RPCS QUARTERLY

Developing New Horizons of Knowledge for Islam in the Contemporary World

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IN THIS ISSUE

SUMMARY

Building on the momentum from the beginning of the year, the second quarter of 2025 reinforced the commitment of the Research Programme in the Study of Muslim Communities of Success (RPCS) to bridge Islamic knowledge traditions with modern challenges facing Muslims in secular societies and thriving economies. As the dedicated research arm of the Singapore College of Islamic Studies (SCIS), RPCS contributes to the intellectual vibrancy whilst supporting its broader educational mission of developing contextually grounded Islamic scholarship.

This quarter featured significant interdisciplinary engagements that exemplified this approach to contextualised knowledge production. The programme successfully brought together diverse voices to explore how religious and moral frameworks can inform responses to environmental challenges and the complexities of governance in secular contexts. These initiatives reflected RPCS''s ongoing effort to develop scholarship that is both academically robust and practically relevant to Muslim communities navigating modern realities. Beyond these scholarly engagements, this quarter also included capacity-building workshops and institutional partnerships that support both immediate research objectives and the longer-term strategic goals of SCIS.

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RPCS
RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN THE STUDY OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS

RPCS ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION: SHARED RITUALS AND MORALITY AS PATHWAYS TO COHESION AND COOPERATION ON ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

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27 June 2025

I. INTRODUCTION

On Friday, 27th June 2025, RPCS hosted a roundtable discussion that brought together scholars, practitioners, and community leaders to explore how shared rituals, moral values, and religious traditions might support collective responses to the climate crisis. As ecological degradation deepens, the session asked a pressing question: how can spiritual and ethical worldviews help societies move towards cooperative action?

The event opened with two keynote presentations offering distinct but complementary perspectives. Professor Harvey Whitehouse, drawing from cognitive anthropology, examined how moralising religions historically enabled large-scale cooperation through shared rituals and norms. He highlighted seven core moral intuitions found across cultures and proposed that these could be reactivated for global environmental efforts. Associate Professor Md Saidul Islam followed with a presentation outlining an Islamic ecological paradigm. He argued that Islam provides not only a moral vision but also a spiritual discipline for stewardship and social responsibility.

These ideas set the stage for a wide-ranging discussion segment, where participants reflected on how such frameworks could be applied in everyday contexts, from organisational culture and interfaith engagement to youth outreach and public policy. The conversation, rich with insights from both local and international voices, affirmed the relevance of religious and moral traditions in cultivating a shared ecological ethic for our time.

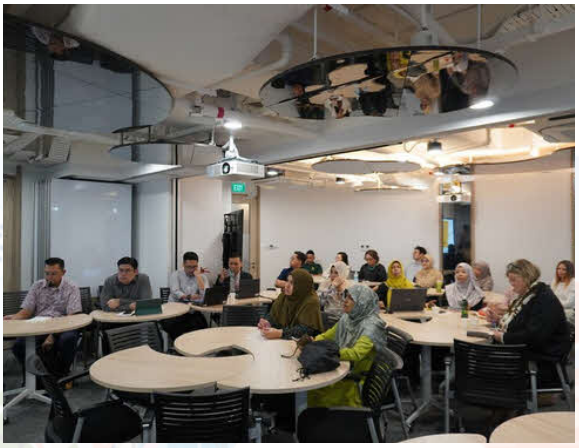
II. SHARED MORAL INTUITIONS AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF COOPERATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION

Professor Harvey Whitehouse opened the roundtable with a keynote presentation that offered a wide-ranging and interdisciplinary reflection on the psychological foundations of cooperation, and the potential of religious traditions to support collective responses to environmental challenges. Drawing from his extensive work in cognitive anthropology, he argued that moralising religions first emerged as powerful mechanisms for unifying diverse populations in multi-ethnic empires, enabling societies to scale beyond the limits of tribal affiliation through shared doctrines, rituals, and moral codes.

A central claim of the presentation was that human beings, regardless of cultural background, share a set of universal moral intuitions. Based on cross-cultural research led by his colleague Dr Oliver Scott Curry, Professor Whitehouse highlighted seven core moral rules that are found consistently across the world's cultures. They include helping family and group members, returning favours, being brave, deferring to superiors, dividing resources fairly, and respecting property. These moral foundations, he suggested, provide an underutilised resource for addressing global issues such as biodiversity loss and climate change. Yet, he observed that most efforts to get people to act on the climate crisis still come from secular sources of authority

authority, neglecting other sources of authority such as religion, that could broaden the emotional and ethical appeal of environmental action.

Another major theme of the presentation was the concept of identity fusion, a psychological phenomenon in which a person's individual and group identities become deeply merged. Through fieldwork, including studies conducted with revolutionary fighters during the Libyan uprising, Professor Whitehouse demonstrated how shared intense experiences such as trauma or struggle, can generate powerful bonds of loyalty and self-sacrifice. While identity fusion originally evolved in small face-to-face groups, it can be scaled up through shared rituals, doctrines and symbols, many of which are sustained and transmitted through religious traditions. He argued that this capacity for deep group bonding can be redirected towards positive collective goals, including environmental responsibility. In collaboration with behavioural economist Dr Lukas Reinhardt, Professor Whitehouse conducted experiments that tested the effectiveness of different narratives in motivating pro-environmental behaviour. The most successful messaging, it turned out, did not rely solely on scientific evidence but on relational appeals that emphasised humanity's shared ancestry and biological kinship. Messages that framed humanity as "one family" were shown to increase psychological fusion with humanity at large and led to greater optimism and willingness to act on the climate crisis. These findings point to the need for environmental communication strategies that speak not just to reason but also to identity, belonging and moral sentiment.



