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Brief Historiography of Islamic Education for the Indigenous Muslim Minority in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

The formal and informal Islamic education available in Singapore has not factored unfortunately, the need to educate the local Muslims on the historiography of Islamic Education. More so, the conventional educational system has for years and persisted until now, not regarded this body of knowledge and information as important or relevant for national heritage and identity or for social and cultural developments. A good appreciation of the historiography of Islamic education in Singapore would be paramount, especially for individuals who assumed leadership roles, policy setters and decision-makers among the Muslims and the designated non-Muslim office bearers. It would be unfortunate and problematic, if the subject matter remained ambiguously or worse erroneously understood, by these key players because efforts towards defining, correcting, improving and refining matters in relation to Islamic education within Singapore context, should be based on proper understanding and analysis of the history, ideas, efforts and legacy of the early Muslims, the British colonialist, the government and related agencies, important institutions and personalities that influenced the Islamic education landscape until today.

Keywords: Islamic Education; Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA); Majlis Ugama Islam (MUIS); secular State; Compulsory Education (CE)

Introduction

The general and basic historiography of Islamic education in Singapore ought to be understood by a significant, or at least, a critical number of discerning adult Muslims in Singapore.[1] Until now, the level of understanding of the historiography of Islamic education among adult Muslims, as well as the number of persons well acquainted with the subject matter could not be ascertained because there are no comprehensive study on this to refer to, or

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[1] Historiography may be briefly defined as the writing of history based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particulars from the authentic materials and the synthesis of particulars into a narrative that will stand the test of critical methods. For a very detailed elaboration on historiography, please see Maryanne Cline Horowitz, Editor in Chief, New Dictionary of the History of Ideas (2005), Vol 1 pp xxxv-xxx, Thomson Gale, a part of the Thomson Corporation.

available relevant data to measure or benchmark against.[2] It may be mentioned however, there are already quite a decent number of literatures and references on Islamic education in Singapore addressed from pedagogical, sociological, legal and economical as well as various other perspectives, written by a rather small community of credible researchers, academicians who are Muslim and non-Muslim, based either locally or from abroad. Thus, the information on matters pertaining is quite readily available and conveniently accessible for public consumption.[3] Evidently, the formal or informal Islamic education available here have not factored the need to educate the Muslims on the subject matter. More so, the conventional educational system has for years and persisted until now, not regarded this body of knowledge and information as important or relevant for national heritage and identity or for social and cultural developments.[4]

The writer has noted that the issues, polemics and debates regarding Islamic education were raised based mostly on exigencies and usually prompted by the turn of significant events, either anticipated or otherwise. First, it was during the pre-independence and post-independence period in the tumulus 1960s, during the crafting of the AMLA vis-à-vis the State constitution.[5] Second, about twenty years later, during the heightened and resurgent consciousness period to understand and practice Islam among Muslim populations at global, regional and national levels during the 1980s. It was during this phase, the Muslim community and the State were grappling on the need to identify the suitable sort of Islamic education and thus the Muslim values and behaviors, suitable for Singapore context. During this period also, there were vigorous and rather extensive efforts to redevelop and upgrade the madrasahs and part-time madrasahs particularly in terms of infrastructure and facilities, albeit is a rather haphazard ways, in order to provide more and sufficient places to cater for the growing demands.[6] Lastly, it happened again, during the controversies prompted by the scathing

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[2] This observation is based largely on the literature review and also personal observations by the writer over a period of about 24 years (1992-2016) in this domain. First, by interacting with various institutions and individuals in the madrasah fraternity while working as an education officer in the Religious Education Department, Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) for about five years from 1992 to 1997. Second, the writer had the opportunity to analyze and understand these issues from the historical, philosophical and conceptual perspectives while being a full-time postgraduate student in the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC) from 1997 to 2000. Third, the writer has been actively involved since 1997 until now, in establishing and managing private Islamic education centers, a private Islamic college and a publishing firm. Lastly but not least, the writer has been researching and analysing these matters while writing the PhD thesis on matters pertaining.

[3] For the Muslim academicians based in the local tertiary institutions, see the works by Hussin Mutalib, Nor Aisha Abdul Rahman, Mukhlis Abu Bakar, Azhar Ibrahim, Sa'eda Buang, Hairon Salleh and Syed Muhammad Khairudin. There may be other local researchers that the writer unfortunately, may not be aware of.

[4] For a good overview of the Singapore education system, please see S.Gopinathan (2013), "Singapore's Education System: Leading the Way for the 21st Century: Some Personal Reflections", Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, NUS, paper presented during Conference on Madrasah Education organized by MUIS, 15 – 16 March 2013; Soon Teck Wong (1988), *Singapore's Education System: Educational Reform for National Development,* Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, pp. 6-7.

[5] A detailed exposition of AMLA, please see, Ahmad Mohamed Ibrahim (1965), *The Legal Status of the Muslims in Singapore,* Singapore: Malayan Law Journal Ltd.

[6] Abu Bakar Hashim (1989), "The Madrasah in Singapore – Past, Present and Future" in ed., Muhammad Hussin Mutalib, *Fajar Islam: Journal of Muslim Issues in Singapore*, Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS), vol. 2, p. 27; Seminar Pendidikan Islam (1989) organized by Jawatankuasa Pendidikan Islam [Committee on Islamic Education], MUIS and Kesatuan Guru-Guru Melayu Singapura [Malay Teachers

comments by the senior politicians on the full-time madrasah education, benchmarked against similar national parameters, prior to introduction of the Compulsory Education (CE) in the late 1990s.[7]

An in-depth understanding and appreciation of the historiography of Islamic education in Singapore would be paramount, especially for those who assumed leadership roles, policy setters and decision-makers among the Muslims and the designated non-Muslim office bearers. It would be unfortunate and problematic, if the subject matter remained ambiguously or worse erroneously understood, by these key players because efforts towards defining, correcting, improving and refining matters in relation to Islamic education within Singapore context, should be based on proper understanding and analysis of the history, ideas, efforts and legacy of the early Muslims, the British colonialists, the government and related agencies, important institutions and personalities that influenced the Islamic education landscape until today. It is worth reminding that Islamic education has direct impact on the state of the Muslim community; the fact that Islam has been embraced homogenously by the community for more than 1000 years and thus has tremendous influence on the worldview, values, culture, language and many key aspects of the Muslim life.

