

RPCS

QUARTERLY

Developing New Horizons of Knowledge for
Islam in the Contemporary World

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SUMMARY

The fourth quarter of 2025 showcased RPCS's commitment to advancing Islamic scholarship through multiple engagement sessions. The key events include Dr Bhirawa Anoraga's roundtable on digital humanities in Islamic studies, which examined how technology is transforming religious authority in Southeast Asia, and Dr Ginanjar Sya'ban's visiting fellowship, which documented Singapore's historical significance as a centre of Islamic intellectual production and scholarly networks.

Additionally, this quarter strengthened both research capabilities and community engagement through targeted capacity-building initiatives. A/P Narayanan Ganapathy's qualitative research workshop enhanced methodological competencies across MUIS, whilst Dr Joshua Salaam's masterclass introduced trauma-informed Islamic pastoral care frameworks. Finally, the roundtable on Shariah and modernity challenged secular-religious binaries and explored how Islamic institutions navigate contemporary demands.

Beyond the workshop and roundtable sessions, the resumption of the RPCS Book Club Series fostered intellectual exchange through critical textual engagement. These initiatives reinforced RPCS's strategic vision of producing scholarship that bridges traditional Islamic knowledge with contemporary methodological rigour, serving both academic excellence and community needs.

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RPCS
RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN THE STUDY
OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS



RPCS RTD: F(AI)TH IN THE FUTURE – PROMPTING ISLAM AND FUTURE TECHNOLOGIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Dr Bhirawa Anoraga
Lecturer, Faculty of Islamic Studies,
Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII)

7 November 2025

I. INTRODUCTION

On the 7th of November 2025, RPCS convened a Roundtable Discussion (RTD) titled F(AI)th in the Future: Prompting Islam and Future Technologies in Southeast Asia, delivered by Dr Bhirawa Anoraga from the Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII). The session was centred on three focus areas:

- how digital media and emerging technologies are actively shaping Muslim societies and their religious life,
- the ways in which Muslim organisations in Indonesia are responding to this technological wave; and
- the growing role of digital humanities in Islamic studies.

II. DIGITAL MEDIA, DEMOCRATISATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND FLATTENING OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES

Dr Bhirawa began by outlining how digital media has transformed the production and sharing of information. Unlike traditional media, which relies on centralised institutions communicating to large audiences, digital platforms enable broader participation and more direct engagement between content creators and users. Whilst this has provided greater autonomy and accessibility to previously restricted information, it has also led to the collapse of conventional knowledge hierarchies between experts and laypeople. Dr Bhirawa noted that religious authorities are not immune to this social transformation. Traditional control over religious discourse by ulama and state institutions is being challenged as secular intellectuals, popular preachers and 'Internet Islamists' emerge as new voices. This development leads to fragmentation and pluralisation of religious authority, where legitimacy is now increasingly linked to digital visibility and algorithmic ranking rather than traditional scholarly credentials.

III. RESPONSES OF MUSLIM ORGANISATIONS IN INDONESIA TO THE TECHNOLOGICAL WAVE

As the nation with the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia presents a compelling case study for examining digital transformation within Islamic contexts. Religious institutions and scholars have increasingly adopted digital platforms to disseminate teachings, conduct outreach and engage with younger demographics. Online lectures, social media content and digital publications have become integral components of contemporary religious communication strategies.

Concurrently, these organisations are confronting significant challenges including the proliferation of misinformation, online polarisation and the dissemination of unverified religious interpretations. The digital landscape necessitates that institutions strengthen their communication frameworks and foster responsible online engagement practices.

Dr Bhirawa also emphasised the critical role of higher institutes of learning, particularly UII's Faculty of Islamic Studies, in preparing students with comprehensive grounding in the Islamic intellectual tradition whilst developing complementary digital competencies. This blended pedagogical approach contributes to the emergence of digital humanities as a distinct field of scholarly inquiry, which the University is pioneering within the Indonesian academic landscape.

IV. DIGITAL HUMANITIES FOR ISLAMIC STUDIES

Digital humanities encompass the use of computational tools and methods to support research, particularly in the analysis of textual and historical materials. According to Dr Bhirawa, the increasing availability of digitised Islamic manuscripts and texts enables researchers to examine extensive collections with greater efficiency than traditional methods allow. Digital tools facilitate pattern analysis, comprehensive keyword searches and comparative studies across different schools of thought and historical periods. These methodologies can generate new research questions whilst complementing established scholarly approaches.