Professor Whitehouse concluded by underscoring the untapped potential of religious communities in climate leadership. With over seven billion people in the world identifying with a religious tradition, faith-based organisations have a profound influence on values, consumption habits and moral responsibility. Yet, environmental action remains dominated by secular voices. For responses to the climate crisis to be truly global and transformative, he argued, they must be grounded in an inclusive moral framework, one that draws upon humanity's shared psychological architecture and the ethical resources embedded within religious traditions. In closing, he invited participants to consider how their own communities and theological traditions might help cultivate the shared narratives and cooperative spirit needed to care for the planet we all inhabit.

III. THE ISLAMIC ECOLOGICAL PARADIGM: A RELIGIOUS FRAMEWORK FOR ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP AND SOCIAL COHESION

Associate Professor Md Saidul Islam's presentation introduced and developed what he terms the Islamic ecological paradigm, a theoretical framework he developed in 2012, that draws on Islamic theology, law, ritual and ethics to respond to the global environmental crisis. His address built on the psychological and anthropological insights presented earlier by Professor Whitehouse and brought to the fore the religious and moral resources available within Islam to promote collective ecological responsibility and cohesion.

Framing the environmental crisis as an existential threat marked by climate change, biodiversity loss, food insecurity and ecological degradation, Professor Saidul argued that technical solutions alone are insufficient. He pointed to deep structural inequalities, such as the coexistence of food surplus and mass hunger, or the disproportionate suffering of the poor in climate-related disasters, and called for a rethinking of the dominant paradigm of modernity. Modernity, he contended, has ruptured the once-harmonious relationship between human beings and nature, while also alienating humankind from the Creator. Its underlying ethos of unbridled freedom, unregulated consumption and instrumental rationality must be critically examined and reformed through a values-based framework.

It is within this context that Professor Saidul introduced the Islamic ecological paradigm as both a religious vision and an ethical response. This paradigm, he explained, is grounded in the five higher objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*), each of which is deeply endangered by environmental degradation:

- **Protection of Life (*nafs*)**: Without a stable climate, clean air, and access to fresh water, life itself cannot be sustained. Climate-induced disasters, toxic pollution, and ecosystem collapse pose a direct threat to human survival.

- **Protection of Intellect (*'aql*)**: Pollution and chemical exposure, especially among children, compromise cognitive development and long-term intellectual capacity. This erodes the very foundation upon which knowledge and moral discernment rest.

- **Protection of Wealth (*māl*)**: Environmental degradation destroys agricultural productivity, fisheries, and natural capital, disproportionately affecting the livelihoods of agrarian and coastal communities. The collapse of ecosystems results in the loss of economic security and prosperity.

- **Protection of Religion (*dīn*)**: The Earth serves as the site for worship and a means of sustaining religious life. When the natural environment is polluted or destroyed, access to clean spaces for ritual practice, halal food, and sacred connection is jeopardised. Preservation of the Earth is thus a religious imperative.

- **Protection of Lineage (*nasl*)**: The continuity of the human family, and of the ummah, is impossible without ecological stability. Environmental degradation threatens reproductive health, food security, and the future of our descendants.

Positioning environmental protection as a *farḍ kifāyah* (collective obligation), Professor Saidul elaborated on six central concepts that together constitute the Islamic ecological paradigm: *tawḥīd* (unity of creation under one Creator), *fiṭrah* (natural human disposition to live in harmony with nature), *khalīfah* (stewardship), *amānah* (trust), *'ubūdiyyah* (servitude to God) and *mīzān* (balance). Together, these principles affirm that humans are not masters of nature but trustees accountable to God for its care. Concepts such as *'adl* (justice), *iḥsān* (benevolence), *wasatiyyah* (moderation) and *zuhd* (asceticism) further anchor Islamic environmentalism in a broader vision of ethical living. Islamic ethics reject a human exceptionalist paradigm that permits unrestrained domination over nature. Rather, every creature is understood to have rights, and human beings are entrusted stewards, not owners.

Professor Saidul also highlighted the ecological significance embedded in Islamic rituals. *Wuḍū'* (ablution) trains Muslims in water conservation; the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ used less than one litre for his ablution even beside a flowing river. During *ḥajj*, pilgrims in ihram are instructed not to harm animals or plants within the sacred precincts (*ḥaram*), instilling respect for ecological boundaries. *'Īd al-Aḍḥā* reinforces ethical treatment of animals and intentionality in sacrifice. These rituals, when properly understood, carry ecological meaning; they form spiritual habits of restraint, reverence and interdependence.

He then addressed contemporary applications of this paradigm. Singapore, he noted, already offers promising examples, such as the Green Avenue Initiative at Masjid Maarof and MUIS's fatwa on water processed through distillation, such as NEWater. These reflect how Islamic teachings and public policy can be aligned in pursuit of shared environmental goals.

