

7TH SRP DISTINGUISHED LECTURE AND SYMPOSIUM 2026

Sacred Words, Contested Worlds: Religion, Pluralism and Social Resilience



12 February 2026, Thursday
9:00am to 5:00pm



Raffles City Convention Centre, Singapore



Professor Perry Schmidt-Leukel
Senior Professor of Religious Studies and Intercultural Theology at the University of Münster, Germany



Dr Nazirudin Mohd Nasir
Mufti of the Republic of Singapore



Ambassador Ong Keng Yong
Executive Deputy Chairman, Director of Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Head of International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)



Ambassador Barry Desker
Distinguished Fellow & Nanyang Professor of the Practice, at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)



Dr Suphatmet Yunyasit
Lecturer, Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies (IHRP), Mahidol University, Thailand



Dr Jaclyn Neo
Associate Professor of Law at the National University of Singapore (NUS) & Director, Centre for Asian Legal Studies



Professor Kumar Ramakrishna
Professor of National Security Studies, Provost's Chair in National Security Studies & Dean at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)



Professor Paul Hedges
Associate Dean (Scholarly Ecosystems) & Professor in the Studies in Interreligious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) Programme at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)



Dr Lee Foong Ming
Assistant Professor, Buddhist College of Singapore

7th Distinguished Lecture & Symposium (DLS 2026)

Sacred Words, Contested Worlds: Religion, Pluralism and Social Resilience

Religious diversity is a defining feature of contemporary societies, nowhere more so than in Southeast Asia and Singapore. Yet in a globalised and polarised world, difference is too often weaponised as a marker of exclusion. While political factors and identity politics are part of the matrix, religious division is also sometimes fuelled by an appeal to the scriptural and foundational texts of the religious traditions. In our interconnected yet fractured world, religious texts serve as both a profound source of meaning and a volatile flashpoint. These sacred texts shape our identities and communities, yet their interpretation lies at the heart of our contested worlds, fuelling polarisation from the global stage to local neighbourhoods, including those across Southeast Asia.

The challenge of religious diversity is no longer simply about achieving coexistence; it is about building genuine relationships and social resilience. How can plural societies withstand the pressures of exclusive truth claims and identity politics without fragmenting? The answer lies not in ignoring our religious texts, but in engaging them more deeply. While some interpretations of scripture are used to draw hard lines of division, these same traditions contain powerful resources for fostering empathy, understanding, and robust pluralism. These are the very ingredients of a resilient society, one that can absorb shocks, adapt to differences, and maintain its social fabric.

Moving beyond the diagnosis of religious conflict, the 7th SRP Distinguished Lecture and Symposium (DLS 2026), themed "*Sacred Words, Contested Worlds: Religion, Pluralism and Social Resilience*", brings together leading scholars and practitioners in theology, history, and law to explore practical solutions. The DLS 2026 will investigate the hermeneutics of both division and harmony, asking how communities can consciously cultivate interpretations that strengthen social bonds rather than weaken them. The symposium presents a timely opportunity to harness the wisdom within religious texts to forge cohesive, resilient societies that are fit for a complex future, moving from scriptural insight to lived social harmony.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)

The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) is a think tank and professional graduate school of international affairs at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. An autonomous school, RSIS' mission is to be a leading research and graduate teaching institution in strategic and international affairs in the Asia Pacific. With the core functions of research, graduate education and networking, it produces cuttingedge research on Asia Pacific Security, Multilateralism and Regionalism, Conflict Studies, Non-traditional Security, Cybersecurity, Maritime Security and Terrorism Studies. For more details, please visit <http://www.rsis.edu.sg>.

Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) Programme

The SRP Programme is dedicated to exploring the adaptation of communities in religious practices and doctrines within plural societies. Our mission is to develop expertise in inter-religious relations, focusing on effective conflict resolution mechanisms and models that promote peace and strengthen social ties. We aim to enrich academic and applied knowledge of inter-religious dynamics, with a particular emphasis on local and regional contexts. We aim to educate and engage communities through events, seminars, and digital platforms. For more details, please visit <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/research/srp>.