However, significant methodological challenges remain. Dr Bhirawa argued that digitisation is not neutral as archives may reflect sectarian, ideological or institutional biases. Moreover, digital corpora can create an illusion of completeness while obscuring selection criteria and gaps. Many computational tools operate as 'black boxes', limiting transparency. Over-reliance on automation risks eroding traditional scholarly heuristics such as contextual sensitivity and philological depth.

Against this backdrop, Dr Bhirawa stressed the significant role of what he calls 'the humanist scholar' that parallels with the concept of 'human in the loop', which entails maintaining human oversight and interpretation throughout the digital research process. While algorithms can retrieve data efficiently, they cannot engage in meaning-making. Meaning-making remains fundamentally the task of human researchers, requiring digital humanities to include an interpretive layer that bridges quantitative data with qualitative insight.

Dr Bhirawa concluded by proposing shared frameworks for studying Muslims in the digital era. He noted that digital realms are complex, contested spaces deeply intertwined with physical life. Effective scholarship must move beyond purely institutional or ideological analysis to capture the lived, mediated experiences of Muslim communities. He outlined four key frameworks to guide such inquiry:

- Ambivalence, Discontent and Divides
- Lived Religion and Everyday Practices
- Hybridity and Connectivity
- Technicity and Mediatization

V. CONCLUSION

This RTD initiated an important conversation about the intersections between emerging technologies and religious life, with particular focus on digital humanities and their significance for the Singapore College of Islamic Studies (SCIS). As highlighted above, leveraging digital tools provides new ways of accessing, reading and interpreting the Islamic intellectual tradition that speaks meaningfully to the modern world. Further engagements and publications will be planned to contribute to the growing body of resources that will support SCIS's interest in introducing digital humanities for Islamic studies.



RPCS VISITING FELLOWSHIP

Dr Ginanjar Sya'ban

*Lecturer, Graduate School of the Faculty of Islam Nusantara
(FIN), Universitas Nadhlatul Ulama Indonesia (UNUSIA)*

November 2025

RPCS was privileged to host Dr Ginanjar Sya'ban from UNUSIA (Universitas Nadhlatul Ulama Indonesia) as a visiting research fellow, bringing his extensive experience, expertise and scholarly publications to our institution. As part of his research fellowship, Dr Ginanjar visited Singapore to present his research findings and conduct engagements with RPCS and relevant stakeholders. Dr Ginanjar's research specialises in turāth (classical Islamic textual traditions) and their preservation, transmission and circulation throughout the Malay-Indonesian world, with particular emphasis on transregional scholarly networks.

Dr Ginanjar's research focuses on Singapore's ulama networks from the colonial period and investigating the city-state's history of intellectual cosmopolitanism, which encompassed both reformist and traditional Islamic thought. His expertise in Nusantara intellectual networks and manuscript preservation uniquely positions him to illuminate Singapore's pivotal role within the broader regional scholarly landscape, thereby contributing foundational resources for current and future research.



I. MASTERCLASS ON NUSANTARA INTELLECTUAL HERITAGE

Dr Ginanjar's masterclass provided valuable insights into the Nusantara's rich intellectual heritage, comprising centuries of texts and manuscripts that have profoundly shaped Islamic thought in Southeast Asia and beyond. The session underscored the critical need for further study, preservation and critical engagement with these materials, which hold immense potential for developing new bodies of knowledge. The discussion highlighted compelling opportunities for scholars, institutions and communities to collaborate in uncovering, digitising and interpreting these works, ensuring that the intellectual contributions of Nusantara scholars continue to inform contemporary Islamic scholarship and inspire future generations.

Dr Ginanjar devoted particular attention to Singapore's pivotal role during the 19th and early 20th centuries as a vital centre of Islamic civilisation in Southeast Asia. He described how areas such as Kampong Gelam, Teluk Belanga and Kampong Bali witnessed the production of works in Arabic, Malay (Jawi), Javanese (Pegon) and Sundanese across various genres. Notable publishing houses included Mathba'ah Athiyyah and Mathba'ah al-Ahmadiyah. Dr Ginanjar shared historical records of scholars staying in Singapore whilst awaiting passage to Makkah, noting that Singapore became the centre for the modern Islamic press in Southeast Asia, publishing influential periodicals such as *Majalah al-Imam* and *Majalah al-Huda*.