To operationalise this paradigm, Professor Saidul introduced the "Three J's Model" developed by Odeh Al-Jayyousi, which includes green *jihād* (activism), green *ijtihād* (innovation) and green *jiwād* (sustainable lifestyle). He cited case studies from across the Muslim world and beyond: Green Muslims and Green *Iftār* initiatives in Washington D.C., eco-halal and green mosque movements in Chicago and Virginia; the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES) in the UK; and community-based eco-initiatives in Bandung and Zanzibar.

He offered practical examples from Singapore: if every person saved one glass of water per day while brushing their teeth, six million glasses of water could be saved daily. Yet, food waste remains a major issue. According to the Singapore Environmental Council, the equivalent of 75 million plates of nasi lemak are wasted annually across households. He cited the Qur'anic verse (*Surah Al-Isra', 17: 26-27*) as a moral response to waste: "Indeed, the wasteful are brothers of the devils, and the devil is ever ungrateful to his Lord."

Professor Saidul emphasised that ecological consciousness must begin in the home and be transmitted through families, schools and mosques. He called on religious leaders to use their moral authority to promote environmental values through khutbahs, madrasah curricula and interfaith collaboration. He also highlighted the relevance of Singapore's Green Plan 2030, which aligns strongly with Islamic ethical teachings in its emphasis on sustainability, moderation and community responsibility.

In closing, Professor Saidul argued that the Islamic ecological paradigm offers not only an Islamic response to the environmental crisis but also a framework for strengthening social cohesion and interfaith cooperation in plural societies. Rooted in theology, law, ritual and ethics, it calls on Muslims to act not only as citizens but as khalīfahs, entrusted stewards of the Earth. He concluded with an invitation to build a shared moral ecology that draws from diverse traditions but is united in the responsibility to protect the planet for future generations.

IV. DISCUSSION SEGMENT

The discussion segment invited participants to reflect on the presentations and explore how ritual, morality and religion might contribute to environmental responsibility in real-world contexts. It sparked deep and wide-ranging conversations, with contributions from local leaders, international guests and professionals across fields and faiths.

The discussion began with a reflection on the significance of the Islamic New Year, which coincided with the day of the event. A participant shared insights from a recent gathering with Singapore's Mufti on the ethical and spiritual lessons of the Hijrah, particularly the values of justice and migration for the sake of principle. Against this backdrop, a question was raised on how the seven cooperative principles outlined by Professor Whitehouse, together with the Islamic ecological paradigm presented by Professor Saidul, might be applied within institutional settings. The participant, who had worked across secular and Muslim-majority environments, noted that many Muslims carry their faith-based ethics into diverse workspaces, including schools, mosques and government agencies. The question posed was how they might remain grounded in their religious identity while contributing meaningfully to shared workplace culture, particularly in multicultural Singapore.

Professor Whitehouse responded that the seven cooperative principles are widely shared across religious and secular worldviews, and focusing on such core values, rather than theological doctrine, can help build moral consensus. In diverse societies like Singapore, these principles could serve as a unifying moral foundation. He suggested that interfaith dialogues could benefit from being more structured, explicitly inviting participants to explore how their respective traditions speak to these shared values. Professor Saidul agreed and noted that the ecological

ethics embedded in Islamic teachings are well-established but often overlooked. The issue, he said, is not the absence of guidance, but the lack of awareness and practical uptake. While secular traditions may frame environmental stewardship as civic duty, Islam offers a dual frame: one of civic responsibility and religious accountability. This dual imperative, he emphasised, should be harnessed in shaping organisational culture and policy.

The next question came from a participant working in interfaith youth engagement in the United States, who reflected on the emotional barriers faced by young people in responding to climate change. Despite their religious grounding, many experience what he described as "climate grief" and a paralysing sense of powerlessness. He asked how communities might move beyond passive awareness towards action.

In response, Professor Whitehouse acknowledged that what appears as apathy is often a matter of prioritisation. Individuals may care deeply but find it difficult to act amidst competing life demands. To elevate climate action on the moral agenda, he suggested tapping into deep motivational systems, such as identity fusion, the sense of being profoundly bonded to a group or cause. He noted that narratives of shared suffering, especially when framed in terms of children and future generations, can activate a moral urgency that compels action. He also spoke of the importance of "barrier-crossing", where people come to recognise that suffering is not unique to their group and begin to connect more deeply with others across social divides.

Professor Saidul added that individual action still has systemic impact. He highlighted the phenomenon of "green reflexivity", where consumer awareness and pressure have compelled corporations to develop more environmentally and socially responsible products. Even as individuals, he argued, people can be part of broader movements that shift norms and practices. Platforms such as this roundtable, he said, are important in nurturing such shared moral consciousness.

This led to a question on whether such narratives of shared suffering can be persuasive in highly unequal societies. In contexts where the privileged are insulated from the worst effects of climate change, such as heat stress, food insecurity or displacement, how can solidarity and collective responsibility be fostered?

Professor Whitehouse acknowledged this challenge. He observed that in many societies, including Singapore, there is a growing trend of conspicuous consumption and status performance, which undermines the perception that "we're all in this together". He nonetheless argued that rituals, especially those that are emotionally resonant and inclusive, can help bridge these divides. Drawing on local examples, such as commemorative school activities such as Total Defence Day that encourage empathy with past hardship, he proposed that meaningful shared experiences, even if symbolic, can cultivate the kind of moral imagination needed to cross socioeconomic and cultural boundaries.

