the Muslim community.





### NAVIGATING DIVERSITY IN PLURAL SOCIETIES: THE ROLE OF MINORITY COMMUNITIES

*Dr Ahmad Suaedy*

*Dean of the Faculty of Islam Nusantara at Nahdlatul Ulama  
University of Indonesia*

*16 November 2023*

#### I. ROLE OF MINORITY COMMUNITIES IN SHAPING DEMOCRACY

Dr Ahmad Suaedy's presentation offered a comprehensive examination of the significance of minority communities in the context of democratic and pluralistic societies, with a specific focus on Indonesia. The insightful discourse delved into the intricate dynamics of minority-majority relations within the diverse religious landscape of Southeast Asia, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities faced by minority groups in Indonesia.

One of the central themes of the presentation was the pivotal role that minority communities play in shaping democratic societies. Dr. Suaedy emphasised the importance of recognising and understanding the nuances of minority-majority

interactions, particularly in a region as diverse as Southeast Asia. By exploring the intersections of religious identities within these dynamics, the presentation underscored the potential contributions of minority communities towards fostering harmony and inclusivity within Indonesian society.

### II. CASE STUDIES OF MINORITY COMMUNITIES

Dr. Suaedy highlighted Indonesia's ongoing journey towards achieving complete equality for its minority populations. While progress has been made, challenges persist, including the influence of transnationalist religious movements, which may carry sectarian undertones and impacts public opinion in Indonesia. Dr. Suaedy also discussed the unique cases of special autonomy for regions like Aceh and Papua, which, despite providing a degree of uniqueness for Indonesia, continue to grapple with conflicts and tensions.

Furthermore, the presentation touched upon the Muslim minority in Mindanao, Philippines, where efforts are underway to implement a special autonomy agreement, showcasing a potential pathway towards addressing minority rights and autonomy. In Patani, Thailand, however, the situation remains unresolved, lacking the optimism seen in other regions. Additionally, the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar serves as a stark reminder of the heavy oppression faced by certain minority groups, with little progress towards resolution in sight.


### III. FOSTERING INCLUSIVITY AND HARMONY

Dr. Suaedy's presentation underscored the importance of engaging with and supporting minority communities to foster a more inclusive and harmonious society. By acknowledging the challenges faced by these groups and recognising their potential contributions to societal cohesion, nations such as Indonesia can move closer towards realising its vision of a truly pluralistic and democratic society.

In conclusion, the presentation served as a thought-provoking exploration of the role of minority communities in Indonesia's pluralistic society, offering valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and community leaders seeking to navigate the complexities of diversity and promote social cohesion in the region. It provided

critical perspectives on fostering inclusivity and understanding the nuanced roles that minority communities play in democratic societies, which are essential for the success and cohesion of diverse Muslim communities in Singapore and beyond.





## 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 events, 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*

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