It may be interesting to investigate the extenuating factors to the disquiet phases and years mentioned above in the 1960s, 1980s and late 1990s that had resulted in more rigorous debates and the accompanying researches and writings. By doing so, we may ascertain, the chief precursors and drivers in conceptualizing and determining the strategies, agenda, key issues and the desired objectives as far as the historiography of Islamic education is concerned, particularly after independence. As such, based on the three periods and accompanying scenarios mentioned above, the writer believes, it is quite evident that the State has played significant and possibly determinant roles in qualifying, justifying and extenuating such issues. The Muslim community including the relevant leaders, as noted by the writer were by and large reacting and responding to the issues and imperatives in the expedient approach, adopting rather argumentative behaviors or worse tailgating ways.[8] Thus, the writer believes it is timely to train and made available, somehow, a critical numbers of capable and independent minded Muslim intelligentsia and leadership to acquire the right body of knowledge as well as the insightfulness and profundity to address such issues with appropriate levels of sophistication and finesse. By doing so, these well qualified and well regarded thinkers and leaders among the community may engage the State and relevant responsible agencies, for the best possible outcomes and for immediate as well as long term ramifications and considerations.[9] It is worth mentioning that

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Union], 11 Mar 1989. The madrasahs conduct classes from on daily basis while the part-time madrasahs conduct classes mostly once a week and on weekends.

[7] Please see, 'Report of the Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore, July 2000'. The report was submitted by the 15 member Committee on Compulsory Education (CE) formed in December 1999 to assess the feasibility of CE in Singapore. The committee looked into areas such as common knowledge, skills and educational experiences in cognizance of the different multi-racial and multi-religious concerns and aspirations, leading towards achieving national identity and cohesion.

[88] See Kerstin Steiner (2015), "Governing Islam: The State, the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) and Islam in Singapore" in *Australian Journal of Asian Law*, Vol 16 No 1, Article 6: pp.1-16.; Kerstin Steiner (2011),"Madrasah in Singapore: Tradition and modernity in religious education' in *Intellectual Discourse*, 19, IIUM Press, pp. 41-70.

[9] For a good deliberation on the role of religious leaders in Modern context, see Mumtaz Ahmad (2013), "Religious scholars in the modern world", paper presented during the Madrasah Convention organized by MUIS, 15 – 16 Mar 2013.

non-Muslim researchers and writers locally and abroad albeit still in small numbers, were already doing serious works on the madrasah education in particular and Islamic education in general. The non-Muslim writers were mostly academicians from the local tertiary institutions and their roles and contributions could be associated with the exigencies and contingencies involving the government and its State apparatus.[10] While the Muslim and non-Muslim writers from countries outside Singapore, could be interested due to security, social, political and economic imperatives especially after the 9/11.[11] The non-Muslims researches and writings on Muslims affairs in general and specifically on Islamic education, would naturally or inadvertently adopt worldviews, axioms, presupposition and methods that were very different from those adopted by their Muslims counterparts while conducting researches, analysis and the recordings and writings of their findings. They may eventually offer very different, critical and objective observations, evaluations and conclusions. But the intention, motivations and outcomes of such works should still subject to critical and objective evaluations for acceptance or otherwise by Muslims thinkers, leaders and Islamic institutions.

Islamic education in the context of this article, includes the madrasahs, where lessons and classes are held on daily basis and the part-time madrasahs where classes are held once a week, mostly on weekends. This article will discuss both the madrasahs and part-time madrasahs since the early ninth-century to the present day. These have to take into consideration and context, the various aspects of developments at national level and in particular the bold policies changes and systems reformations that were incorporated periodically to the education system and landscape in response to both internal and external imperatives, resulting in the significant transformation of the national education system, principally after independence.[12] It is important to recognize and acknowledge that Singapore has now been accepted largely at regional and global standpoints, for its excellent education system and its direct correlations with other key aspects of governance and nation building. Thus, the evolution for Islamic education has to take cognizance of these changes and developments. [13]

Four stages in the historiography of Islamic education in Singapore may be delineated. They are the pre-colonial period (9-18th century A.D.), the colonial period (19-20th century A.D.), post-colonial period (20th century) and lastly from the 1980s onwards, with the dynamics in the madrasahs, mosques, self-help Muslim organizations and private educational agencies and with direct involvements or otherwise from Majlis Ugama Islam (MUIS) and the State.[14] More attention will be given to the last stage, which is the observable trends from the 1980s onwards, when the relevant laws pertaining to the madrasahs and Islamic education were passed by the Singapore government in parliament and later the formation of the Religious Education Unit in

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[10] For works by non-Muslim academicians based in the local tertiary institutions, see the works by S.Gopinathan, Lai Ah Heng, Charlene Tan, Phyllis Ghim-Lian Chew.

[11] For non-Muslim academicians based abroad, see works by Kerstin Steiner, Warnk, Holger, Johnson Tan.

[12] For an overview of the major policy changes and significant developments in the national education, see S.Gopinathan (2013), "Singapore's Education System: Leading the Way for the 21st Century: Some Personal Reflections", paper presented during Conference on Madrasah Education organized by MUIS, 15 – 16 March 2013.

[13] For good discourse on the contrasting and competing needs and expectations of madrasahs' education vis-a-vis the State, see Kerstin Steiner (2011) Op. Cit., p. 41-70,

[14] This could be an original attempt by the writer to delineate the Islamic education history in Singapore into four stages. Previous writings and discussions on this subject by others may not address the matter by referring specifically to these stages.

MUIS before the end of that decade.[15] During this period, several rather spectacular changes in trends occurred resulting in a surge in public interests among Muslims for Islamic education and particularly the heightened confidence in the madrasahs' education.

Pre-Colonial Period (9-18th Century A.D.)