Professor Saidul also underscored the urgent need for what he termed an "ontological alliance" among religious communities in response to the global environmental crisis. He argued that ecological degradation transcends national and cultural boundaries, affecting the entire planet as a shared ecological commons. As such, faith communities must move beyond isolated responses and embrace a deeper collective responsibility rooted in their spiritual worldviews. This alliance, he suggested, is not merely strategic but ontological, stemming from the very being and interconnectedness of creation as understood in religious traditions. Without such unity of purpose and moral vision, the world risks heading towards an uninhabitable future shaped by unsustainable consumption and ecological collapse. Professor Saidul called for collaborative, faith-inspired action across traditions to confront these shared existential threats.

Another participant, an academic from Japan, raised a question about the omission of Japan from the original data set used in Professor Whitehouse's cross-cultural study on moral foundations. She also reflected on the role of Shintoism and its emphasis on harmony with nature and asked how Japanese values fit within the moral framework of cooperation.

Professor Whitehouse clarified that while Japan had not been included in the initial 60-country sample, subsequent studies confirmed that the seven cooperative principles are indeed endorsed within Japanese society. He noted a distinctive cultural feature: Japan's low relational mobility. Unlike societies where people frequently change social groups, social ties in Japan tend to be stable and enduring. This creates strong normative pressures to act ethically, not necessarily because of fusion with the group, but because of long-standing social accountability.

The next intervention came from a sustainability consultant pursuing postgraduate studies, who offered a strong personal reflection on Islam's environmental commitments. He argued that environmental responsibility is already deeply embedded in the Qur'an and Sunnah, and does not require fresh justification. The challenge, he suggested, is not one of convincing Muslims, but of reminding them of what their faith already demands. He cited several Qur'anic verses and prophetic examples, noting their close alignment, even with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

Professor Saidul affirmed this point. He described Islam as a "natural religion", one that aligns both with human nature and the natural order. He lamented the underutilisation of what he called "Islamic science", which historically aimed not at profit maximisation but at social wellbeing and the discovery of God's signs in nature. He called for its revival as a vital intellectual and spiritual resource for confronting ecological degradation. Professor Whitehouse concurred, adding that regular repetition and rituals are essential to embedding values. Just as Islamic ritual sustains spiritual awareness, environmental ethics need structured, repeated engagement to remain salient.

The final question came from a representative of the Baha'i International Community. She asked how societies might rethink dominant frameworks, particularly economic and educational models, that prioritise material success

spiritual service. She pointed out that these values are embedded from a young age and shape how individuals approach work and achievement. What might it mean, she asked, to imagine a new paradigm centred on spiritual growth and community wellbeing?

Professor Whitehouse acknowledged the gravity of this question. He reflected on the moral tension experienced by those in positions of corporate leadership who may want to uphold religious or ethical commitments but are also beholden to market pressures. He suggested that purposeful capitalism, a model of business aligned with moral and even transcendental goals, may offer one path forward.

In sum, the discussion segment surfaced a common concern: that moral clarity exists across traditions, but the mechanisms to sustain and activate these values need renewed attention. Whether through ritual, narrative, education or institutional culture, the discussion affirmed the potential of religion to serve as a powerful resource for environmental responsibility and cooperation in both personal and collective life. [i]

[i] Readers may look forward to forthcoming RPCS commentaries from the respective presenters, which will expand on their insights and provide deeper reflections on the themes highlighted in this discussion.

RPCS MASTERCLASS: ISLAM AND GOVERNANCE IN THE MODERN ERA

Dr. Khalil Abdur-Rashid
Muslim Chaplain at Harvard University
Public Policy Lecturer at Harvard Kennedy School of Government

27 June 2025

I. INTRODUCTION

In late June 2025, Dr Khalil Abdur-Rashid, a public policy lecturer at Harvard Kennedy School of Government and Harvard's first full-time Muslim chaplain, delivered a Masterclass on Islam and Governance for RPCS. He begins his presentation with a quote by Imam Malik:

لن يصلح آخر هذه الأمة إلا بما صلح بها أولها

"This nation (ummah) will only be rectified by what rectified the first nation (ummah)." – Iman, Righteous Deeds, Love for one another, Unity, and then Governance.

This quote sets the tone for his presentation by highlighting the relation between virtues and governance (good governance), as well as the importance of drawing from the tradition to extract relevant concepts and values which help inform our understanding of Islamic governance in the modern world.

In a post-colonial context and within an ever-evolving political landscape, many Muslim communities continue to grapple with the complex relationship between Islam and modern governance, where both paradigms or systems are often perceived as completely distinct from each other. This is understandable given that traditional Islamic political systems were developed in the pre-modern world.

However, it can be argued that the Shariah is not necessarily absent from modern transformations of governance. After all, Shariah is neither static nor confined to a specific context.

II. FRAMEWORK AND MAJOR CONCEPTS OF GOVERNANCE

Dr Khalil presented the major concepts of governance in Islam which can be observed in the Qur'an, Sunnah-Seerah (the life of the Prophet s.a.w.), and in practice by the following generations, particularly during the Imperial age from the Abbasid to the Ottoman caliphate.

