

The Future of Artificial Intelligence in/and of Islam: A View from Muslim Southeast Asia

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The conference on “*The Future of Artificial Intelligence in/and of Islam: A View from Muslim Southeast Asia*” was held on July 2-4, 2024, at Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII). The conference was initiated by the Faculty of Islamic Studies UIII in collaboration with Project 0100 led by Bart Barendregt (Leiden University, the Netherlands). The conference aims to “explore the dynamic intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) and Islam ... [and] discuss the profound implications arising from the co-production of digital and religious futures.” Barendregt also asserted that Southeast Asia was selected as the conference’s focus since “Southeast Asia [does] not only [have] a significant Muslim population ... it is also very much at the forefront of digital technologies interacting with them in everyday practices.” The conference covered three main programs: **Keynote Speeches**, **Panel Sessions**, and **Masterclasses**. This writing focuses on the discussions in the keynote speeches and exclusive panel sessions, with more detailed explanations dedicated to the keynote speeches. Masterclasses focused primarily on technical and practical engagement directly with the audience.

Three Keynote Speeches

First Keynote Speech

Amana Raquib (Institute of Business Administration, Pakistan) delivered the first keynote speech titled “*Confusing Technological Means and Ends: Virtue or Birr as the Islamic Telos for Reordering the Hierarchy.*” She began by questioning Muslims’ enthusiasm for AI and other modern technologies, noting that they often lack grounding in deeper Islamic traditions and consciousness. She highlighted some factors behind Muslims’ enthusiasm for technology. The first is colonization, where techno-science was embraced as a symbol of modernity and progress. Another factor is the pressure on Muslim governments to catch up with global scientific and

technological advancements. These factors have led to what she calls “techno-scientific inertia, which tends to inhibit the thinking and developing of other alternatives [of societal paradigms].”

According to her, the constraint to the thinking of other alternatives is a false assumption in viewing technology as value-neutral, as in the saying, “guns don't kill people; people do.” In fact, according to her, technologies might have harmful consequences for humanity, as in the narrative of popular figures like Oppenheimer. Raquib emphasized that technology is not value-neutral. According to her, “The technology of any culture embodies and reflects what the inhabitants of what culture want and what they consider the desirable ends of human life.” In other words, technology is both shaped by, and shapes human culture and values.

Raquib's key critique is the lack of intrinsic higher telos in modern technology, leading to a proliferation of artifacts that serve innumerable ends, hence, indefiniteness and chaos. By telos, she refers to “whole scale purpose ... what ends are in our mind when they are being developed.” The lack of telos in technological development led her to skeptically ask, “how can someone who is developing this very one minuscule part of these [technologies] ... really know the whole thing and really know what role they are going to play? That is exactly the problem [of our technological development].”

Raquib concluded her speech by stressing the need for a holistic analysis of technological progress. She argued that a piecemeal assessment of the risks and benefits of technologies, including AI, is insufficient, and a thorough critical analysis of the dominance of technological rationality over Islamic morality is necessary. This comprehensive approach is essential for developing a framework that aligns technological advancements with Islamic ethical and moral standards.

Second Keynote Speech

In the second keynote speech, Ismail Fahmi (Drone Emprit, PT Kernels Indonesia, Indonesia) discussed “*Islamic Ethics in AI Development: Integrating Divine Principles for Global Technological Governance*.” Fahmi began by describing the rapid advancements in AI, particularly with the AI tool, ChatGPT. He highlighted the significant difference between the free and paid versions of ChatGPT, with the latter offering a much higher token limit, thus enhancing its ability to process and generate content. Furthermore, he stressed a future where AI could achieve Ph.D.-level intelligence within a year, raising excitement and concern. According to him, this could lead to unprecedented advancements in various fields. On the other hand, it raises questions about the data and computational power required to sustain such intelligence.

Moreover, there is a concern about the impacts of AI on inclusivity. He said, “it will be scary in the future. ChatGPT is a very cheap, nice AI tool, and a rather powerful creature. It can

do whatever we ask, but its knowledge is limited to digital data.” He highlighted the case of the diverse linguistic landscape of Indonesia, where many of the country’s 7,000 languages have not been digitalized. “There are two sides of the same coin here,” he stressed. While AI has the potential to preserve knowledge for future generations by digitalizing it, there is also a fear that languages and cultures not represented in the digital sphere might disappear. “We can kill humanity by not inputting it into AI,” he lamented.