The subsequent question-and-answer session yielded further valuable insights. When asked why figures like Nawawi al-Bantani are not labelled ‘reformists’, Dr Ginanjar explained that such categories stemmed from Orientalist scholarship, whilst many ‘traditionalist’ scholars were deeply reform-minded. He also emphasised the archipelago’s scholarly connections with India and explained how colonialism, the collapse of sultanates and the loss of waqf houses in Makkah disrupted cosmopolitan networks. Regarding strengthening manuscript work, he stressed the importance of inventory, cataloguing, digitisation and regional collaboration. He concluded by highlighting Singapore’s potential to lead preservation efforts given its advanced infrastructure and rich historical legacy.



II. RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTATION BOOK REVIEW SESSION

The RTD with Dr Ginanjar further explored the Nusantara’s intellectual heritage and the ongoing efforts to document and preserve this scholarly tradition. Dr Ginanjar began by recounting his experience at the Institute of Arabic Manuscripts in Cairo in 2015, where he realised the absence of comprehensive documentation of Southeast Asian Islamic manuscripts and biographical dictionaries of Nusantara scholars.

It revealed a significant gap when compared to established works on Arabic and Persian literature by scholars such as Carl Brockelmann, Fuat Sezgin and Edward G. Browne. Whilst works on classical Malay literature existed, comprehensive documentation of Nusantara Islamic scholarship remained limited.

Dr Ginanjar presented three major publications addressing this gap. His first work, *Mahakarya Islam Nusantara* (2017), contains 105 annotations covering Islamic works by Nusantara scholars from the 15th to 20th centuries across multiple languages and formats including manuscripts, correspondence, lithographs and modern prints. His second work, *al-Mukhtasar al-Hawi* (2022), is an Arabic-language biographical dictionary containing 111 biographies of Nusantara scholars following a structured methodology covering lineage, works and historical context. His third work on Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (2024) presents analyses of 30 letters written by Nusantara figures to the Dutch colonial adviser in various languages, offering insights into intellectual networks and colonial-era correspondence.



III. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Dr Ginanjar's visit extended beyond academic research to include meaningful engagement with local institutions. His visit to the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (PERGAS) focused on the value of studying Nusantara intellectual heritage and highlighted the role of local institutions in uplifting local scholars, as exemplified by PERGAS's work. Additionally, he engaged with pre-university students from local Madrasahs, enlightening them about the value of studying the Nusantara intellectual tradition and emphasising the need to appreciate and benefit from the scholarly treasures left behind by local and regional scholars.

The visit also included a comprehensive tour of the NUS Library, where Dr Ginanjar reviewed valuable manuscripts from the Nusantara region and examined their preservation and accessibility for contemporary scholarship. This engagement underscored the importance of institutional collaboration in maintaining and promoting access to these invaluable historical resources. Dr Ginanjar was also warmly welcomed at other institutions such as Ba'alwie Mosque, BAPA (the Religious and Education League of Radin Mas) and Wardah Books.

IV. CONCLUSION

Dr Ginanjar's research fellowship and visit to Singapore illuminate the need to further examine and study Singapore's historical role and rich Islamic intellectual heritage. His work has demonstrated that Singapore's position as a vital centre of knowledge production during the 19th and early 20th centuries represents a foundational chapter in understanding the region's intellectual development and scholarly networks. The comprehensive documentation and preservation of Singapore's Islamic intellectual heritage present compelling opportunities for developing new bodies of knowledge that can inform contemporary scholarship and practice.

The collaborative efforts highlighted during Dr Ginanjar's visit underscore the collective responsibility to safeguard and study these intellectual treasures. By learning from the scholars who came before us and understanding their contributions, we can develop more nuanced perspectives on contemporary challenges. The continued examination of our Islamic intellectual heritage will not only honour the contributions of past scholars but also establish robust foundations for future research that can bridge historical understanding with contemporary needs, ensuring that the intellectual legacy of Singapore's Islamic scholars continues to inform and inspire generations to come.





RPCS RESEARCH WORKSHOP ON QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS: THEORY AND PRACTICE

By A/P Narayanan Ganapathy

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Education & Training, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,
National University of Singapore*

20 November 2026

SUMMARY OF EVENT

On the 20th of November 2025, the Research Programme in the Study of Muslim Communities of Success (RPCS) organised an intensive one-day training workshop on Qualitative Data Analysis: Theory & Practice. The session was facilitated by A/P Narayanan Ganapathy, Vice Dean of Graduate Coursework Studies and Continuing Education & Training at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, NUS. The workshop brought together MUIS staff, researchers and Postgraduate Certificate in Islam in Contemporary Societies (PCICS) alumni, as part of ongoing efforts to strengthen methodological competencies across the MUIS research ecosystem.