The early missionaries Muslims who came to the Malay world from the 9th century onwards, were mainly from Arabia and later from India and elsewhere. It is important to mention, to-date there are still lively debates among historians specializing in this field or among interested scholars in general, as to whether the main mediators of propagating Islam were dedicated and qualified missionaries from Arabia who were motivated solely in disseminating and carrying out teachings of Islam, or they act as both missionaries and traders. The writer is inclined to align himself to the position of al-Attas that the early propagators of Islam during the early 9th century onwards to the Malays in the Malay Archipelago were mostly well trained missionaries from Yemen and particularly from Hadhramaut province.[16] The fact, Islam was properly and well taught by qualified and dedicated individuals, the authenticity and veracity of the religion were ensured, safeguarded and the key tenets well understood and embraced by the vast majority of the Malays as the indigenous peoples for hundreds of years. It was not possible for common traders who lacked the pre-requisite trainings as well as the rigour, discipline and focus to execute such responsibilities well with tenacity, perseverance and sagacity.

Thus, the early Muslim missionaries were well trained, experienced and very earnest in their efforts to propagate the religion. Although there were no formal religious educational institutions or educational programs during the early days, the informal educational activities conducted by these early missionaries were very effective. They were so successful that the rulers themselves became convinced and willingly embraced the religion followed by the elite ruling class and the rest of the population. By the end of the 13th century, Islam had been established in North Sumatra and by the 14th century in northeast Malaya, Brunei, the southern Philippines and East Java. By the 15th century, Malacca and other areas of the Malay Peninsula embraced Islam. The newly converted rulers and community elites were actively supporting religious activities. Learning activities were carried out at designated areas in the royal palace, mosques, *suraus* (a designated public area for congregational prayers and learning of the

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[15] The Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS), also known as the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, was established as a statutory body in 1968 when the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) came into effect. Under AMLA , MUIS is to advise the President of Singapore on all matters relating to Islam in Singapore. By virtue of section 87 and 88 of the AMLA, all activities relating to religious activities is the responsibility of MUIS. For a quite interesting discourse on the position of MUIS vis-a-vis the State, please see "Religious representation in secular Singapore: a study of MUIS and Pergas", Walid Jumblatt Abdullah (2002). Unpublished MA thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Social Sciences, National University of Singapore (NUS).

[16] For an elaborate discussion on this, see Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (1990), *Islam Dalam Sejarah Dan Kebudayaan Melayu [Islam in the History and the Culture of the Malays]*, Petaling Jaya: Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, pp. 17-24; Syed Muhd Naquib Al-Attas (2011), *Historical Fact and Fiction*, Johor Bahru: Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Press; H. Meuleman, Johan (2005), "The History of Islam in South East Asia: Some Questions and Debate" in K.S. Nathan and Mohammad Hashim Kamali Islam eds., *South East Asia, Political, Social and Strategic Challenges for the 21st Century,* Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, pp. 22-38.

religion in small groups) and homes of the religious teachers or the students. The teachings were focused mostly on the religious creeds and the practices. The approach and methodologies adopted and employed by the missionaries amalgamated well with the dominant cultures and traditions within the right context and circumstances. This had made the understanding, appreciation and acceptance of the religion by the indigenous people, apt and very well received.[17] Thus, the education and Islamization processes were by and large very effective and successful. Malays who were formerly largely Hindus, Buddhists or Animists were successfully convinced and converted to Islam in large numbers particularly during the 14th to 16th century. [18]

However, the later generations of Muslims were more focused and interested in practicing and preserving their religious beliefs rather than to propagate them. By the end of the 18th century, the majority of the indigenous people were already Muslims. They were mostly adhering to the *'aqīdah* of *Al-Ash'arī* and *Al-Māturīdī* and the teachings were basically *arkān al-Imān, arkān al-Islām* and *taşawwuf.* At this stage, the active propagation of the religion amongst the local Muslims to attract others of different beliefs was not as significant as compared to the earlier missionaries. There were no concerted efforts to convey Islam to the Chinese and Indian migrants who came to Singapore later, what more the British colonialists. As such, until today, the majority of Muslims in Malaya and Singapore included are Malays. Could the European colonialists who subjugated the Malay world from the 15th to 19th century, caused the Islamic missionary activities to be largely restrained or impeded? As to why Islam was not well and successfully propagated by the indigenous Malays to the migrant Chinese and Indians, warrants a study of its own.

During the Colonial Period (19-20th century A.D.)

The British colonized the island from 1819 to 1965 for about 146 years.[19] Besides controlling the trade and economy, they were more interested in establishing Christian missionary schools and churches rather than stopping the teaching and learning of Islam or impeding the religious activities among the Muslims.[20] According to Meuleman:

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[17] Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (1990), Op.Cit., pp. 17-24.

[18] There are various alternative and conflicting views on the spread of Islam, taking over the predominance of Hindu, Buddhist or animist believes. Some scholars attributed the phenomena to trade, cultural interactions, inter-marriages, political expedience, antagonism to the European missionary activities and others. These debates requires extensive discourses but the writer prefer to delimit them to remain focus to the crux of this chapter and thesis.

[19] The European powers who were naturally Christians had successfully conquered various parts of the Malay Archipelago resulting in the fall of the Muslim rulers. This resulted in decreases in political influence of Islam in the region and the growing presence and influence of Christianity. Malacca fell to Portuguese on 1511 and later to the Dutch on 1641, Manila to the Spaniards on 1521 and Indonesia fell to the Dutch on 1594. On 1768 British occupied Penang. These happened mostly in the 16th - 18th century A.D. See Muhammad Abdul Rauf (2001), *The Muslim Mind,* Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, pp. 280-281.