This cultural concern is tied closely to the ethical implications of AI. Fahmi raised questions about the ethical use of AI, particularly in how it handles sensitive topics and the potential biases that might be embedded within its algorithms. For instance, he pointed to the issue of AI’s responses to questions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where the predominance of data supporting one side could lead to biased outcomes. This example illustrates the broader ethical challenge posed by big figures whose quotes Fahmi showed in his presentation, including Stephen Hawkin, Elon Musk, and Claude Shannon.

In his conclusion, Fahmi advocated for increased education and awareness about AI, particularly among students. He emphasized the importance of teaching students how to use AI tools like ChatGPT and how these tools work by understanding the human influences behind them. In addition, Fahmi called for collaboration across stakeholders such as academics, professionals, and religious actors to ensure that “Islamic ethics could be heard” in AI development. These Islamic ethics include principles such as intention (*niyyah*), harm prevention, and stewardship (*kehalifah*). This collaborative approach is seen as essential in creating a balanced framework that maximizes the benefits of AI while mitigating its risks.

Third Keynote Speech

The third keynote speech was delivered by Gary Bunt (University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Wales), who discussed the contents of his newly published book titled *Islamic Algorithm: Online Influence in the Muslim Metaverse*.¹ Bunt titled his presentation “*From Sheikh Google to ImamAI? Evolving Islamic Influence and Authority in Muslim Digital Worlds*.” He noted how online environments have challenged traditional models of religious authority. Through the Internet, Muslims, especially the younger generation, can look for religious opinions, just like “shopping on Amazon,” he described. This shift has led to the emergence of new Muslim influencers who employ various digital platforms, multi-media formats, and algorithms to boost their searchability on the Internet. Thus, according to Bunt, “digital literacy can be more important than religious status.”

A key point in Bunt's speech is the concept of “Islamic algorithms,” which he defines as “the ways in which individuals might ‘locate’ the Divine (and/or information about Islam) through a digital interface, and how this is influenced by the creation of specific data structures and relationships.” He provided “Islamic algorithms” examples, such as Virtual IFTA and FatwaPro. These programs were intended to answer live questions about Muslim prayer and ritual, illustrating how these digital tools are becoming integral to the practice of Islam.

However, while the algorithm might connect Muslims with the “Divine” in more personalized and easier ways, Bunt raised concerns about the authenticity and veracity of information circulating online. He explored how AI can perpetuate the influence of prominent religious figures even after their death, using the example of Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, whose legacy might be continued through AI personification. Bunt warned about the ethical implications of such developments, particularly the potential for deep fakes, including the use of AI by extremist groups to further their agendas.

Furthermore, he raised critical questions about the data sources that AI tools draw upon and how these sources might influence the interpretation of religious texts. For instance, by experimenting in such AI tools as **ChatGPT**, **Copilot**, and **Gemini**, Bunt asked for the translation of the first chapter in the Qur’an, Al Fatihah. While, in general, these AI tools could provide translations that are close to Muslim scholars, they drew from random questionable references. For instance, Copilot sourced its references from a Lahore-based online tutorial website. This website is not specific to Qur’anic translation. Another source is a website that collects Love Quotes in Arabic. Thus, Bunt asserted that “it provides translations, but the sources did not really help.”

Given the rapid development of AI, Bunt concludes his speech with the following [in]conclusive statement:

AI is contingent on the source material scraped into its design and how it refines its approaches. The integration of aspects of AI and their impact on religious authority is an issue that will be under scrutiny as the nascent technology continues to develop further, with its integration into competing browsers, operating systems, software, and online products.

Six Panel Sessions

Besides the keynote speeches, the conference on AI also invited 20 speakers to discuss AI development and its impact in Southeast Asia. These speakers were divided into six panel sessions.

Panel Session One

The first panel session on “*AI and Spirituality*” discussed the relationship between AI and human’s spiritual aspect. The first speaker, Haidar Bagir (Mizan, Indonesia), presented an argument against AI’s doomsday scenario posited by figures like Stephen Hawking in his discussion on “AI and Human Intelligence: An Akbarian Perspective.” Bagir optimistically emphasized that while AI may surpass humans in rational and imaginative thinking, the higher levels of human intelligence, such as transcendent imagination and spiritual faculties, remain beyond AI’s reach.

The second speaker, Yusuf Çelik (University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands), focused on “The Hermeneutical Quest for a Resilient Theological Anthropology: Artificial Superintelligence and Islam.” Against the narrative of artificial superintelligence, he argued for a new interpretation of human distinctiveness that incorporates non-rational aspects and the “dependent and fragile” aspects of humans to redefine human uniqueness in the age of AI.

