

RPCS

RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN THE STUDY
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Insights and Perspectives

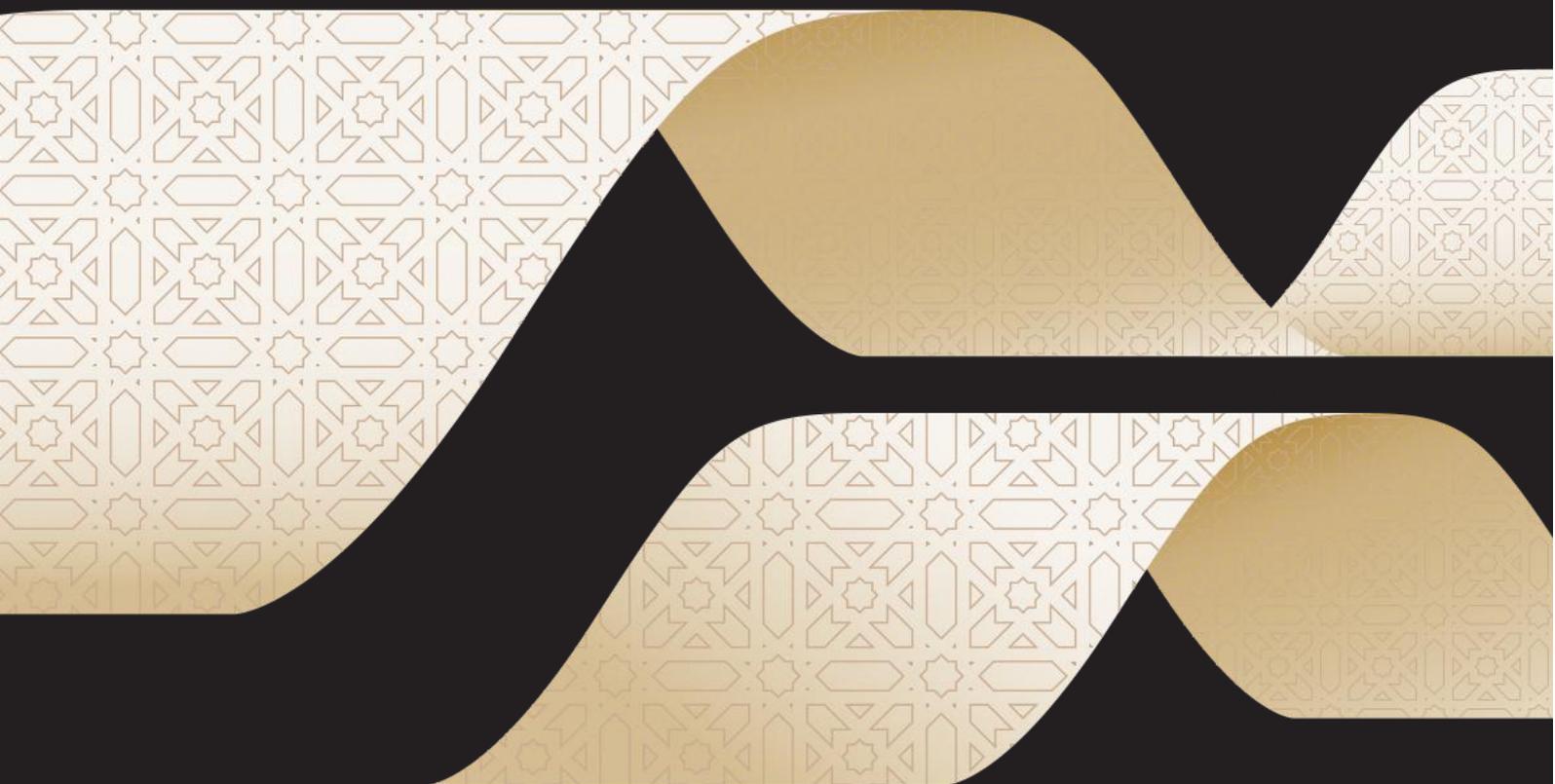
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Conditions for Constructive Religious Dialogue in Plural Societies

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Synopsis

In May 2023, the author represented the Harmony Centre and RPCS at an interfaith meeting in Istanbul, which gathered academic scholars and community leaders from institutions studying Christian-Muslim relations across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Amongst others, the meeting discussed conditions for effective interfaith dialogue, and the centrality of religious literacy in promoting cooperation and understanding amongst people of faith in plural contexts. This commentary is a reflection piece based on the author's participation and insights from the event.

Introduction

In cosmopolitan settings typical of many advanced economies around the world, it has become the norm to live amongst people of diverse cultural, social, and religious identities. Naturally, humans react in contrasting ways when confronted with such differences. Some become reclusive and withdraw from society in fear of diluting their core identities, while others appear more motivated to forge connections and leverage commonalities. Wedged between these two categories is a vast segment of society who have been conditioned to tolerate and coexist yet remain largely indifferent toward others.