Major Concepts of Governance from the Sunnah & Seerah

01 Madina Charter / Constitution (*Ṣaḥīfah/Wathīqah*)

02 Covenants of the Prophet (relations with other faith communities)

03 Inviolability & Rights

04 Protecting the Common Good & Policing Public Nuisances (*Ḥisbah/Muḥtasib*)

05 Privacy

06 Rights of the Road & Public Spaces

07 *Bay'ah* (Oath of Allegiance)

08 *Ijmā'* (Consensus of the Community)

09 Market Place / Monetary Policies

Major Concepts of Governance in the Islamic Imperial Era

(Abbasid - Ottoman Empires)

- *Siyāsah* ("Islamic Secular") - Shariah Distinction
- *Fatwá* / Qada Dynamic
- *Waqf* / *Ḥubus* Role (Develoment of Civil Society)
- *Maṣlahah*
- Economic Policies (Taxation; Tariffs; Zakat; *Jizyah*)
- Circle of Justice
- *Wilāyah*

Major Concepts of Governance from the Quran

01 Shariah

02 Customary Norms (*'Urf*)

03 *Shūrá* (mutual consultation)

04 Justice

05 *Ihsan* in all things (good governance)

06 Vicegerency (*Khalīfah*)

07 Non-Maleficence (Do no Harm)

08 Criminal Law - *Ḥudūd*, Retribution (*Qiṣaṣ*), *Ta'dhīr* (Discretionary Punishment)

09 Judicial Policy

10 International Relations (rules of war)

11 *Sulḥ* - Conflict Resolution & Negotiated Settlements

12 Monetary Policy

13 Family Law (marriage, divorce, custody, guardianship and inheritance)

These concepts are not merely remnants of the past, but they are argued to be relevant and expressed even today. Dr Khalil thoughtfully presented these concepts in relation more contemporary terminologies to help bridge the perceived gap between traditional Islamic governance and modern political systems. His approach demonstrated how these fundamental themes evolved and manifest in the modern world.

To synthesise these concepts, Dr Khalil identified three key questions:

1. *What is the foremost concern about governance?*
    - ***Ensuring Freedom**: Trust and Integrity (Amānah). In Islam, ensuring freedom of rights does not mean unlimited access to merely doing whatever is desired. Rather, it means that the individual has the freedom to uphold his rights to perform his duties, whether in the form of a religious obligation or to sustain economic and social responsibilities. Fulfilling the right to observe duties also reflects the trust and integrity of the society.*

    - ***Protection against Tyranny (Ẓulm) & Chaos – Non-Maleficence:** The concept of 'non-maleficence' is heavily factored in Islamic jurisprudence, deriving from the Islamic legislative maxim, "There should neither be inflicting harm nor reciprocating harm".*

    - *Creation of a just political society ('Adl)*

2. *How and to whom is the management of human affairs delegated?*
    - ***Executive**: This can take multiple forms throughout history and context. We have seen the Executive power expressed through the Caliph, Monarch, even the Ulama in some models of executive authority, the President and the Prime Minister in more recent and secular systems.*

    - ***Legislative:** This refers to the authority responsible for introducing and enacting laws and policies. In modern secular contexts, this role is typically attributed to institutions such as Parliament or Congress. However, they were also present in pre-modern societies with legislative functions, such as the Shura Council in Muslim societies that advised rulers and contributed to decision-making processes.*

3. *In what manner does such delegation operate?*
    - *The implementation of laws and policies has been expressed in different ways throughout history. Some were through coercion, often labelled as Authoritarian or Military Dictatorship – Power-based (wilāyat 'am).*

    - *Others were in more consultative expressions which could take the form of democratic processes (mutual or selective) – Contract-based (wilāyat khass).*

From these key points, we can observe that there are multiple applications of governance in Muslim communities, each holding varying degrees of relevance to the concepts established earlier.

III. MODERN MODELS OF ISLAMIC GOVERNANCE

This is particularly evident in the modern-secular world where the 'caliphate' is no longer present. In response, several Muslim nations and political theorists have attempted to administer Islamic governance by adapting or rejecting modern political systems in different ways. Dr Khalil narrowed down these diverse theories and applications into three primary models:

- Islamic State (Theocratic State)
- Secular State (Civil State)
- Hybrid (Custodian of Islam - Democratic State)

In each of these political models, the Shariah in its legal dimension is applied differently. For example, Dr Khalil noted that the **Islamic State model**, as adopted by groups such as ISIS and the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwān Al-Muslimīn*), is characterised by a complete rejection of modern political systems. This model is often seen as a reformist response against Western-European dominance. After all, modern modes of governance are argued to be rooted in Western experiences, including concepts such as secularism, democracy, human rights and liberalism. Essentially, the Islamic State model aims to establish an Islamic social order through a theocratic system from top to bottom. In practice, however, Dr Khalil argues that this model has yet to produce a viable example that demonstrates the promise of its theoretical framework. Often its application has been considered by many to be extreme.

The second model is the **Civil-Secular State model**, in which the state's involvement with religion varies depending on the country. In some cases, the state engages with religion only in certain areas, such as regulating marriage and worship for religious communities. In others, the involvement goes beyond that. For example, the United States adopts a pure separation of church and state. In application, Americans are free to practise their religion privately without interference from the state. Contrastingly, in France, the state takes a more active role in regulating religious expression. Citizens must often seek state permission or comply with specific restrictions to engage in certain religious practices. This delicate balance in State policy is always present in the question of equality and public liberty. Today, Secular states generally recognise religious institutions for religious communities.

The third model is the **Hybrid model**. In this political system, the Shariah plays a more dynamic and adaptable role in governance. At times, religion is invoked to play a central role. Other times, it takes on a more secondary position in governance. Essentially, the idea is for the State to preserve religion and its institutions (including other faith groups) and promote moral values without imposing a theocratic religious governance as per the Islamic State model.