The third speaker, Zainal Abidin Bin Sanusi (International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia), addressed “The Challenge of Artificial Intelligence to Spiritual Intelligence: Implications on Student Learning Experience.” He emphasized the need for caution and proactive strategies to ensure AI aligns with Islamic values that holistically integrate intellectual, spiritual, and moral growth.

Panel Session Two

The second panel session on “*AI and Education*” delved into the diverse challenges and opportunities that arise from integrating AI into educational systems in Indonesia and Malaysia. The first speaker, Trina Fizzanty (National Research and Innovation Agency, Indonesia), explored “Some Issues with the Use of AI in Indonesian Education.” Her study revealed that while students frequently use AI tools like ChatGPT for academic tasks, they often lack awareness of ethical issues and exhibit deficiencies in AI literacy and competence.

The second speaker, Daphne Wong-A-Foe (Leiden University, the Netherlands), discussed “Dreams and Dilemmas in Indonesian AI Education.” She highlighted the critical shortage of digital workers in Indonesia despite an increase in university-level education attainment. Through her ethnography in an Indonesian public university, she found some

challenges faced by the students, including financial struggles, aspirations to work abroad, and the need to reconcile AI ambitions with cultural and religious values.

The third speaker, Hasyiya Karima Binti Adli (Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, Malaysia), examined “The Effectiveness and Impact of Integrating Information Technology, Artificial Intelligence, and Huffaz Al-Quran Education: Perspectives from Students and Instructors.” She highlighted the potential of this interdisciplinary approach to positively impact the professional and spiritual development of the students and instructors, providing insights for the emergence of future-oriented education in Malaysia.

Panel Session Three

The third panel session on “AI and Society” explored AI’s multifaceted and complex impacts on various aspects of society. The first speaker, Wijayanto (Universitas Diponegoro, Indonesia), presented his findings on “KPK and Taliban: Cyber Troops, Social Media Propaganda, and the Weakening of Indonesian Anti-Corruption Body.” Wijayanto revealed the role of organized cyber troops in drowning out alternative views against the revision of anti-corruption law in Indonesia by collaborating with mainstream media and exploiting the fears and anxieties of the Indonesian middle class, particularly regarding Islamic radicalization in the Indonesian Anti-Corruption Body.

The second speaker, Sulfikar Amir (Nanyang Technological University, Singapore), asked, “Can We Trust the Smart Machine? A Search for the Framework of Responsible AI” in his presentation. He emphasized that “AI is never neutral and unbiased ... [as] it runs on man-made algorithms,” leading to “inequality and unfairness ... especially in employment and life opportunities.”

The third speaker, Muhamad Ali (University of California, Riverside, United States), explored “The Mixed Impacts of AI on Society and the Ambiguous Views of AI.” He acknowledged the positive impacts of AI where “AI makes life ... more efficient, productive, and easier.” However, like the previous speaker, he also pointed out the downsides of AI, including “infringement of privacy and exacerbated bias ... [that perpetuate] social inequality, job insecurity, exclusion, and division.”

Panel Session Four

The fourth panel session on “*AI Challenges to Islamic Organizations and Institutions*” highlighted Muslim organizations’ and scholars’ diverse responses and strategies in adapting to AI technologies. The first presenter, Ahmad Nuril Huda (National Research and Innovation

Agency, Indonesia), asked, “Disciplining the Ummah? Responses of Indonesian Muslim Organizations to AI Technologies.” He focused on the engagement of the two largest Indonesian Muslim organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, with AI, as reflected in their *fatwas*, debates, publications, and AI-related trainings. Huda argued that their responses reflect “disciplinary practices” to maintain their followers’ Islamic identity while adapting to global technological advancements.

The second speaker, Mohamad Noordin Fauzan (International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia), discussed “AI from Qur’anic Perspectives and Madani Approach in Malaysia.” He suggested a Qur’anic and Madani perspective on ethical AI use, advocating for selective acceptance of AI to ensure it aligns with Islamic values.

The third speaker, Sheikh Mohd Farouq Abdul Fareez (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, Singapore), examined the relationship of “ChatGPT, Muslim Cyberspace and the Construction of a Critical Islamic Epistemology.” Fareez called for “epistemic disobedience” to engage with digital technologies critically to find an equilibrium between the sacred texts with contemporary realities, ensuring responsible and ethical use of AI.