[20] In the 19th century A.D., secular education began to develop in the Straits Settlement in Penang, Singapore and Malacca with the establishment of Government English Free School and Mission schools. The mission schools were to promote Christianity and secular education. These were funded substantially by British and the ensuing governments after independence until now. For more details on the teaching and learning Islam during the early days among Muslims in Singapore, see Zahoor Ahmed

> Generally speaking, Great Britain did not interfere much in the administration of justice among its Malay subjects and left this task to the Sultan and other pre-colonial, indigenous leaders. It also treated Islamic jurisprudence as the principal source and decisions among its Muslim subjects.[21]

William Roff also commented that the British did not interfere with the Islamic education because Islam did not exert much influence on the political and public affairs. The religious elite or '*ulemā'* were also not very organized to be considered a political threat. The Arabs who were respected by the Muslims then were also loyal to the British.[22] Stamford Raffles in 1823, laid down rules that was agreed by the Sultan and Temenggong such that,

> in all cases regarding the ceremonies of religion, and marriages, and the rules of inheritance, the laws and customs of the Malays will be respected, where they shall not be contrary to reason, justice and humanity. In all other cases the laws of the British authority will be enforced with due consideration to the usages and habits of the people.[23]

During the early nineteenth century, the Qur'ān schools were popular and studies were mostly conducted in the mosques, *suraus* and homes of teachers and students. Focus was given to the recitation and memorization of the Qur'ān. With emphasis on rote learning, there was little effort at getting learners to understand or comprehend the sacred text. The British colonials were largely responsible for initiating and propagating the Malay schools. They began using the Qur'ān schools as the starting point and the foothold for their endeavors. These schools were then regulated and the teaching of the Qur'ān and Malay language was separated. The Malay language schools were under the purview of the government and held in the morning while the Qur'ān lessons were left to the private individuals to be taught after school hours in the afternoon. While the government paid the Malay language teachers, the Qur'ān teachers were paid by the parents. This was the first initial attempt to demarcate the teaching of language and non-religious subjects from religious education. A small number of Qur'ān schools continued their traditional ways and received the support of parents who still wanted the teachings of Qur'ān to be the dominant aspect of the curricula.[24] Consequently, there arose two distinct types of education system amongst the Muslims thereby creating a dichotomy between the Malay schools and the Qur'ān schools. While the Malay schools no longer exist today, the dichotomy first established by the British colonizer is still entrenched and exists until today. As S.M. Hossain notes:

> By dividing education into secular and religious education and by establishing separate institutions for both divisions, the British scheme of dual education

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F. Hussain (1966), "Growth of Islamic Education in Singapore" presented during the seminar on Islamic Education in Singapore.

[21] "The History of Islam in South East Asia", Op.Cit., p. 36.

[22] Roff, William R (1966), *The Origin of Malay Nationalism,* Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, p. 71

[23] Cited from Ahmad Mohamed Ibrahim (1965), *The Legal Status of the Muslims in Singapore,* Singapore: Malayan Law Journal Ltd, p. 3.

[24] For more details the education and schools promulgated by the British, see Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied and Dayang Istiaisyah Hussin (2005) "Estranged from the Ideal Past: Historical Evolution of Madrassahs in Singapore' in *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, August, pp. 249-260.

replaced the unitary Islamic system of education resulting in perennial discord among products of the two systems.[25]

This policy became more apparent in the early part of the 19th century A.D. and clearly demonstrated the British government policy of not stopping but not supporting the religious education among Muslims. The role to provide religious education was assumed by a few Arabs and a few local Malay individuals. This policy of not supporting the religious institutions, first initiated by the British government, is still upheld to a large extent by the present government.

However, it would be interesting to note that Islamic studies was introduced in the Malay schools from 1958 onwards (the country was under self rule) when Islamic studies was offered as an examination subject for the Cambridge/Malayan Certificate.[26] This was a unique situation where Islamic studies were introduced in Malay vernacular schools which had secular curriculum. This was in vogue until the closing of the last Malay schools in the 1970s due to declining in popularity and low student enrolment.[27] It is also interesting to note that the subject Islamic Religious Knowledge (IRK) was introduced in the government schools as an examinable subject in 1982 but unfortunately the policy was rescinded a few years later.[28]

It is worthy to note that the six madrasahs still in existence and active now were built during the colonial period. None was built in the post independence era particularly with the presence of Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) in 1966. Why was AMLA written and enacted? While this law was popularly accepted as a positive development for the Muslims, why where there no new madrasahs established after 1966? Was AMLA written more to regulate or to control and inhibit the activities of the Muslims especially with regards to the madrasahs' education? Could it be due to the lack of interest and realization or sheer ineptitude among key personalities involved in Islamic education that lead the extended period of indolence? The answer to these questions would be an interesting but should be extensive area of study.[29]

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[25] S.M. Hossain (1979), "A Plea for a Modern Islamic University: Resolution of the Dichotomy" in ed., Syed Muhamad Naquib al-Attas, *Aims and Objectives of Education,* Jeddah Hodder and Stoughton, p. 101.

[26] Ahmad Mohd Ibrahim (1966), "Islamic Education in Singapore" paper presented during a seminar on Islamic Education in Singapore by University of Singapore Muslim Society, September 17-19 1996; *Kongres Pendidikan Anak-Anak Islam* [Educational Congress for Muslim Children] (1982) organised by Mendaki and self-help Muslim organizations, Singapore, May 28-30 1982. Hereafter called *Kongres Pendidikan*.

[27] The period before independence from the British and until the independence of Singapore (1956-1965), saw a tumulus relationship between Malaysia and Singapore. This had to some extent, influenced some of the policies with regards to religious studies in the secular schools. Malaysia being a Muslim majority country and adopting Islam as State religion would embrace a policy that liberally incorporates Islamic studies in the school curriculum. However, Singapore has a Muslim minority and no official religion, thus making it difficult to have religious studies in its secular curriculum. For some discussion with regards to the merger of Singapore into Malaysia, see Mohamed Noordin Sopiee (2005), *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation,* Kuala Lumpur: University Malaya Press, pp. 112-115; Also see Kevin Y.L. Tan and Tio Li-ann., (1997), *Tan, Yeo and Lee's Constitutional Law in Malaysia and Singapore*, 2nd ed., Butterworths Asia, pp. 888-889, hereafter cited as *Constitutional Law*.

[28] Students may still take Islamic Religious Knowledge (IRK) classes. But these are normally held outside curriculum time. They may also sit for the examination for this subject but the results may not be used for entry into tertiary institutions. These classes are not popular any more and many schools no longer offer this subject. See *Constitutional Law,* pp. 890-892 for the reasons religious knowledge was introduced in the curriculum and later taken out.