IV. CORE PILLARS OF ISLAMIC GOVERNANCE

Beyond these theories and models of Islamic governance in the modern world, Dr Khalil proposes the key and core pillars of Islamic Governance – Shariah and Siyasah (administrative governance). These foundational pillars represent ideals that should be present in any Islamic system of governance.

First, Dr Khalil emphasised the importance of representation and participation in the administration of governance. In addition to experienced politicians, governance should include participation from religious scholars (*Ulama*), experts in various fields and significant representation from minority groups and grassroot community members.

The Islamic tradition recognises two approaches of administering governance – one, through consultation, and two, through a more authoritative means. He then argued that the best way to accommodate the voices of the participants is through consultation (*Shura*). This consultative process, he suggested, can take place within a more democratic framework rather than an authoritarian model, for example. Historical caliphs and monarchs (*Malik*) in the past do not necessarily practise authoritarian leadership as executives. Rather, they have advisers that play a significant role in expressing consultative leadership.

According to Dr Khalil, the core components of *Siyasah* consist of the following:

Executive: Custodianship of Islam by State (Amānah)

- *The executive holds the responsibility of safeguarding the religion and ensuring its presence and values are reflected in the life of Muslims while protecting the rights of the citizens (regardless of faith). Dr Khalil highlighted that religiosity, and by extension, faith, is not a prerequisite for holding this responsibility. There is sufficient precedence in Islamic history to demonstrate this, in expanding the role of leadership for Muslim communities.*

Legislative: Ensuring Public Benefits (Maṣlaha)

- *Laws and policies should aim to secure the public good, balancing religious principles with societal needs to promote overall welfare and justice.*
- *The legislative position also plays a significant part in offering a check-and-balance role.*

Economic: Protecting Society from Economical Tyranny (Non-Maleficence)

- *The economic component of Siyasah includes instruments such as Taxation, Zakat, Waqf, Inheritance and Monetary Policy, which help to safeguard the public, ensuring the circulation of wealth and empowering the vulnerable.*

Social: Protecting Society from Tyranny

- *The social dimension of Siyasah extends to Education, Family, Health, Land management, upholding Justice and the utilisation of Energy and Resources. This is another core aspect of Siyasah which employs the concept of Non-Maleficence to safeguard the welfare of society.*

V. GOOD GOVERNANCE AND IHSAN

Dr Khalil argued that much of the discourse on governance in Islam tended to focus on its structures and legal frameworks, while often overlooking the importance of 'good governance' which can be viewed as part of Ihsan (Excellence). This underscores the inseparable role of virtue and moral excellence in governance. Good governance, in this sense, serves to protect people from tyranny by upholding justice and safeguarding their rights.

If today, democracy protects its citizens from tyranny, then it should be considered a best practice to maintain good governance, as compared to other models such as dictatorship, communism or monarchy, which are often perceived to run contrary to the objective of justice in today's world.

VI. *MAQASID* PRINCIPLES AND RIGHTS

In concluding his presentation, Dr Khalil clarified what he meant by "rights" within the framework of Islamic governance. These rights are grounded in the five foundational principles of *Maqasid al-Shariah* (the Higher Objectives of the Shariah), along with additional dimensions he proposed. They include:

- Protection of faith and religion
- Protection of life
- Protection of intellect
- Protection of the family institution
- Protection of property
- Protection of dignity
- Protection of the environment and natural resources
- Protection of public and private spaces

JAKARTA TRIP REFLECTIONS

May 2025

The recent RPCS institutional visit to Indonesia marked more than an academic engagement. It was a return to a shared regional history, to long-standing intellectual ties, and to a long-established yet still evolving tradition of contextual Islamic Thought in the Malay world. Over the course of several days, meetings with institutions such as UNUSIA, Maarif Institute, Paramadina University and the Indonesian International Islamic University (UIII) provided valuable insights into institutional development and intellectual frameworks. Not only that, they also offered a space for RPCS to critically situate its own work within the wider Southeast Asian Islamic discourse.

RPCS has always understood that the study of Muslim communities in Singapore cannot be meaningfully pursued in isolation. The Malay-Muslim community in Singapore is not an insular one; it has always been shaped by regional and global flows of knowledge, reform and migration. From the printing presses of Kampong Gelam to the pesantren networks of Java and Sumatra, the lines of influence run deep. The visit to Indonesia reaffirmed this historical continuity and reminded us of the importance of learning from regional best practices – not as a passive exercise in observation but as an active engagement with institutions that have developed Islamic discourses grounded in their own histories and social realities.

At UNUSIA (Nahdlatul Ulama University of Indonesia), the concept of Islam Nusantara was presented not as a mere branding of locality but as an epistemic project rooted in three interlocking domains: philology, Islamic sciences and socio-political studies. Articulated by Dr Ahmad Suaedy and Dr Ginanjar Shaaban, their approach reflects a longstanding confidence among Indonesian scholars to further develop Islamic thought that is critical, homegrown and responsive to current realities. The emphasis on philology – particularly the study of manuscripts – also carries significance for RPCS, whose Intellectual Heritage project aims to highlight the link between our local intellectual tradition with the wider region.