As adherents of a particular faith, we are constantly challenged to strike a coherent balance between creating alliances with people of other beliefs and retaining our own set of convictions. In many ways, our understanding of our faith traditions and what it says about interacting with the “other” will impact our social outlook and determine the extent of our involvement and contribution towards society. While we acknowledge that these attitudes generally come from a place of sincerity and goodwill, we must continue to be cognizant of the demands of social cohesion and harmony, especially in the context of a plural society.

A polemical approach and socially exclusive mindset

In carrying out our collective responsibility to preserve and strengthen social cohesion, it is imperative that our conversations regarding religious diversity are not framed through a polemical lens. A polemical rhetoric can be defined as one that is argumentative and confrontational, often involving negative criticism or attack on the beliefs, practices, and legitimacy of opposing religious views. While it can be conveniently misappropriated to distinguish between certain concepts across different faiths, a polemical approach primarily intends to prove its viewpoint as superior and inherently true instead of using the opportunity of dialogue to foster understanding, extend respect, and engage in constructive ways.

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Certainly, this approach is unhelpful and detrimental in any religious discourse, interfaith or intrafaith, as it only serves the singular and neglects the collective. It fails to generate respect as it does not offer due consideration to the “other” in the first place. Moreover, the use of polemical approaches toward religions and beliefs can undermine trust and exacerbate existing tensions at the community level. This leads to a socially exclusive mindset that amplifies suspicions and hinders any constructive interaction among different religious groups. In many ways, it weakens the foundations of a plural society instead of enriching it and contributing to its development.

Based on these considerations, some interfaith advocates view the usage of the term “comparative” in the study of religions as insufficient in capturing the essence of learning about other faiths. This is mainly because the primary objective of such education is to inculcate appreciation and understanding towards others. While the conventional methods in the study of religions will discuss their particularities and differences, the emphasis on these differences should not constitute the main message nor emerge as the outcome of such discourse. Rather, as we explore areas of convergence and frameworks for coexistence and cooperation, we may consider neutral terminologies such as interreligious or interfaith studies, which more appropriately reflect the interests of a plural society.

A relativist approach: false tolerance and inclusivism

Additionally, there are also groups involved in interfaith dialogues yet adopt a relativist outlook towards religions. A relativist approach in this context alludes to the belief that truth is not absolute but subjective and varies depending on individual experience or cultural perspectives.¹ According to this view, there can be no objective reference or standards for human beliefs, morality and ethics. Therefore, all of them are equally good and true. While relativism may appear to be a tolerant and inclusive approach on the surface, it can be counterproductive and ineffective in advancing genuine interfaith dialogue for several reasons.

A relativist approach toward religious dialogue tends to downplay or dismiss the unique aspects and contributions of the different religious traditions. It fails to recognize the distinctive traits of religions such as practices, and worldviews that should be appreciated in form and substance rather than in a reductive manner. By blurring or ignoring these differences, it risks diluting the richness and diversity that religious traditions bring to interfaith work. Furthermore, if all perspectives are considered equally valid, there may be a tendency to avoid exploring the deeper dimensions of religious traditions which can hinder the development of a comprehensive understanding of diversity and belonging.

[1] Hollis, M., & Lukes, S. (1982). Rationality and relativism.

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More importantly, the relativist approach does not accurately project the general sentiments, beliefs, and practices of the religious population, including their subscribing to specific conceptions of truth and morality. As Dr Omar Suleiman explained, “Interfaith groups are ineffective if they exclude the mainstream of any faith. Suggesting that orthodox followers of a particular faith have no room at the table for the betterment of society or in achieving justice is actually a form of intolerance”.² In addition, the relativist approach has to contend with internal inconsistencies and paradoxes. For instance, if one asserts that all beliefs are equally valid, it becomes contradictory to dismiss or critique the beliefs of those who do not adhere to relativism. This inconsistency undermines the credibility of relativism as a sound framework for interfaith work.

Social cohesion in everyday pluralism

In reference to our plural context, we must reflect on the following questions: What does it mean for our society to be plural? How can a plural society accommodate the different religious identities? Are our faiths and belief systems at risk of being diminished? Should we insert and assimilate ourselves into a plural society? To address these questions, we must first confront a glaring terminological issue. Today, especially in the context of religion, “pluralism” as a term is often used in ways that are synonymous with relativism. However, while we acknowledge the expanding scholarly discourse on religious pluralism, our lived reality dictates we face a distinct form of pluralism that is shaped by our everyday experiences.

Social pluralism is the bedrock of a pluralistic society, which fosters an appreciation of diversity and inclusivity. Here, the goal is not to eliminate or suppress differences, as a relativist approach may suggest. Rather, social pluralism aims to create an inclusive and harmonious environment where diversity is seen as a strength and contributes to the overall social fabric. It acknowledges and affirms the coexistence and maintenance of multiple identities, beliefs, and values, while ensuring that all individuals and groups can participate in social, economic, and political life, regardless of their cultural or religious background.