The training provided participants with structured grounding in qualitative social science research, focusing on interpretive approaches, interviewing techniques and analytic procedures. Through conceptual exposition and applied discussion, participants were guided through the qualitative research process, from problem formulation and field entry to coding and thematic interpretation, while reflecting on how these methods may be more effectively integrated into ongoing MUIS and SCIS research workstreams.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

I. REAFFIRMING THE INTERPRETIVE FOUNDATIONS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Professor Ganapathy emphasised that qualitative inquiry is fundamentally an interpretive, humanistic and naturalistic approach to understanding patterned social conduct. Participants were reminded that qualitative research is particularly suited to uncovering meaning systems, documenting lived realities and contextualising social action. This framing was especially relevant for researchers working on complex community and religious phenomena where insider perspectives and contextual sensitivity are critical. As such, for researchers working on Muslim societies in plural and rapidly changing contexts, qualitative competencies remain especially important. Many of the key questions facing Muslim communities, such as identity formation, religious authority, intergroup relations and everyday religious practice, are deeply embedded in lived experience and meaning-making processes that may not always be fully captured through quantitative approaches.

II. THE CENTRALITY OF THE RESEARCHER AS INSTRUMENT

A key theme of the training was the role of the researcher as the primary instrument in qualitative inquiry. Professor Ganapathy highlighted that researchers are directly responsible for the collection, interpretation and analysis of data, thereby invoking the enduring subjectivity-objectivity debate. This prompted important reflection among participants on reflexivity, positionality and the need for methodological self-awareness when conducting fieldwork within plural social contexts. Participants were encouraged to critically examine how their own social location, institutional role and prior assumptions may shape both access to the field and interpretation of findings. This emphasis ought to contribute to the cultivation of a more reflexive research culture within MUIS and SCIS, where methodological self-awareness is treated as integral rather than supplementary to community-based research.

III. STRENGTHENING COMPETENCIES IN QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING AND CODING

The session provided detailed guidance on the continuum of interviewing approaches – from structured formats to ethnographic, open-ended conversations described as “conversation with a purpose”. Professor Ganapathy placed particular emphasis on ensuring that qualitative interviews do not become extractive, overly instrumental or socially unnatural encounters. Instead, participants were encouraged to approach interviews with a strong sense of empathy, relational awareness and attentiveness to the human dimensions of the research process. In this regard, effective qualitative interviewing was framed not simply as a technical skill but as a disciplined form of engaged listening that balances analytical purpose with respect for the interviewees’ dignity and voice.

Participants were also introduced to systematic coding procedures (open – axial – selective), which enable movement from raw transcripts and data to higher-order themes. As the first step, open coding involves the initial identification and labelling of key themes emerging from the data. Axial coding then examines relationships between these preliminary codes, grouping them into more organised categories. Subsequently, selective coding focuses on integrating and refining these categories around a smaller set of core themes that will structure the final analysis.

Building on this, Professor Ganapathy underscored the importance of analytic balance in qualitative work. Using the metaphor of ‘seeing both the trees and the forest’, he explained that qualitative researchers must work at two levels simultaneously. At the micro level, careful attention must be paid to individual data segments, such as interview excerpts, specific phrases and field observations (the ‘trees’). At the macro level, researchers must synthesise these details to identify broader themes, patterns and conceptual relationships across the dataset (the ‘forest’). This dual orientation helps prevent two common analytic pitfalls: becoming overly immersed in fragmented details without developing meaningful insights, or, conversely, advancing broad claims that are insufficiently grounded in empirical evidence.

IV. ETHICAL AND CREDIBILITY CONSIDERATIONS IN FIELD RESEARCH

The workshop also foregrounded ethical responsibility, informed consent and the importance of maintaining rapport while safeguarding research integrity. Techniques such as triangulation, careful note-taking and reflexive logbooks were discussed as mechanisms to enhance credibility and analytic transparency. These discussions were particularly salient for MUIS and SCIS researchers who may be working with sensitive data.

V. CONCLUSION

The one-day intensive workshop represented a significant contribution to RPCS's broader capacity-building efforts across MUIS, SCIS and the PCICS alumni network. By consolidating both theoretical foundations and practical analytic skills, the session enabled participants to better appreciate both the demands and possibilities of qualitative social research. Importantly, the training reinforced that rigorous qualitative inquiry requires sustained reflexivity, methodological discipline, as well as empathetic and careful engagement with empirical realities. As RPCS continues to advance interdisciplinary and applied research on Muslim communities in plural contexts, strengthening qualitative research capabilities remains an essential priority. The workshop therefore marks an important step towards building a more methodologically confident and analytically grounded research community engaged in the study of Muslims in Singapore.