Dr Ginanjar's reference to Southeast Asia's increasing strategic relevance – highlighted by Shaykh Ahmad al-Tayyib's observations on regional stability, pluralism and modern engagement – speaks directly to RPCS's long-term vision. However, he also raised a structural limitation: the lack of proper documentation and theoretical scaffolding in Southeast Asian Islamic scholarship has hindered its visibility in the global Muslim intellectual community. This concern aligns with RPCS's intention to build archives, identify genealogies and contribute to the documentation and development of Islamic thought in the region. The reference to Singapore's historical contributions as a printing hub in the 19th century – particularly in Kampong Gelam – further underscores the importance of RPCS's work in understanding Singapore's historical and potential role in shaping regional Islamic discourse.

The visit to Maarif Institute offered another perspective of intellectual engagement. As an institution committed to promoting Progressive Islam, Maarif Institute's methodological focus is both normative and civic. It frames Islam as rahmatan lil-'alamin (mercy to all of creation) but grounds this vision in practical programmes: interfaith dialogue, values-based leadership training and civic education in human rights and pluralism. As elucidated by Dr Andar Nubowo, what stood out was the Institute's ability to translate philosophical commitments into institutional work.

RPCS's own conceptual framework, which aims to explore the conditions of Muslim Communities of Success, finds resonance here. Maarif Institute offers an example of how Islamic institutions can operate beyond formal religious instruction to address broader issues of coexistence, identity and social transformation. Particularly relevant is the Institute's role in shaping narratives around Islam and democracy, as well as its recognition of Indonesia's hybrid political culture – neither secular in the Western sense, nor theocratic. This nuanced understanding of state-religion relations may offer comparative insights for Singapore's own evolving governance of religion.

These reflections were further deepened during our engagement with Paramadina University, known for its reformist orientation and civic engagement. The scholars from Paramadina expressed a keen awareness of the region's intellectual diversity. Figures such as Dr Ahmad Rifa'i Hasan, Dr Lutfi Asyaukanie and Dr Fuad Mahbub candidly shared their thoughts on Singapore's historical role in the region's religious landscape. Their knowledge of Kampong Gelam's intellectual legacy reveals an enduring recognition of Singapore's past role in the reformist movement in Southeast Asia. It is a recognition that calls for RPCS to critically examine how that intellectual energy can be reignited and translated into the present.

At UIII, the tone of the conversation shifted towards the global landscape of Islamic Studies. Under the leadership of esteemed scholars, the university is positioning itself as a centre for interdisciplinary Islamic studies, bringing together classical Islamic disciplines with the social sciences and humanities. The structure of their MA programmes – ranging from turath studies to dual degrees with institutions such as SOAS and the University of Edinburgh – reflects a serious effort to reconfigure Islamic higher education in ways that are both contextually grounded and globally engaged.

As part of the visit, RPCS attended a conference on Decolonising Social Science and Humanities, jointly organised by UIII and the Turkey-based Institute Social. The conference brought together scholars, policymakers and practitioners to critically examine how colonial legacies continue to shape knowledge production, both institutionally and epistemologically. The discussions centred on rethinking inherited frameworks, reasserting indigenous intellectual traditions, and situating Southeast Asia as an autonomous site of Islamic reasoning and scholarly innovation. Several panels reflected on the persistent marginality of non-Arab Muslim societies in global Islamic discourse, and how Southeast Asian experiences – marked by pluralism, negotiation and hybridity – offer a compelling alternative to dominant paradigms. For

RPCS, the conference served as an important discursive space regarding the need to develop critical and localised bodies of knowledge. It was also a timely affirmation that the Nusantara region must be studied not as a marginal entity but as a generative field of Islamic Thought in its own right.

The conference is especially relevant in the context of SCIS and RPCS, where we aim to develop contextualised bodies of knowledge built upon our local intellectual heritage. Academics such as Professor Farid Alatas, Professor Vedi Hadiz and Professor Salman Sayyid emphasised the importance of epistemic independence and intellectual autonomy, countering not only colonialism but also biased paradigms such as nativism and authoritarianism. On the other hand, figures such as Professor Farish Noor, Professor Recep Senturk and Professor Anna Gade, advocated that the intellectual project required epistemic restructuring, highlighting the need to develop critical and creative integration of indigenous knowledge systems. This resonates with RPCS's current focus on the Intellectual Heritage project, where we are working towards recentring our local Ulama Intellectuals as knowledge producers and critical mediators of Islamic tradition.

What the visit ultimately revealed was a regional landscape that is intellectually dynamic, institutionally confident and critically self-aware, while also exhibiting a generous and collaborative approach as exemplified by RPCS's engagements. This bodes well for RPCS as an emerging research programme that has just entered this discursive space. Each institution that we encountered demonstrated in its own way a commitment to developing Islamic Thought that is not merely derivative but shaped by local histories, contemporary challenges and global conversations. These are not institutions that look elsewhere for validation. They speak with their own voice and carry a distinctive identity that is evident in their output.

For RPCS, the significance of this is twofold. First, it affirms the importance of situating Singapore's Islamic discourse within the broader Malay-Islamic world – not merely for cultural reasons but for epistemic ones. The intellectual challenges faced by Singapore's Muslims are not unique. They are shared, albeit expressed differently, across different societies in the region. RPCS must be conscious of the region's intellectual discourse to be able to partake in its intellectual synergy that has long existed and is always evolving.