Time	Event	Speaker / Facilitator
8.30 am	► Registration	
9.00 am	► Introduction	Mr Mohamed Nassir Head of SRP Programme
9.15 am	► Welcome Remarks	Professor Kumar Ramakrishna Dean, RSIS
9.30 am	► 7th SRP Distinguished Lecture The Pluralistic Imperative: An Interreligious Theology for Truth & Peace	Professor Perry Schmidt-Leukel Senior Professor of Religious Studies and Intercultural Theology, University of Münster, Germany
10.30am	► Tea and Coffee Break	
11.00 am	► Distinguished Lecture Q&A Session <i>Moderator: Dr Lee Foong Ming</i>	Professor Perry Schmidt-Leukel
11.45 am	► Lecture 1 Women, Religion & the Promotion of Social Resilience: Perspectives from Thailand	Dr Suphatmet Yunyasit Lecturer, Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies (IHRP), Mahidol University, Thailand
12.15 pm	► Lecture 2 Countering Religious Polarisation in Plural Societies	Dr Nazirudin Mohd Nasir Mufti of the Republic of Singapore
12.45 pm	► Lunch	
2.00 pm	► Lecture 3 Violence and Identity in Religions & Social Contexts	Professor Paul Hedges Associate Dean (Scholarly Ecosystems), RSIS
2.30 pm	► Lecture 4 Managing Religious Tensions & Plurality in Singapore	Dr Jaclyn Neo Director, Centre for Asian Legal Studies
3.10 pm	► Tea and Coffee Break	
3.40 pm	► Panel Discussion and Q&A Session <i>Chaired by Ambassador Barry Desker</i>	Prof Perry Schmidt-Leukel Dr Suphatmet Yunyasit Dr Nazirudin Mohd Nasir Prof Paul Hedges Dr Jaclyn Neo
4.35 pm	► Token of appreciation presentation to all invited speakers	
4.45 pm	► Closing Remarks	Ambassador Ong Keng Yong Executive Deputy Chairman, RSIS
5.00 pm	► End	

Programme above is subject to changes

Lectures Synopses

7th Distinguished Lecture

The Pluralistic Imperative: An Interreligious Theology for Truth & Peace

Professor Perry Schmidt-Leukel

In an era of increasing polarisation, Prof Perry Schmidt-Leukel argues that durable peace demands more than tolerance; it requires religions to utilize their internal scriptural resources to embrace plurality. Drawing on Buddhist and Christian insights, he advances the thesis that only a genuinely pluralistic reading of traditions can ground peace and transcend exclusive truth claims. This analysis targets practical coexistence, demonstrating how sophisticated textual interpretation strengthens social resilience. Crucially, he distinguishes his "interreligious theology" from conventional dialogue, advocating for a transformative, integrated approach to theology in a diverse world.

Lecture 1: Women, Religion, and the Promotion of Social Resilience: Perspectives from Thailand

Dr Suphatmet Yunyasit

The speaker will address how women are integral to efforts to develop inclusive and plural societies, with a focus on Southeast Asian contexts, drawing especially from Thai experiences. Looking at women's peacebuilding networks and her experience within them as well as academic theories and perspectives, the speaker will offer a critical examination of how efforts towards pluralism and social resilience are enhanced when women are included as integral, even leading, partners. Both theoretical perspectives and real-world case studies will be shared.

Lecture 2: Countering Religious Polarisation in Plural Societies

Dr Nazirudin Mohd Nasir

This lecture examines how religious teachings can be mobilised to resist polarisation and counter narratives of exclusion. While exclusionary views often claim legitimacy through scripture and tradition, other, often more valid, interpretations exist. The speaker will present a case for why inclusive narratives offer a compelling reading of faith. While the focus is on Islam, the speaker will draw relevant parallels with other faith traditions.

Lecture 3: Violence and Identity in Religions and Social Contexts

Professor Paul Hedges

This lecture will explore how religious traditions interpret narratives that promote violence or equally irenic coexistence within their social context, and how identity is constructed in relation to these narratives. As such, it approaches questions of hermeneutics (the interpretation of religious texts) not simply as theological matters but as ones which are also political.

Lecture 4: Managing Religious Tensions and Plurality in Singapore

Dr Jaclyn Neo

This lecture examines how law and policy function as pragmatic tools to foster coexistence in religiously diverse societies. While peaceful harmony may be an ideal, legal and policy frameworks remain central in managing tensions and enabling pluralism in practice. Using Singapore as a case study, the lecture explores how legislative approaches are crafted and applied within specific social contexts, and how they contribute to sustaining religious diversity and stability.

Speakers' Profiles



Professor Perry Schmidt-Leukel

Perry Schmidt-Leukel is Senior Professor of Religious Studies and Intercultural Theology at the University of Münster, Germany and was Director of the Institute for Religious Studies and Intercultural Theology. He received his PhD in Theology from the University of Munich (1992). His habilitation (1996) was in Systematic Theology, Ecumenical Theology and Religious Studies. Prior to joining the University of Münster, he taught at the Universities of Munich, Innsbruck and Salzburg and was Professor of Religious Studies and Systematic Theology at the University of Glasgow (2000-2009). In 2015, he delivered the prestigious Gifford Lectures at the University of Glasgow.