RPCS MASTERCLASS: REIMAGINING LEADERSHIP THROUGH CARE: ETHICAL AND INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO VULNERABILITY

By Dr Joshua Salaam
Head Chaplain, Duke University
President of the Association of Muslim Chaplains, USA

25 November 2025

CONCEPTUALISING RELIGIOUS TRAUMA IN ISLAMIC PASTORAL THOUGHT

On the 25th of November 2025, RPCS hosted a masterclass led by Dr Joshua Salaam on religious trauma and Islamic pastoral care, in the context of Singapore's multi-religious landscape and institutional frameworks. Through an integrated engagement with theology, applied psychology and professional chaplaincy, the session articulated a clear claim that Islamic pastoral care can effectively address religious trauma when it embodies the principles of mercy, justice and balance.



Religious trauma was conceptualised not as a loss of faith, but as ‘wounded belief’ – a condition that arises when religious teachings, authority or institutions foster fear, shame or psychological harm rather than nurturing the soul. This perspective encouraged participants to move beyond simplistic binaries of belief versus disbelief and to recognise trauma as both a theological and emotional phenomenon that requires integrated responses.

The masterclass anchored healing in the Islamic principles of *rahmah* (mercy), *’adl* (justice) and *mīzān* (balance). Faith was depicted as a living relationship with Allah, one that becomes distorted when religion turns into a coercive, performance-based or punitive practice. The prophetic example was emphasised as a model in which mercy precedes justice, and authority is exercised in service of human dignity. Quranic verses and prophetic narratives were introduced as essential pastoral resources that can support processes of spiritual healing following experiences of harm.

META-COGNITIVE APPROACHES TO SPIRITUAL CRISIS AND CARE

A significant portion of the masterclass adapted Brian McLaren’s Four Stages of Faith (Simplicity, Complexity, Perplexity and Harmony) for application in Muslim chaplaincy. This framework helps chaplains in recognising where individuals may be in their spiritual journeys, particularly during times of crisis. Instead of viewing doubt or questioning as a failure, the model encourages chaplains to acknowledge ‘perplexity’ as a legitimate and often necessary stage of growth. Practically, this translates into pastoral strategies that allow space for uncertainty and support movement towards a more integrated and compassionate faith.

Questions of power and authority formed a critical analytical thread throughout the session. Dr Joshua contrasted fear-driven, controlling leadership with an empathic, mercy-centred style of care. Participants were invited to reflect critically on how the

misuse of sacred texts, the conflation of cultural norms with Divine command and the silencing of dissent can harm those who are already vulnerable. In response, the participants were urged to cultivate leadership practices that prioritise listening, accountability and the genuine well-being of community members, rather than merely protecting institutional image.

To translate these ideas into practice, Dr Joshua introduced an **Islamic Chaplaincy Response Framework** built around four movements: listening, understanding, validating and exploring. Within this model, chaplains are viewed less as problem-solvers and more as non-judgemental companions who remain present with individuals in their pain and uncertainty. The framework emphasises the significance of collaborating closely with mental health professionals in situations involving severe trauma or risk. It also stresses the importance of establishing appropriate boundaries and providing organisational support for chaplains.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR ISLAMIC CHAPLAINCY IN SINGAPORE AND BEYOND

Singapore's socio-religious context was interwoven throughout the masterclass as both a constraint and a resource for pastoral work. Participants reflected on the pressures Muslims may face in a secular, plural society, such as feeling responsible for "representing" Islam, navigating generational differences and balancing traditional authority with contemporary governance. The discussion underscored the need for Singapore-specific approaches to chaplaincy in hospitals, prisons, universities and mosques, including careful attention to legal and regulatory requirements and proactive interfaith collaboration.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the masterclass situated Islamic chaplaincy within a broader global conversation on religious trauma and interfaith pastoral care, pointing towards the need for culturally responsive training. Singapore was presented as a valuable setting for comparative research, given its Muslim-minority status, strong institutional governance and long-standing commitment to religious harmony.