According to Professor Diana Eck, director of Harvard Pluralism, “Pluralism is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity. Today, religious diversity is a given, but pluralism is not a given; it is an achievement. Mere diversity without real encounters and relationships will yield increasing tensions in our societies. The new paradigm of pluralism does not require us to leave our identities and commitments behind, for pluralism is the encounter of commitments. It means holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation, but in relationship to one another”.³

[2] Suleiman, O. (2020). Faithful Activism: A Sunnah Framework. Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research.

<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/faithful-activism-a-sunnah-framework>

[3] The Pluralism Project. <https://pluralism.org/about>

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As members of the religious community, we should realize that a plural society affords us the freedom to continue practicing our religion, despite the amalgamation of identities and beliefs within a shared social space. It allows us to continue upholding our religious convictions and expressing our faith identities. Similarly, as beneficiaries of the plural nature of society, we must also be ready to maintain this provision by recognizing the rights of others to practice and profess their beliefs accordingly, despite our dissimilarities.

This affirmation of a pluralistic society assures that faith communities do not necessarily have to forgo their fundamental religious beliefs and practices to become contributive members of society. Professor Abdullah Saeed proposed that while theologically exclusionary views continue to be pervasive amongst Muslims, the inculcation of socially inclusivist views about people of other religions appears to be a feasible approach.⁴ This framework, which enables genuine religious engagements and defines a broad middle ground that is neither relativist nor divisive, would appropriately serve the aspirations of a plural society.

Social pluralism challenges society to progress beyond mere tolerance and co-existence. While tolerance is a necessary pillar of civil society, it is an attribute that comes with limitations as it suggests that an individual's presence is grudgingly accepted. According to Sir John Templeton, while tolerance is a divine virtue, it could also become a vehicle for apathy.⁵ Too regularly, tolerance becomes a convenient excuse for indifference and thus, the extent of our socialization with others. By limiting the vocabulary of our social participation and consciousness to tolerance, one would lack the desire to learn about the motivations that drive the inner pursuits of the "other".

As a result, a shallow understanding of tolerance commonly leads to religious illiteracy. This refers to a limited or inaccurate understanding of different religions, often stemming from a lack of real exposure or engagement with religious diversity. Religious illiteracy leads to distorted perceptions of the "other" and amplifies the potential for religious conflicts. To mitigate this concern, we must recognize the importance of maintaining religious literacy as a cornerstone of a plural society. Religious literacy promotes respect and empathy towards individuals of different faiths. By fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of diverse religious identities, it helps to counter stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination which continue to be prevalent, particularly in societies that are averse to diversity.

[4] Saeed, A. (2020). *Inclusivism and Exclusivism among Muslims Today between Theological and Social Dimensions*. Singapore: Interreligious Relations, 21.

[5] Templeton, J. (2000). *Possibilities for over one hundredfold more spiritual information: the humble approach in theology and science*. Templeton Foundation Press.

Conclusion: The value of religious literacy

Essentially, religious literacy involves a comprehension of one's own faith tradition and what it says about engaging people outside that tradition. In the Islamic tradition, we can deepen our understanding of interreligious relations by studying topics pertaining to freedom of religion and conscience, protection of the rights of non-Muslims, citizenship and civic engagement for Muslims residing in non-Muslim majority countries. By developing a broad understanding of these topics, Muslims can participate confidently and fulfil their civic responsibilities in the wider society while remaining true to Islamic tradition.

In addition to this, religious literacy also requires an appreciation of the religious framework of the “other”, and what their faith traditions say about interacting with people outside of that framework.⁶ By inculcating a reciprocal understanding amongst people of different faiths and beliefs, it allows them to identify common aspirations and motivations, and provides a strong foundation for principled engagements and collaborations. Consequently, this paves the way for the realization of a harmonious and thriving ecosystem within a plural society.

Ultimately, the richness of religious diversity is not diminished nor disregarded in a plural society. Rather, it is appreciated, leading to an increased understanding and appreciation of different cultures, religions, and perspectives. Instead of tolerating differences, a plural society promotes a harmonious and thriving coexistence among its inhabitants. Crucially, this relies on promoting interreligious understanding and deep dialogue that encourages unity instead of division. By developing and adopting this approach, we can contribute meaningfully to the growth and impact of a plural society where religious diversity is earnestly embraced and celebrated.

[6] Seiple, C., & Hoover, D. R. (2022). *The Routledge Handbook of Religious Literacy, Pluralism, and Global Engagement* (p. 468). Taylor & Francis.

About Author

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About 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 focus will be on developing new understanding, interpretations and application of Islamic principles, values and traditions to contemporary issues and challenges.

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