[29] Steiner AMLA., Op. Cit.

It may interesting to note that the gradual and progressive development of more structured learning institutions for Muslims in Singapore mirrors in a similar fashion; albeit taking a longer time, the developments of formal religious educational institutions in the Middle East. According to Nashabe, the first madrasah established on record was built in Khurasan on 1014 A.D. or about 400 years after *hijrah*.[30] However, the first madrasah to be established here took about 600-700 years after the arrival of Islam to the island.

In the early part of the 20th century A.D., a number of Arabic schools or madrasah were established by wealthy Arabs philanthropist.[31] The main motivations to set up these schools were to propagate Islam and to promote Arabic language and culture. The early teachers in the madrasah were from Arabia and taught Arabic to the students and enabled them to understand Arabic texts. These students eventually became religious teachers and preachers because of their ability to read Arabic text.

Madrasah Alsagoff, Madrasah Aljunied and Madrasah Al-Maarif were built on *wakaf* lands by Muslim philanthropist in the years 1912, 1927 and 1937 respectively. Meanwhile, Madrasah Al-Irsyad, Madrasah Al-Arabiah and Madrasah Wak Tanjong were built during the years 1946, 1950 and 1955 respectively.[32] There were a number of other madrasahs like Madrasah Al-Iqbal (1908), Madrasah Al-Khairiah (1932) and Al-Firdaus College (1937) but these were of less significant importance compared to the six madrasahs mentioned earlier. There was a clear trend that the madrasahs were rebuilt in the 1980s and 1990s. This showed the growing consciousness and public support for the madrasahs. Most of the funding for the redevelopments came from the donations from the Muslim public. Madrasah Al-Maarif was rebuilt from the grant given by the Islamic Bank based in Jeddah.[33]

Now only Madrasah Alsagoff and Madrasah Al-Maarif stand on *wakaf* lands because the government had acquired the *wakaf* properties of Madrasah Aljunied. It is again worthwhile to note that, all *wakaf* properties are also under the control of MUIS by virtue of section 58 and 59 of AMLA. This brings to question again the role of MUIS as a statutory board, the objectives and functions of AMLA. Are MUIS and AMLA designed to regulate and thereafter encourage the activities of the Muslims in general for the betterment? Or are they meant to control and restrain the religious activities of Muslims here, when deemed necessary by the secular State? As mentioned earlier, there should be an extensive and thorough study and review on the role and function of MUIS and AMLA.

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[30] See Nashabe, Hisham (1989), *Muslim Educational Institutions,* Beirut: Institute of Islamic Studies.

[31] C.M. Turnbull (1977), *A History of Singapore 1819-1975,* Singapore: Oxford University Press, pp. 100-101.

[32] These information is consistently found in almost all existing literatures on madrasah history in Singapore like the '*Assirat'* the magazine published by Madrasah Alsagoff in 1982 to commemorate its 70th anniversary; also in the *'Inspiration'* a magazine published by Madrasah Al-Maarif on March 1987 to commemorate its 50th anniversary and the official opening of its new building.

[33] Madrasah Alsagoff building was restored in 1992. The *wakaf* property belonging to Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah was acquired by the government in 1996. The madrasah is now operating on a new building that was constructed on a small portion of the acquired property with a 30 years lease from the government. Madrasah Al-Maarif Al-Islamiah was redeveloped in 1986 but later moved to a new freehold property in 2007. Madrasah Wak Tanjong was redeveloped in 1993 and currently stands on leasehold property of 30 years like Madrasah Aljunied. Madrasah Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiah was relocated due to redevelopment projects by the government and now at a permanent building adjacent to MUIS's building. Madrasah Al-Arabiah had moved into a temporary building with the help of MUIS.

Besides the madrasahs, the vast majority of the Muslim children at school going age as well as youths and adults were attending religious classes organized by the mosques and individual teachers.[34] They attended classes before or after school during the weekdays and on weekends. They attended the lessons once, twice or thrice per week and took subjects such as *Tawhīd, Fiqh, Sirāh, Akhlāq, Qur'ān*, Arabic Language and *Jāwī*.

Post Colonial Period (1965- 1989)

Singapore was under self government in 1959 but still under British rule until 1965. After the war, there was a proliferation of religious schools in the villages from 14 schools in 1959 to about 50 schools by 1966 with about 5000 students. These schools were not registered with the government and were run by committees set up by the villagers themselves.[35] The quality of religious education generally did not change much after independence. The religious schools were poorly managed and had no proper administration. These were privately owned and had no controlling body. Each school developed its own tradition and culture. There were barely any benchmark, standardization in policies and procedures in the administration, finance, curriculum, examination, recruitment of teachers and teachers' training. The religious schools had traditionally been a private enterprise with minimal involvement and interference from the government. For years the religious schools were barely able to survive because it was lacking in funding and expertise. It could attract only a handful of students because many parents were doubtful of the system. Students who left religious schools were said to have significant problems finding jobs since there were limited opportunities and their qualifications were not recognized by many employers.

The religious schools were then a melting pot of students who joined the schools since young and older students who left the government schools prematurely to join these schools. A number of religious schools could not be sustained and closed down. There were many religious schools that died of natural deaths since they received little support from the community in terms of student enrolment and financial aid.[36] However, it was due to the perseverance and sacrifices of a number of Muslims that a few religious schools managed to pull through the difficult times and existed until the present day. By 1982, the number of religious schools or more popularly knowned as madrasahs, was reduced to only six, providing primary level education and four of them continue to provide secondary level education. The rest were called part-time madrasah provided by the mosques and Muslim organisations.[37]

There were several factors leading to this situation such as the rapid urbanization, the disappearance of villages and the relocation of the villagers and the Muslim community to new housing estates. In addition, parents preferred English or Malay schools to madrasah as these schools were deemed to ensure better employment prospects. As a result of reduced support and dwindling enrolment, many madrasah had to close. According to Teck Wong:

> A further consequence of the transformation of the economy was the sharp rise
> in the demand for education in English. Increasing external trade, tourism, and

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[34] The mosques in Singapore organize multitudes of activities besides the congregational prayers. The bulk of these activities are educational in nature. See Mansor Sukaimi (1982), *Dynamic Functions of Mosques – The Singapore Experience,* Singapore: Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, p. 11.