The closing reflection emphasised a key insight that is both theological and practical: healing begins when people no longer have to fear their questions, and when spiritual care is firmly grounded in Allah's mercy, allowing faith to become a source of repair rather than harm. In this way, the masterclass represented a significant contribution to ongoing academic and professional discussions on trauma-informed religious leadership and advancement of chaplaincy practice in diverse societies.



ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION: SHARIAH & MODERNITY: BEYOND THE SECULAR RELIGIOUS DIVIDE

Dr Muhammad Al-Marakeby

Assistant Professor, Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII)

Ustaz Dr Afif Pasuni

RPCS Research Fellow

27 November 2025

On the 27th of November 2025, RPCS hosted an RTD featuring two presentations by a visiting scholar, Dr Muhammad Al-Marakeby, and RPCS Fellow Researcher, Ustaz Dr Afif Pasuni, titled Shariah & Modernity: Beyond the Secular Religious Divide.

The session brought together diverse participants delving into the question of how Shariah is understood and lived in the modern secular context, like Singapore, by drawing examples from both the Islamic classical tradition as well as the practical application of Singapore's religious education policy.

THE UNADDRESSED SHARĪAH IN THE CLASSICAL ISLAMIC LEGAL LITERATURE: THINKING BEYOND THE SECULAR-RELIGIOUS DEBATE

DR MUHAMMAD AL-MARAKEBY

During his presentation, Dr Muhammad Al-Marakeby challenged the application of Western secular-religious binaries to Islamic legal thought. He argued that modern Eurocentric concepts of religion fail to capture the truly comprehensive nature of Shariah.

Muslim scholars universally acknowledge that while the Quran and Sunnah are limited in their explicit textual content, the cases requiring legal and ethical guidance are potentially infinite. This raises fundamental questions of whether the Shariah is truly comprehensive, as argued.

The Orientalist perspective characterises Islam as unique amongst religions because it does not differentiate between religion, politics and economics, while modern Islamist discourse, in asserting that “Islam is religion and state”, paradoxically presupposes a Western understanding of religion as a confined domain.

Both cited perspectives fail to break free from Western frameworks and grasp the nuanced relationship between textually based rulings and matters left to human discretion within the Islamic legal tradition.

I. BEYOND EXPLICIT SCRIPTURE GUIDANCE: ‘URF AND SIYASAH

Classical Muslim scholars maintain that Shariah is comprehensive guidance to address all aspects of human life. Yet this comprehensiveness operates differently from how it is often understood in contemporary discourse, as established in Western thought, mentioned above.

Instead of looking at the domains outside of explicit scriptural rulings as merely secular, Dr Al-Marakeby argued that the Shariah recognises these domains as the spheres of human discretion. Thus, Fatwa literature frequently highlights two primary spheres beyond explicit scriptural rulings:

1. ‘Urf (Customary Practice): Such are cases where the authority rests with the social and customary norms rather than explicit textual ruling.

2. Siyasah (Governance and Political Regulation): Cases that are decided based on the authority of rulers rather than explicit textual ruling. Dr Al-Marakeby cited the example of formal marriage registration, which has no explicit command in the scripture but becomes obligatory when mandated by the state.

Regarding the latter, this regulatory authority, whilst not textually derived explicitly, is accepted within the Islamic legal framework, provided rulers exercise appropriate self-regulation and it does not contradict with the Shariah.

Dr Al-Marakeby referenced another example, citing the distribution of state remittance during the caliphate of Abu Bakr r.a. The Siyasah domain encompasses matters left to rulers that are not textually mentioned, raising the question of how such regulations can be understood within a comprehensive legal system.

II. WHY THE UNADDRESSED IS NOT SECULAR

Dr Al-Marakeby disagreed with Sherman Jackson's concept of 'Islamic secular'. From the perspective of *Usul al-Fiqh* (Islamic legal theory), no case is void of a ruling (*hukm*). The unaddressed domains of *'Urf* and *Siyasah* are not secular for three crucial reasons:

- 1. Religious priority:** Islamic law maintains priority over customs and personal regulations, which must serve the public interest to be valid.
- 2. Religious transgression:** Violating established state regulations (like failing to register a marriage) or breaking a personal vow is not merely a civil violation; it constitutes a religious transgression.
- 3. Divine authorisation:** The delegated authority given to humans and rulers does not create a secular sphere. Instead, it operates under the principle of *al-ada muhakkama* (custom is authoritative because Allah grants it authority).

Nothing in Islam is secular in the Western sense. The comprehensive nature of Shariah simply means that every matter falls within a framework where the boundaries of human discretion are themselves religiously authorised.