Schmidt-Leukel is internationally renowned as one of the leading proponents of a pluralist theology of religions. His primary research interests lie in the fields of interfaith relations, Buddhist-Christian dialogue, theologies of religions within various religious traditions, and interreligious theology. He has published over 30 books in both German and English. Among his more recent English publications are: *The Celestial Web: Buddhism and Christianity - A Different Comparison* (Orbis Books, 2024); *Buddha Mind - Christ Mind: A Christian Commentary on the Bodhicaryāvatāra* (Peeters, 2019); and *God Beyond Boundaries: A Christian and Pluralist Theology of Religions* (Waxmann, 2017).

Dr Suphatmet Yunyasit is a lecturer in the field of conflict and peace studies, Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies (IHRP), Mahidol University, Thailand. She also formerly served as the Secretary-General, Religions for Peace-Interreligious Council of Thailand (RfP-IRC). She started her work on conflict transformation and peacebuilding in 2012 after receiving her Ph.D in Anthropology with focus on ethno-religious minority group's struggle to preserve identity and build community. Working at IHRP and serving as Secretary General of RfP Thailand, she has organized and facilitated intra and interreligious dialogues designed for conflict transformation and relationship building between conflicting parties in Thailand's three southernmost provinces. Her current project focuses on the participation and roles of the Buddhists of the South in conflict transformation and peacebuilding. Her research interests and expertise include conflict transformation in Thailand and Southeast Asian contexts, inter-ethnic/religious and majority-minority interaction in multicultural societies, freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), and cultural rights of minority groups. She is the author of *The Siamese of Malaysia: Linkage of Two Lands*.



Dr Suphatmet Yunyasit

Speakers' Profiles

Dr Nazirudin Bin Mohd Nasir was trained as a cleric at Al-Azhar University in Cairo and currently serves as the 4th Mufti of Singapore, the religious head of the Muslim community. He obtained his M.A. in Comparative Law from SOAS, University of London, followed by a Master of Studies in Religion at St. Cross College, Oxford, in 2015. He later completed a Doctor of Theology at the University of Oxford - his thesis examined the interrelationships between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and the emergence of the idea of the 'Abrahamic religions' in the thought of French Islamicist Louis Massignon. He teaches world religions and ethics at the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS). He is also a member of the National Steering Committee on Racial and Religious Harmony and was appointed to the Presidential Council for Minority Rights in February 2024.



Dr Nazirudin Mohd Nasir



Professor Paul Hedges

Professor Paul Hedges is an Associate Dean (Scholarly Ecosystems) and Professor in the Studies in Interreligious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) Programme, at RSIS, NTU Singapore. He is also a Life Member of Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, UK. He publishes widely in interreligious studies, religious studies, and theological studies with a focus on theoretical & methodological issues. He serves as the editor or on the editorial boards of various scholarly journals and book series. He has published 16 books and over hundred scholarly papers. Recent books include *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies* (University of California Press, 2021), *Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia, and Antisemitism in a Global Context* (Bloomsbury, 2021), and *Christian Polytheism? Polydox Theologies of Multi-Devotional and Decolonial Praxis* (Routledge, 2024).



Dr Jaclyn Neo

Dr Jaclyn Neo is an Associate Professor of Law at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and presently the Director of its Centre for Asian Legal Studies. A graduate of the NUS Faculty of Law and Yale Law School, she is a recipient of multiple academic scholarships from NUS, including the NUS Overseas Graduate Scholarship. Her research focuses on comparative constitutional law, law and religion in Asia, and access to justice in Singapore. She is the principal investigator and co-principal investigator of multiple competitive research grants from the Singapore Ministry of Education, the Singapore Judicial College, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin-NUS Joint Project, and the NUS Law-Melbourne Law School Research Partnership.

Speakers' Profiles

As Executive Deputy Chairman of RSIS in NTU since 2014, Ambassador Ong Keng Yong is also concurrently Director of Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) and Head of International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) at RSIS. He is also Ambassador-at-Large in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Singapore's Non-Resident Ambassador to Iran. Since 2019, he is Chairman of Humanity Matters, a non-profit humanitarian organisation based in Singapore, which is also focused on inter-faith understanding and volunteerism.

After diplomatic postings at Singapore Embassies in Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, the USA, and as High Commissioner to India (1996-1998), Ambassador Ong was Press Secretary to the then Prime Minister of Singapore Mr Goh Chok Tong from 1998 to 2002. He served as Secretary-General of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), based in Jakarta, Indonesia, for five years from January 2003. He headed the Institute of Policy Studies in the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore from 2008 to 2011 before appointed as Singapore's High Commissioner to Malaysia (2011-2014).