The fourth speaker, Mohd Al-Adib Samuri (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia), highlighted the potential of generative AI in interpreting complex legal texts in Islamic law through his presentation titled: “Enlightening Paths: Generative AI as a Tool for Islamic Law Research.” Yet, he also acknowledged the errors and biases of AI in interpreting Islamic texts, for instance, depending on the language of the input data, sparking “a dialogue on the future of Islamic jurisprudence in the age of artificial intelligence.”

Panel Session Five

The fifth panel session on “*AI and Visuality*” explored how AI interacts with and transforms visual and sensory experiences, especially in Malaysia and Singapore’s religious and urban contexts. The first speaker, Weiyan Low (Leiden University, the Netherlands), examined the practice of “Prompting and Piety: Malaysian Muslims and Religious Expression in the Embrace of Generative AI.” Through the study of local Generative AI Facebook groups, Low highlighted the practice of “prompting,” which is seen as a creative act of coding to generate art that aligns with Islamic values and is somewhat political. The second speaker, James McGrail (Leiden University, the Netherlands), went “Beyond the Visual - Hearing AI Infrastructures in the Smart City” in his presentation. He innovatively used sonic ethnography to explore AI’s impact on Singapore’s urban landscape, revealing the invisible aspects of AI infrastructure that the visual sensory often overlooks. The third speaker, Nurul Huda (National University of Singapore,

Singapore), explored “an Algorithmic Visuality of Muslim Women Images” on search engines like Google, Baidu, and Yandex. She revealed algorithmic biases in the portrayal of Muslim women, offering new perspectives on visuality and the paradigms of the “Muslim world.”

Panel Session Six

The sixth panel session on “*Digital Economy and Creative Sector*” offered an in-depth examination of how AI intersects with Islamic discourses, financial issues, and entrepreneurial practices in Indonesia. The first presenter, Mishbah Khoiruddin Zuhri (Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia, Indonesia), examined the role of “AI-Powered Muslim Digital Creatives: Reshaping Religious Authority and Islamic Meaning-Making in Indonesian Social Media.” Zuhri highlighted the growing influence of Muslim Digital Creatives in shaping digital Islamic discourse while both challenging and amplifying traditional religious authority in Indonesia by navigating algorithms and digital platforms.

The second presenter, Reza Shaker (Leiden University, the Netherlands), presented the findings of “Mapping the Crypto-Islamic Debates in the Indonesian Social Media Scene.” By using Natural Language Processing (NLP) to analyze TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube data, he revealed contrasting views on crypto as either a *halal* innovation or *haram* speculation, with debates centered on interpretations of Islamic finance principles like *riba* (usury), *maisir* (gambling), and *gharar* (excessive risk).

The third speaker, Bhirawa Anoraga (Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia, Indonesia), analyzed “Big Data and Big Debates in Studies of Islam and Muslim Societies in Indonesia.” Like Shaker, Anoraga also used digital tools to archive Instagram posts of various Muslim organizations and influencers in Indonesia to critically analyze big debates surrounding studies on Indonesian Islam, including topics such as Islamic economy, Muslim women, Muslim youth, and political Islam.

The fourth speaker, Ibnu Nadzir (University College London, UK), examined “The Making of AI and Performative Startup Entrepreneurship.” He revealed how the pursuit of “unicorn” status among Indonesian digital startups has driven entrepreneurs to grapple with AI-related businesses regardless of the complexity of its technical matters, given the trend of AI among global technological companies.

All in all, the conference on “The Future of Artificial Intelligence in/and of Islam: A View from Muslim Southeast Asia” delved into the hotly debated issue of AI development, which has generated pros and cons on a global scale. Its significance lies in presenting Islamic ethical perspectives within this debate while highlighting the ambiguities and dilemmas Muslims

face in the era of AI. The conference also served as a platform for researchers to showcase their cutting-edge topics and methodologies. As Gary Bunt remarked on his participation, “this workshop was the first time I’d really heard serious tech centred research and methodology sessions in this field.”² Thus, this venue is expected to not only advance scholarly discourse but also lay the groundwork for the future trajectory of this nascent yet rapidly growing research area.

Endnotes

¹ Gary R. Bunt, *Islamic Algorithms Online Influence in the Muslim Metaverse*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024).

² Gary R. Bunt. “this workshop was the first time I’d really heard serious tech centred research and methodology sessions in this field.” X (formerly Twitter), August 18, 2024. <https://x.com/garybunt/status/1809246210496360892>.