III. POSITIVE SHARIAH & NEGATIVE SHARIAH

Drawing on the classical jurist, Imam al-Qarafi, Dr Al-Marakeby explained that rulings can be categorised into two broad categories: those God has explicitly detailed (*al-mansus 'alaih*), and those God has left general for humans to regulate (*al-maskut 'anhu*). Thus, Dr Al-Marakeby proposed the 'Positive-Negative Shariah' framework within Islamic law:

Positive Shariah: Textual rulings with restricted interpretive authority. These can be expanded to cover some unaddressed issues as well.

Negative Shariah: The domain of the unaddressed (*al-maskut 'anhu*), characterised by the sophisticated dynamism in the spheres where human discretion, self-regulation and local nuances, amongst others, are observed.

Towards the end, Dr Al-Marakeby put his presentation into his own self-criticism. He acknowledged that this typology of 'Positive and Negative Shariah' is fundamentally legalistic and struggles to explain cultural phenomena like Islamic art, which exists in the unaddressed domain but transcends legal categorisation. This highlights a profound realisation that Islam must be understood not merely as a legal system, but as a rich culture and civilisation.

The existence of spheres distinct from formal Islamic law does not render them secular; rather, they are vibrant components of a comprehensive framework where human autonomy flourishes under divine authorisation.



MADRASAHS IN THE THIRD SPACE: NAVIGATING ISLAMIC TRADITION & SECULAR MODERNITY

USTAZ DR AFIF PASUNI

For over a century, madrasahs in Singapore have continuously evolved to meet shifting educational expectations and state regulations. In his presentation, Ustaz Afif explored how these historic religious institutions navigate the complex intersection of Islamic tradition and secular modernity. Drawing on interviews with ten past and present madrasah principals, he introduced the concept of the 'third space', a framework for understanding how educational leaders balance competing demands while fiercely maintaining their institutional identity.

As a start, Ustaz Afif first established the definitions of tradition and modernity within the context of his presentation:

Tradition: Rather than denoting a temporal, pre-modern, or anti-modern stance that resists change, tradition is understood as a discursive concept. It represents the normative frameworks and practices that provide an institution with its continuity, distinctiveness and identity.

Modernity: Modernity refers to the specific, contemporary demands of modern educational systems. This includes bureaucratic accountability, merit-based evaluation and standardised assessments. Crucially, expectations placed on secular schools, such as hitting Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) benchmarks and satisfying parental demands for academic excellence, are also equally demanded of madrasahs.

Ustaz Afif then conceptualised the madrasahs through a three-space framework:

- 1. The First Space (Traditional Islamic Studies):** This embodies the madrasah's foundational mission: the transmission of traditional Islamic knowledge and the scholarly formation of religious leaders.
- 2. The Second Space (The Bureaucratic Framework):** This space is defined by regulatory compliance, state expectations and merit-based academic assessments.

3. The Third Space (The Lived Reality): This is the operational space where madrasahs currently exist. It is not a comfortable, resolved middle ground, but rather a site of ongoing negotiation and tension. Here, madrasahs strive to meet contemporary bureaucratic expectations without abandoning their traditional mission.

In response to the demands of modern educational systems, the madrasah curriculum is not a static document but a 'living practice'. Every lesson plan, timetable and subject weighting represents a micro-negotiation over limited instructional hours.

To cope, madrasahs employ adaptive strategies like curriculum compression. Subjects may be compressed, removed or pushed down to lower grade levels to make room for major examinations or essential religious formation at higher levels. This strategic redistribution of rigour demonstrates that madrasahs do not passively absorb external demands; they actively and creatively adapt them to fit their specific contexts.

I. DEFINING SUCCESS MODELS FOR THE MADRASAH EDUCATION SYSTEM

Because the third space is characterised by tension rather than resolution, there is no single model of success. Different madrasahs navigate these constraints differently, largely driven by how they define the ultimate purpose of their education. Ustaz Afif identified three competing models of Islamic leadership shaping these institutions:

- 1. The Classical Ulama Model:** Focuses on deep mastery of traditional Islamic sciences and scholarly competencies.
- 2. The Community Leadership Model:** Prioritises practical, pastoral skills for engaging with and directly serving Muslim communities.
- 3. The Hybrid Expert Model:** Advocates for graduates who combine Islamic knowledge with secular expertise, enabling them to address complex interdisciplinary challenges.