**Ambassador
Ong Keng Yong**



**Professor Kumar
Ramakrishna**

Kumar Ramakrishna is the Dean of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), the Provost's Chair in National Security Studies, and the Research Adviser to the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research. Prior to his current appointments, he held several key leadership roles at RSIS, including Head of the Centre of Excellence for National Security and Head of the National Security Studies Programme. He holds a First Class Honors degree in Political Science from the National University of Singapore, a Masters in Defence Studies from the University of New South Wales, and a PhD in History from Royal Holloway, University of London.

A historian by background, Professor Kumar is widely recognized as one of Southeast Asia's leading experts on counter-terrorism and radicalization. His research spans the history of strategic thought, British propaganda during the Malayan Emergency, and the mechanics of violent extremism.

He is a prolific author whose seminal work, *Emergency Propaganda* (2002), is considered required reading for counter-insurgency practitioners. His second major book, *Radical Pathways* (2009), was named one of the top 150 books on terrorism. His most recent publications include *Extremist Islam: Recognition and Response in Southeast Asia* (2022) and *Jemaah Islamiyah, ISIS and Beyond* (2025).

Beyond his academic work, Professor Kumar has served in significant advisory capacities both globally and locally. In recognition of his international contributions, he was appointed a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at Oxford University and has served as an advisor to the UN Secretary-General's draft Plan of Action for Preventing Violent Extremism. Locally, he sits on the Board of Trustees for the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute and the Board of Governors for the MUIS Academy. He remains active in global networks, currently advising The Concord Foundation and the Council for Asian Transnational Threats Research.

Speakers' Profiles

Ambassador Barry Desker is a Distinguished Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) and Nanyang Professor of Practice at Nanyang Technological University. He is a Member of the Presidential Council for Minority Rights and the Board of Directors of the Lee Kuan Yew Exchange Fellowship. He chaired the ASEAN Inter-Governmental Commission on Human Rights in 2018. From 2000 to 2014, he was the Director of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies and founding Dean of RSIS. He served as Singapore's Ambassador to Indonesia and Non-Resident Ambassador to the Holy See and Spain. A President's Scholar, he studied at the University of Singapore, University of London, and Cornell University, receiving honorary doctorates from the University of Warwick and the University of Exeter.



Ambassador Barry Desker



Dr Lee Foong Ming

Dr Lee Foong Ming teaches history and philosophy of Indian Buddhism at the Buddhist College of Singapore. Since 2016, through her participation in events organized by RSIS Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) Programme, Dr Lee directs her academic interest to exploring interfaith learning to alleviate suffering (dukkha) that springs from religious bigotry.

She graduated from the National University of Singapore in 1994 with a BA in Mass Communication and Chinese Studies. She obtained her PhD at the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka in 2003, specialising in Sarvastivada Abhidharma.

Acknowledgements

The Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) Programme, representing the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), expresses its sincere gratitude to the many individuals and entities whose invaluable contributions made the 7th SRP Distinguished Lecture and Symposium (DLS 2026) possible.

Firstly, we extend our deepest appreciation to our Distinguished Speaker, Professor Perry Schmidt-Leukel, for his profound insights on the "pluralistic imperative" and interreligious theology. Our gratitude also goes to our esteemed symposium speakers – Dr Suphatmet Yunyosit, Dr Nazirudin Nasir, Professor Paul Hedges, and Dr Jaclyn Neo. Their diverse expertise in theology, law, and peacebuilding contributed immensely to the symposium's exploration of the theme "Sacred Words, Contested Worlds," helping us navigate the challenges of religious diversity and social resilience.

We are also grateful to Professor Kumar Ramakrishna and Ambassador Ong Keng Yong for their leadership and introductory and closing remarks. Special thanks are due to Dr Lee Foong Ming for moderating the Distinguished Lecture Q&A Session, and to Ambassador Barry Desker for serving as Chair of the Panel Discussion and Q&A Session with all speakers. Their guidance was instrumental in framing and deepening our collective discussions.

Our gratitude extends to the dignitaries, government agencies, and ministries that supported and participated in the symposium. Their active engagement provided vital perspectives on managing religious tensions and fostering cohesion in a complex future.

We thank the apex religious organisations for their kind participation and continued partnership with SRP's and RSIS's programmes. Sincere appreciation is also due to the various community, interfaith and religious groups for their involvement. We hope that the discussions held here – centred on engaging texts to build genuine relationships – will broaden perspectives and intensify efforts in building positive inter-religious relations.

Finally, we sincerely thank the SRP Programme, ICPVTR and RSIS staff and volunteers for their perseverance and dedication in facilitating the fruition of the DLS 2026 event at the Raffles City Convention Centre. The collective support from everyone has been instrumental in making the 7th SRP Distinguished Lecture and Symposium a meaningful experience, moving us from scriptural insight to lived social harmony.



Contact Us

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