[35] See "Seminar on Islamic Education", 1966, pp. 77-84.

[36] *See Kongres Pendidikan,* p. 59.

[37] Ibid., p.60.

the growing role of Singapore as financial centre created many job opportunities for those fluent in English. This did not escape the notice of pragmatic parents who came to believe that an English education would give their children better career prospects.[38]

Later Developments and the Establishment of the Religious Education Unit, MUIS (1989 onwards)

Although AMLA was passed in 1966 for the establishment of MUIS, it was only in 1989, some 23 years later that the Religious Education Unit (REU) was formed in MUIS. Soon after, a seminar was convened to solicit ideas to formulate the roles and functions as well as to charter the direction of the newly formed unit.[39] On 1 March 1990, the Singapore Parliament enforced sections 87 and 88 of AMLA that gave MUIS widespread control over the madrasahs.[40] Besides madrasahs, all other activities relating to religious activities in the country came under the direct purview of MUIS. Concurrently, the madrasahs also fall within the Education Act under the Ministry of Education where they are considered as private schools. It would be interesting to study why it took so long to enact the said law and take needful actions to improve the madrasahs. During the intervening years for about 10 years (from early 1980s to late 1980s), MENDAKI (Council for the Development of Singapore Muslim Community) played the interim role to coordinate the madrasahs' education since there was no other body during that period that was looking into it.[41] But it was promptly handed over once MUIS was ready to assume the responsibility. To-date, MENDAKI provides annual financial contribution to MUIS as its commitment to religious education.[42]

There are at present about 4,000 students studying in the 6 madrasahs. Each madrasah has its own Management Committee (MMC) that is registered under the Education Act. Ministry of Education (MOE) appoints the members of the MMC and the appointments are renewed every 2 years. MOE would consult MUIS before confirming the committee members.[43] The MMC members were sometimes affiliated to the founders of the madrasahs or volunteers from members of the public.

A number of initiatives taken by MUIS since early 1990s to improve the conditions of the madrasahs received quite favorable responses from the madrasah administrators and members

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[38] Soon Teck Wong (1988), *Singapore's Education System: Educational Reform for National Development,* Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, pp. 6-7. Hereafter cited as *Singapore's Education System.*

[39] See Seminar Pendidikan Islam organized by Jawatankuasa Pendidikan Islam [Committee on Islamic Education] (1989), by MUIS and Kesatuan Guru-Guru Melayu Singapura [Malay Teachers Union], Mar 11, 1989.

[40] Mohd Yusuf Zuhri (1993), "Memanfaatkan Potensi Pendidikan Madrasah [Optimise the Potential of Madrasah Education]", paper presented during the Seminar, Commemorating MUIS's 25 Years Achievements and Its Future Directions, Singapore, 13-14 November 1993.

[41] Op. Cit., Kongres, pp. 59-67.

[42] For MENDAKI's role in madrasah education, see *Secularism and Spirituality*, pp. 16-18.

[43] There are political appointments in the Ministry of Education who are Muslims, given the role as the Minister of State for Education or Senior Parliamentary Secretary. Their focus is on all the students in the conventional schools and not the Muslim students only. However, their efforts and contributions to improve the madrasahs were quite minimal.

of the Muslim community.[44] It is an accepted fact that MUIS had managed to make some strategic inroads into the madrasahs and has successfully helped the madrasahs to progress significantly in a number of critical areas.[45] Concurrently, during the late 1980s and the 1990s, there was a significant and a very apparent increase in the Muslim confidence and support for the madrasahs here and Islamic education in general. There were a number of factors that could be attributed to this increase. First, there was a global and regional interest among Muslims worldwide to discover and practice Islam.[46] Secondly, since the formation of the REU and later RED in MUIS, there were more concerted efforts to improve the madrasahs at national level which, in turn, generated positive publicity in the mass media. This involved the collaborative efforts between MUIS and all the madrasahs.[47] Third, there were some, albeit very few, graduates from the madrasah who became successful in both the religious and non-religious educations and spheres of life and their achievements were well covered by the local media. They became role models for the community. Fourth, the growing number of well educated Muslim parents who wanted their children to have a balanced education in both religious and non-religious sciences. Fifth, there were serious concerns about the increasing number of juvenile delinquency cases like gangsterism, drug abuse, substance abuse and premarital sex amongst Muslim children and youths in secular schools. Also the government school has not allowed the female students who have reached puberty to observe *hijāb.* The issue of hijab had caused significant uproar and controversies involving the government, quite akin to the CE and until now has not been resolved concretely.[48]

There are however, concerns about the compatibility and matching of goals set by the madrasahs and the aspirations of the parents who sent their children to the madrasah. The popularity of the full-time madrasah would be a positive phenomenon only if the parents are

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[44] For more details of the initiatives by MUIS, please see, Mohd Yusuf Zuhri (1995), "Islamic Education – Shaping the Future Generation" *in Fikrah – Shaping the Future,* Singapore: Majlis Ugama Islam, pp. 1-10. The Religious Education Unit (REU) was upgraded to a department called Religious Education Department (RED) in 1992-1993. There was an increase in manpower in the department and also in the scope of activities.

[45] See Mohd Yusuf Zuhri (1995),"Ke Arah Sistem Pendidikan Madrasah yang Sesuai dan Berkesan di Singapura [Towards an Appropriate and Effective Madrasah Education in Singapore]" paper presented during a seminar Muzakarah Islam by MUIS, Singapore, 1 July 1995.

[46] Within a period of 5 years (1977-1982) there were five World Conferences on Islamic Education held in King Abdul Aziz University (Saudi Arabia), Quaid-i-Azam University (Pakistan), Institute of Islamic Education and Research (Bangladesh) and Indonesia. Consequently a World Centre for Islamic Education was established at Ummul Qura University in Saudi Arabia. All these initiatives certainly generated much interest in Islamic Education world wide. See Niaz Erfan and Zahid A. Valie, eds. (1995), *Recommendations of the Four World Conferences on Islamic Education. Education and the Muslim World: Challenges and Response,* Lahore: Institute of Policy Studies the Islamic Foundation, Introduction.

[47] There were various efforts to reform the madrasah to meet the community, national and global prerogatives and challenges. Some were made independently by the madrasah administrators utilizing own resources. While there were initiatives spearheaded by MUIS in close collaboration with the interested madrasah administrators as well as the parents, students and appointed external consultants. The effects and results of the above may be observed within probably 15-20 years' time frame from the start of these initiatives. A case study on the changes made in a particular madrasah was given in the article, by Charlene Tan and Hairon Salleh (2014) "Reforming Madrasa Curriculum in an Era of Globalization: The Singapore Case" in *Reforms in Islamic Education – International Perspectives,* Ed Charlene Tan, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Academic.

[48] For more detailed discourse on this, please see Walid Jumblatt Abdullah (2012), Op. Cit., pp 8-9.

aware and actively involved in their children education. In addition, full-time madrasah should have proper and reliable mechanisms to identify students with the right aptitude, attitude and interest before accepting them. Zainah Alias in her study on this area commented:

> … if a great percentage of parents who intend to send their children to madrasahs have confidence in their children's ability and their interest to study in madrasahs, have the commitment to be involved in their children's study and spiritual development and share the aspirations of the respective madrasahs, the popularity for madrasah education would be a blessing for the madrasahs' vision. [49]

The government has been by and large, apathetic and oblivious to the problems and challenges faced by the madrasahs. However, when they realized the sudden popularity and surge in demand for places in the madrasahs from the Muslim community, several actions were swiftly introduced to address the situation. A quota was introduced in 2000, allowing only 400 students to enter full-time madrasah at primary 1 per year. In addition, they decided to introduce Compulsory Education (CE) with effect from 2003. This implies that madrasah have to adhere to similar curriculum offered in the secular schools as prescribed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in tandem with the religious curriculum. The government will evaluate the performance of madrasah students at primary 6 during the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) in the year 2008. If the madrasah students fail to perform in this examination, the government may take actions it deemed suitable on the madrasah concerned, even to the point of closing them down.

Possibly knee jerk reactions and direct consequences to the CE, several major revamps were made to the madrasah system initiated and led by largely by MUIS. It was noted several of the madrasah notably Al-Arabiah, Aljunied and Wak Tan Tanjong were struggling hard to meet the PSLE requirements. Rather than to allow these madrasahs to fail and fade, pragmatic solutions were chartered by the interested parties. The Joint Madrasah System (JMS) was introduced involving three of the six madrasah. Madrasah Al-Irsyad-Zuhri focuses in primary education, while Madrasah Aljunied and Al-Arabiah specialise in secondary education. Madrasah Aljunied will offer the *ukhrawi* or religious stream that offers intensive religious education curriculum for students who are interested to pursue Islamic education at secondary and post-secondary levels. Madrasah Aljunied will tie-up with the Al-Azhar University in Egypt for its curriculum planning. Meanwhile, Madrasah Al-Arabiah offers the academic stream for students who are more inclined to study academic subjects, but will include Islamic Studies and Arabic Language within an Islamic settings. Whilst Madrasah Al-Irsyad will serve as the feeder school for both Aljunied and Al-Arabiah.[50] There other three madrasahs namely Madrasah Alsagoff al-Arabiah, Madrasah Al-Maarif al-Islamiyyah and Madrasah Wak Tanjong stayed out of JMS for various reason, but probably had to do with the ownership and control of the respective institutions as well as differing philosophies and objectives as far as Islamic education is concerned. Madrasah Wak Tanjong at some stage failed to make the mark for CE and were disallowed to take in

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[49] This study was done to analyze the aspirations of the parents who sent their children to madrasah vis-à-vis the goals set by madrasah themselves. See Zainah Alias (1997-1998), "The Goals of Madrasah Educational System in Singapore: Obstacles and Recommendations," Unpublished Academic Exercise, National University of Singapore, Department of Sociology, p. 53. Hereafter cited as "The Goals of Madrasah Educational System".

[50] For details of the JMS, please see http://www.madrasah.sg/About/index.html

primary 1 students for 2 consecutive years. Fortunately, after the corrective actions made, the madrasah resumed taking students.

Although there are only six madrasahs in the tiny island, unfortunately they were split into JMS and non-JMS madrasahs. As such, the limited resources were divided and resources such as manpower, finance and expertise cannot be mobilized and optimized effectively. All these institutions are still under MUIS as stipulated under AMLA but the JMS and non-JMS madrasah operate quite differently. The JMS madrasahs are directly under MUIS and thus accorded special considerations, although assistance by MUIS are generally provided to all six madrasahs.[51] It can be concluded at this juncture, the concern of the government to limit the intake of primary 1 students into the madrasah was largely successful. As a consequence, the overall population of the madrasah was controlled and stabilized. Also the need to revamp the curriculum was achieved partly, via the JMS system.

For the part-time madrasah, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, the aLIVE program was introduced to replace the older mosque madrasah curriculum. The four major segments of the new program introduced includes, kids (5 to 8 years old), tweens (9 to 12 years old), teens (13 to 16 years old) and youths (17 to 20 years old). In addition to the thematic approach, new terms were introduced such as Faith and Practice (instead of *Aqidah* and *Fiqh*), Character and Life Skills (instead of *Akhlak*), Social and Civilisational Islam (instead of *Sirah* and *Tarikh*) and Reading (Quranic literacy and Understanding). New teaching pedagogies such as role play, modelling, reflective practice and others were adopted and whatever approaches deemed suitable that employs the latest modes of teaching and learning. These were significantly different from the traditional ways of knowing Islam that may have been considered by the policy setters and decision makers in MUIS as antiquated and outmoded. As a result, the curriculum content, pedagogy, assessment methods, language of instruction and others underwent major changes.[52] The rather massive changes mentioned above, resulted in mixed reactions and attracted a fair share of criticism and concerns, since it was mooted and directed largely by MUIS. Thus, the mosque madrasah administrators and the teachers had little options, if any, for to provide differing opinions or decide otherwise. Still, they were warmly welcomed and given positive feedbacks by different segments of the mosque madrasah community. Gradual improvements were to the aLIVE initiative, like the home version for the Kids aLIVE programme, where relevant teaching materials were provided at no costs to assist parents and interested members of the public to guide their own children learning Islam at home. In addition, the Islamic Education Fund (IEF) was formed, to help those with financial difficulties to attend classes at the mosque madrasahs. This fund may also be utilised to improve the quality aLIVE programs rendered by

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[51] For a good overview of JMS see, Farah Mahamood Aljunied (2013), "Integrated and holistic madrasah education curriculum" paper presented during Conference on Madrasah Education organized by MUIS, 15 – 16 March 2013.

[52] See Charlene Tan and Hairon Salleh (2014),"Reforming Madrasa Curriculum in an Era of Globalization: The Singapore Case in Reforms in Islamic Education – International Perspectives, Ed Charlene Tan, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Academic; Phyllis Ghim-Lian Chew (2014), "Coming to grips with modernization. The Teens ALIVE programme and the teaching of sadaqah (giving of alms)", in Muslim Education in the 21st Century Asian Perspectives eds Sa'edah Buang, Phyllis Ghim-Lian Chew, London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, pp. 143-161.

the mosque madrasahs and teachers. Continual initiatives to SIES were made like the ADIL or Adult Islamic Learning for those 21 years old and above. [53]

It is interesting that Andalus, a private Islamic educational enterprise surfaced in the midst of the major changes at the madrasah and mosque madrasah. The beginnings of Andalus since 1996 was in fact, not a deliberated or well planned, nor was it a coordinated initiative among the Malay elites or the general masses. Rather, it was simply an intuitive initiative from a few young, sincere and quite uninitiated undergraduates as well as fresh graduates from an Islamic university. They were basically finding avenues to provide a meaningful service to the community relevant to their education and training; as well as supporting themselves financially. Thus, they embarked on providing small scale tuition and religious classes to interested audience. Such initiative were in fact, not very novel nor amazingly new at that period of time because there were already similar initiatives and enterprises by various individuals or groups on similar grounds. However, Andalus embarked on a very interesting journey that proved to be rather spectacular and made it stand out from the rest. From a humble beginnings of a class with about 30 students, now Andalus has 17 centres across the island with about 10,500 students. The writer was directly involved in this journey since 1997 or 1 year after initiation of Andalus and is still actively involved to-date. Eventually, Andalus formed affiliate companies such as Cordova Education Centre in 1999 and Institute Pengajian Tinggi Al-Zuhri in year 2000. To-date, the total number of students in the three educational institutions stands at 14,500 offering Islamic education pre-school to postgraduate levels. Darul Andalus was also formed in year 1999 and publishes textbooks from pre-school to tertiary levels.

Conclusion

This article has shown that problems and challenges relating to madrasah education in particular and Islamic education in general are due to both extrinsic and intrinsic factors. The demise of credible leadership and authority in many parts of the Muslim world including the Malay Archipelago particularly in the sixteenth century A.D. onwards had a direct impact and gave an appalling blow that crippled the spirit of learning and inquiry among Muslims worldwide. The subsequent rise of Western powers and the subjugation and suppression of Muslims under their rules and set of laws for several centuries thereafter and until a few decades ago had a debilitating impact on Islamic education. Thus, the political, legal, economic, social, educational and religious dynamics involving the Muslims and the West could contribute significantly to this problem. The British who colonized Singapore for 165 years initiated their own conception of knowledge and education that separated religion from education. This resulted in a significant level of confusion with regards to meaning and objective of education among Muslims during the intervening years of their long colonization. This had subsequently led to the dualistic education system which has since become deeply imbedded in the minds of Muslims and permeated years after independence. The philosophy and methodology of education introduced by the British vis-à-vis religious study are still largely employed by the secular State now. Thus the British legacy on these matters ought to be well studied and understood towards liberating implicitly the Muslim minds from being virtually colonized. The writer hopes Muslims here should inquire, rediscover and experience their own authoritative

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[53] For details about ADIL, please see, http://www.adil.sg/About/faq.html (retrieved on 15 June 2016). As at 2014, there were 13 mosques that offer ADIL with 2,300 participants. Also see, MUIS Annual Report 2014, p 18.

traditions and know their own glorious legacy and civilization in order to counter effectively and deconstruct the colonial frame of mind. This would eventually equip Muslims with the capability and confidence to face mounting challenges and influencing forces in the past, present and to reconstruct an educational framework based on the proper Islamic worldviews

The position of the government with regards to the madrasah education in particular, has much room for improvements, albeit acknowledging several positive but relatively minor adjustments after the CE saga. This has to do with the long historical tradition and policies the authority has adopted since independence with regards to religious education; not only to studies relating to Islamic but to other religious beliefs. The Muslim community ought to understand the historical background, the guiding policies and the constraints of the government in a secular State vis-à-vis religious education. The Muslim community should do away with the suspicion of an ominous plot by the government to uproot and abolish the madrasah education.[54] But concurrently, it should always be very vigilant against possibilities of such motives by the government or related agencies and intelligent enough to react in the most appropriate ways.

Meanwhile, Muslims here must also be realistic in terms of expecting and forwarding multitude of requests and demands for the government to improve the madrasah education. It must learn to be strong, independent and self-reliant with the initiatives to upgrade Islamic education and therefore should prove itself to be successful with or without government support. Muslims in Singapore are to some extent, successful in areas such as the development of *wakaf* properties, management of *zakāt, haj* and mosques among others, with minimal government intercessions and support. On the other hand, the government should also consider the fact that a successful and confident Muslim minority in Singapore would be an admirable showcase to the governments and their respective Muslim populations in the neighboring countries and other parts of the world. It will demonstrate and provide clear evidences that the policies in relation to the indigenous Muslims minority population here are well positioned, plausible and successful to be emulated by others.

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[54] See *Secularism and Spirituality,* Op.Cit., p. 97 and pp. 154-159.

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