Ustaz Afif suggested that the diverse approaches among Singapore's madrasahs should be viewed not as problematic fragmentation, but as a strategic strength that produces different types of leaders suited to varied community needs. He outlined three practical implications for the future:

- 1. Explicitly Identity Formation:** Lessons must be framed not just as knowledge transmission, but as explicit identity formation, helping students connect their learning to their development as Muslims and citizens.
- 2. Proportional Policy Support:** If the state imposes standardised expectations on madrasahs, it must provide commensurate and holistic support to help them meet these benchmarks without losing their distinctiveness.
- 3. Strategic Adaptation:** Advocates for graduates who combine Islamic knowledge with secular expertise, enabling them to address complex interdisciplinary challenges.

In concluding his presentation, Ustaz Afif left us with a critical question for future research: What makes a madrasah a madrasah? As these institutions continue to evolve, identifying the essential characteristics that prevent them from becoming simply regular schools which happen to teach Islamic subjects remains a vital area for ongoing empirical and theoretical reflection.

RPCS BOOK CLUB SERIES 2025

*Organised by The Research Programme in the Study of
Muslim Communities of Success (RPCS)
Facilitated by Aisyah Yusoff*

The RPCS Book Club Series provides a collaborative platform for RPCS researchers and MUIS officers to exchange ideas and explore both familiar and emerging topics within their fields of work. Through structured discussions that draw from both classical texts and contemporary scholarship, participants contribute to a growing archive of critical reflections on contemporary Islamic issues. This collaborative environment welcomes fresh perspectives, generates momentum for further research and advances RPCS's scholarly vision.

The RPCS Book Club recommenced its activities in October 2025 following an intermission.

Session #1: Ethical soundscapes and Islamic counterpublics

The discussion centred on *al-da'wa* as both a Divine call and a communal responsibility, and how 'modern' media has facilitated a diffused yet coherent Islamic counterpublic that transcends gender, class and generation. Participants emphasised the sensorial aspects of this public, through adhan (call to prayer), Quranic recitation and sermons. These aspects embed ethical expectations into daily urban life and re-politicise issues often privatised by secular states, such as prayer and modesty. Attention was also given to how these practices create alternative moral authorities and ethical bodies by cultivating *adab al-da'wa*: the virtues of humility, sincerity and discipline through speech and listening. The session highlighted the importance of 'ethical soundscapes' in understanding Islamic pedagogy, affective religious authority and the nuanced ways in which Islamic publics intersect with and contest state regulatory frameworks in minority contexts.

Session #2: Collective stability and its moral costs

The second session transitioned from anthropological analysis to philosophical and ethical inquiry through a joint reading of Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*. Participants used both texts as moral thought experiments to examine themes such as scapegoating, collective responsibility and the limitations of "greater good" reasoning.

The discussion focused on how communities normalise harm through rituals, bureaucracy and appeals to social harmony. Key points included the role of the scapegoat as a mechanism for maintaining communal stability, and the ethics of complicity through both active participation and passive acceptance. The session also drew connections to religious education and governance, exploring moral courage, resistance and the responsibilities of officials within institutional systems. Here, particular emphasis was placed on Islam in the Singapore context and the challenge of balancing respect for tradition with a principled resistance to injustice.





THE RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN THE STUDY OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS (RPCS)

The Research Programme in the Study of Muslim Communities of Success (RPCS) was established as part of Muis' efforts to advance religious thought leadership for the future. The programme seeks to develop contextualised bodies of knowledge on socio-religious issues relevant to Muslim communities living in secular states and advanced economies. Through its research and publications, RPCS focuses on developing new understandings, interpretations, and applications of Islamic principles, values, and traditions in response to contemporary issues and challenges.

RPCS is now situated within the Singapore College of Islamic Studies (SCIS) as its dedicated research arm. In this capacity, RPCS plays a strategic role in supporting key programmes through applied research, contributing to public discourse and advancing the intellectual vibrancy and educational goals of the college. RPCS' research work is structured around four agendas: Governance, Society, Science and Technology, and Intellectual Heritage.

RPCS aims to bring together local scholars and senior practitioners to study current and emerging issues in the socio-religious life of the Singapore Muslim community. Its seminars, workshops, and roundtable discussions serve as platforms to nurture the right intellectual ecology, facilitating the growth and development of religious leaders, scholars, and thinkers who are seen as authentic and credible voices to guide the local Muslim community.



GOVERNANCE

Islam, Secularism & Diversity

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



SOCIETY

Family & Social Cohesion

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



SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

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

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

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

www.muis.gov.sg/education/RPCS.



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