Secondly, the visit reinforced RPCS's role as both a research institution and a discursive platform. Its work must go beyond documentation; it must create the conditions for knowledge to circulate, for memory to be reconstituted, and for new ideas to emerge. These institutions embody an approach that honours their intellectual tradition in a way that is critical and creative. They have built upon the ideas of their religious intellectuals and developed a strong intellectual tradition that is both dynamic and localised.

The demands of today indicate that mere research output no longer suffices. What is required of RPCS is critical reflection, scholarly inquiry and moral imagination. These are imperative in its mission to produce localised bodies of knowledge that integrate both Islamic Tradition and modern humanities, developed from the Muslim community's unique Singaporean context as a Muslim minority in a secular state and an advanced economy. The RPCS institutional visit to Indonesia was a reminder that such capacities and collaborations exist within reach, and that the task before us is not to replicate but to learn, adapt and contribute. As the Nusantara's Islamic intellectual landscape evolves, RPCS has the opportunity to be an impactful node in the rich and long history of the region's Islamic discourse. For this, it must both reclaim and engage with Singapore's Islamic intellectual heritage.

[MDDI SENTIMENTS RESEARCH] AI X RESEARCH TRAINING: GENERATIVE AI FOR LITERATURE REVIEWS

Wednesday, 26th March 2025

I. SUMMARY OF EVENT

On 26th March 2025, the RPCS team attended an AI Research Training seminar conducted by the Ministry of Digital Development and Information (MDDI). This seminar centred on leveraging generative artificial intelligence tools for academic literature review. With the rapidly evolving landscape of academic research, this session bridged the gap between traditional academic research methodologies and emerging AI technologies. It is imperative for researchers to stay up-to-date and utilise the latest technologies while maintaining academic integrity. This seminar explored the recent advances in generative AI, particularly the development of the 'deep research' function for literature reviews. Through practical demonstration and hands-on exercises, participants of the seminar learned how to leverage these tools to conduct comprehensive literature reviews more efficiently. The seminar also taught participants how to craft effective prompts and understand the limitations of generative AI tools. Participants had the opportunity to experiment with various AI tools using their own research questions, making the insights immediately applicable to their work.

II. TAKEAWAYS AND REFLECTIONS

1. <u>The "BOSS" Framework:</u> The seminar introduced the BOSS (Background, Objective, Specific Output, Share more) Framework to craft effective AI prompts for academic literature review. This framework emphasises the importance of contextual background, clear objectives, specific output parameters and iterative refinement. In order to properly utilise generative AI tools, a clear and comprehensive prompt must be input to yield more sophisticated and relevant outputs. Through this structured approach, participants discovered how to harness AI's potential to enhance established research practices.

2. Limitations of AI: With the advancement of technology, several prominent AI research tools have emerged. Among them are ChatGPT, with its 'deep research' feature; Perplexity, with its real-time citation capabilities; and Elicit, with its focus on academic source analysis. These tools offer researchers a means to streamline the labour-intensive aspects of literature reviews, enabling them to dedicate more time to critical analysis and theoretical development.

However, the seminar highlighted the crucial limitations that one must consider when using AI research tools. The various limitations include their tendency to 'hallucinate' citations, limited access to resources, inherent biases and a preference for recent digital sources over seminal historical works. Understanding these limitations helps researchers position AI tools more appropriately within the research process. AI can significantly streamline research workflows, but the fundamental tasks of academic research, such as the critical evaluation of sources and contextual interpretation, remain firmly within the domain of human expertise.

3. The ethics of augmented research: Although the seminar explored the different AI tools that increase the efficiency of conducting academic literature review, it also emphasised the delicate balance between leveraging the capabilities of AI and maintaining academic integrity. Researchers should utilise these tools but also err on the side of caution. The ethical considerations of AI-assisted research extend beyond mere data security. One also must consider the questions of intellectual honesty and research transparency.

III. CONCLUSION

The AI x Research Training seminar represented a significant contribution to the ongoing discourse on the integration of artificial intelligence into academic research. Through the hands-on application, it is clear the AI tools are not replacements for traditional research methods. Instead, AI represents a powerful augmentation of existing research practices. It raises important questions about the future of academic inquiry and knowledge production. The balance between integrating technological advancement and maintaining academic rigour becomes increasingly crucial. Careful synthesis between AI and traditional research will allow us to push the boundaries of knowledge creation while maintaining academic integrity. The essence of good research still lies within the human domain.

RPCS ENGAGEMENTS

MEETING WITH INDONESIAN INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY (UIII)

Wednesday, 25 June 2025

RPCS welcomed representatives from the Indonesian International Islamic University (UIII) for a courtesy visit on Wednesday, 25 June 2025. This meeting served as a follow-up to our Jakarta study trip in April 2025 during which initial discussions were held to explore areas of collaboration.

The visit focused on three key objectives: exploring opportunities for joint research initiatives, strengthening RPCS's regional network of knowledge partners to advance our strategic research goals, and gaining detailed insights into UIII's Islamic Studies postgraduate programme. The last one can help inform the development of SCIS's curriculum and potentially serves as a pathway for SCIS graduates pursuing postgraduate studies.

UIII was represented by Dr Haula Noor, Co-Director of the Center of Islam and Global Challenges (IGC), and Dr Zezen Mutaqin, Head of the MA programme in Islamic Studies.

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 serve as platforms 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 efective 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/education/RPCS****.*

RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN THE STUDY
OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS