

Probably nothing has caused so much suffering in a more comprehensive way than the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in recent times. It is the manifestation of the collective pain associated with old age, sickness, and death. The pandemic hit the elderly harder than anyone. Hundreds of millions of people tested positive. Many of them got severely sick. The disease has also been one of the most deadly pandemics in history. By January 2022, almost six million people had died because of the virus – not to mention the mental illness, isolation, and unemployment that many more suffered.

While there have been diverse reactions to the pandemic, many people turned to God and religion as a response. According to one study, for example, the number of people who turned to Google searches for prayer increased significantly. More than half of the global population sought divine help to end the pandemic in the early months of the virus in 2020.¹

Many people also emphasized the role of God in the pandemic. According to a poll conducted in 2020, more than two-thirds of religious Americans believe that the pandemic was sent by God as a warning to humans. One in ten stated that the coronavirus is related to human sinfulness. More than half of those who were surveyed noted that God would protect them from the infection.²

¹ Jeanet Bentzen, “Rising Religiosity as a Global Response to COVID-19 Fear,” Vox EU, June 9, 2020, <https://voxeu.org/article/rising-religiosity-global-response-covid-19-fear>.

² “How Faith Shapes Feelings about the Coronavirus Outbreak,” AP-NORC at the University of Chicago, accessed February 4, 2022, https://apnorc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Divinity_COVID_report_final.pdf.

Congregations of various religious traditions continued to hold their religious services communally before the vaccines became available because they believed that God would shelter them from the virus. Some of these congregations became hot spots for the spread of the virus.³

This chapter explores Muslim approaches to plagues and pandemics in general and COVID-19 in particular. I begin with a few verses from the Qur'an to outline some of the principles of Islamic theology concerning the pandemic.

Principles from the Qur'an and Implications for Coronavirus

First, everything is in the knowledge of God. There is nothing beyond his knowledge; God knows what is concealed in hearts and what is revealed.⁴ Not even a leaf falls without his knowledge.⁵ Everything in the heavens and the earth belongs to God. He has control over all things.⁶ Based on these principles, the pandemic is not only in the knowledge of God but also in his control.

Second, the Qur'an mentions that God tests people with "fear, hunger, [and] loss of property, lives, and crops."⁷ It encourages believers to be patient in times of trial and tribulation. In another verse, the Qur'an reads: "We will test you until We know those among you who strive and those who are patient, and We will test your reactions."⁸ The pandemic can potentially be a form of test for people.

³ Phil Zuckerman, "Secular vs. Religious Responses to COVID-19," *Psychology Today*, June 8, 2020, www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/the-secular-life/202006/secular-vs-religious-responses-covid-19.

⁴ Qur'an 3:29.

⁵ Qur'an 6:59.

⁶ Qur'an 4:126.

⁷ Qur'an 2:155.

⁸ Qur'an 47:31.

Third, the Qur'an repeatedly reminds people of the nature of this world; that it is uncertain and impermanent.⁹ All that is on earth will perish.¹⁰ The scripture points to the temporary nature of the world as follows:

The parable of the life of this world is like this: rain that We send down from the sky is absorbed by the plants of the earth, from which humans and animals eat. But when the earth has taken on its finest appearance, and is adorned, and its people think they have power over it, Our Command comes upon it by night or by day, and We turn it into a mown field, as if it had not flourished just the day before. This is the way We explain the revelations for those who think.¹¹

If there is anything that the coronavirus disease has demonstrated, it is that nothing is certain. While people are often attached to what they have, the pandemic has shown that things are not worth being attached to. Attachment to this world is a distraction from the hereafter.

Fourth, whereas human beings are weak and vulnerable, God is all-powerful and almighty.¹² The coronavirus has revealed the weaknesses of human beings despite the progress that has been made in many areas, including medicine. The creation, including COVID-19, is the indication of God's names. The virus's power over people can be seen as the revelation of God's name the Almighty (al-Qadir). The death of thousands of people because of the pandemic can be considered as the manifestation of God's name the Bringer of Death (al-Mumit). Millions of people recovered from the virus, which can be seen as the expression of God's name the Healer (al-Shafi).

Fifth, the pandemic forced people into lockdowns. The Qur'an often refers to the spiritual progress of prophets such as Jesus,

⁹ Qur'an 29:64.

¹⁰ Qur'an 55:26.

¹¹ Qur'an 10:24.

¹² Qur'an 35:44.

Moses, and Muhammad while in seclusion from people. The Prophet Muhammad, for example, would retreat to the cave of Hira on the mountain Jabal al-Noor in Mecca and isolate himself from society for days. It was during one of his spiritual quarantines that he received his first revelation. Social isolation was part of the spiritual journeys of many Muslim saints (*awliyah*) as well. This practice is known as *'itikaf* in Islamic spirituality. Many Muslims made connections between quarantine due to the pandemic and the tradition of *'itikaf*. Some Muslims even used the term “qu’rantine,” meaning that quarantine can be taken as an opportunity to engage with the Qur’an.

Sixth, trials and tribulations are times to worship God. The idea is that people should be thankful to God not only in times of prosperity but also in times of struggle. One of the best examples is the story of Job in the Qur’an. Sickness became an occasion of worship and prayer for him. Likewise, many Muslims took the challenges of the pandemic as an opportunity to demonstrate their trust in and devotion to God.

The Prophet Muhammad and Pandemics

Muslims turned not only to the Qur’an but also to the teachings of Muhammad. His sayings and approach have been widely cited and shared in discussions about the pandemic. In one of the hadiths, the Prophet said: “Do not enter a place where there is a plague, and those who live in a place where there is a plague should not leave the area.”¹³ Another commonly related story is attributed to the Prophet’s companion Omar. According to the account, when Omar was about to enter Damascus with his army, he was told that there was a plague in the city. Omar then did not enter the place. When he was asked whether he was running away from God’s predestination, he answered that he was running away from God’s predestination to

¹³ *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab al-hil, bab bab ma yuqrahu min al-ihitiyal fi al-firar min al-ta’un.*

seek refuge in his predestination. He implied that escaping from the plague was part of God's will as well.

While scholars used principles from the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet in their understanding of the pandemic, a number of approaches and controversies became apparent.

Coronavirus as a Punishment from God

Many preachers implied that the pandemic might be a warning and a punishment from God. They often gave examples from the Qur'an as well as hadiths of the Prophet. The Qur'an relates the stories of the communities who sinned, committed injustices, and disobeyed God. They faced severe punishments of plagues and natural disasters. To illustrate just a few examples, while those who believed in the message of Noah were saved, those who rejected it were drowned.¹⁴ In the case of the prophet Saleh, those who disobeyed him were caught in an earthquake.¹⁵ Because of their wrongdoings, Pharaoh and his people were also plagued with floods, locusts, lice, frogs, and blood and were eventually drowned in the sea.¹⁶ In one of the hadiths, Muhammad said: "When people see an oppressor but do not prevent him from doing oppression and evil, it is likely that God will punish them all together."¹⁷

Martyrdom and COVID-19

Another major discussion has been whether those who lost their lives because of the pandemic, including medical staff, are considered

¹⁴ Qur'an 7:64.

¹⁵ Qur'an 7:78.

¹⁶ Qur'an 7:133; Qur'an 7:136.

¹⁷ Yahya b. Sharaf al-Nawawi, *Riyad al-Salihin: kitab al-muqaddamat, bab al-'amr bilma'ruf wa nahy 'an al-munkar*.

martyrs, the highest spiritual status in Islam. For example, amid the initial global outbreak in March 2020, a story from Iran made headlines in major news outlets. According to the news, the country's highest religious authority, the leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, had declared the Iranian medical staff who lost their lives by contracting coronavirus while treating patients in hospitals as martyrs (*shahid*), a status that can only be attained through jihad. Those who sacrificed their lives caring for the people of Iran during the pandemic would be considered equal to Iran's fallen soldiers who defended the country during wartime. Like military martyrs, the families of fallen medical staff will now receive payments and benefits.¹⁸

There are a number of hadiths that imply that those who die because of a pandemic can be considered martyrs. In one of them, the Prophet said: "Any servant who resides in a land afflicted by plague, remains patient and hoping for a reward from God, knowing that nothing will befall them except what God has decreed, will be given the reward of a martyr."¹⁹

Proper Burial and Funerals

Having proper burials and funerals in the context of the coronavirus was another controversy among Muslims. Funerals are personal in Islamic communities. The corpse is considered to be sacred, and there is a washing ritual before the burial. However, what should be the approach to someone who died because of the coronavirus? What should be the process of burial?

Many Muslim organizations issued legal opinions (fatwas) noting that the washing ritual can be avoided if the ritual endangers the lives of the people who are handling the process. The funeral prayer

¹⁸ Nassim Karimi and Amir Vahdet, "Iran to Call Dead Medical Staff 'Martyrs' as Virus Kills 291," *AP News*, March 10, 2020, <https://apnews.com/12c49ab6a3f3dbc19fc1fc99dc9daa58>.

¹⁹ *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab al-tib, bab 'ajr al-sabr fi al-ta'un*.

can be done with two people, and those who cannot attend can do it as absentees.²⁰

A more controversial issue concerning Islamic burials during the pandemic concerned the cremation of the body, which is impermissible in Islamic law. The UK government, for example, amended an emergency COVID-19 bill in March 2020 to stop the cremation of Muslim and Jewish bodies. Families of these faiths could opt for a traditional burial. In Sri Lanka, however, the government enacted a law in the early months of the pandemic making cremation mandatory for all people who died because of the coronavirus disease. This included Muslims, who make up 10 percent of the population. Because of the opposition from the local and international Muslim community, the government eventually stopped the cremation of Muslim bodies almost a year after the breakout of the pandemic.²¹

Vaccination and Permissibility

Many Muslims questioned the permissibility of the COVID-19 vaccines because some of them may contain animal ingredients such as gelatin or animal fat, small traces of ethanol, and fetal cells (the cell lining from an aborted fetus). Muslim fatwa organizations concluded that despite what they contain, vaccines are permissible, as they save lives. The protection of life is one of the most important objectives of Islamic law.²²

²⁰ For the overview of the fatwas regarding the burial rituals, see Ahmed al-Dawoodi and Oran Finegan, "COVID-19 and Islamic Burial Laws: Safeguarding Dignity of Dead," *Humanitarian Law & Policy*, April 30, 2020, <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2020/04/30/covid-19-islamic-burial-laws/>.

²¹ Haaris Mahmud, "Issue of Corona Cremations: Mr. President, Please Respect the Wishes of Muslims," *Colombo Telegraph*, March 26, 2020, www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/issue-of-corona-cremations-mr-president-please-respect-the-wishes-of-muslims/.

²² For example, see "The Ruling on Getting the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Vaccine," Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America, December 13, 2020, www.amjonline.org/fatwa/en/87763/the-ruling-on-getting-the-covid-19-coronavirus-vaccine.

Spiritual and Practical Responses: The Case of Mehmet Görmez

Many scholars and preachers responded to the pandemic to provide spiritual and practical guidelines for Muslims. One of them was Mehmet Görmez, who served as the president of the Presidency of Religious Affairs of Turkey from 2010 to 2017. He is also an academic specializing in the field of hadith. Görmez delivered a talk concerning understanding the trials and tribulations that people endured because of the coronavirus in March 2020.²³ In what follows, I engage with some of his major points.

Görmez begins his talk with a short prayer highlighting God's name the Healer (al-Shafi) and prays for God to heal all of humanity through this name. He also prays for God to bestow his mercy and compassion upon people and dispel fear and anxiety from their hearts. However, Görmez points out that there should be a methodology guiding believers to understand the pandemic. He raises a number of questions that people often ask: Is the pandemic a punishment or a mercy from God? Is it a sign (*ayah*) of the end of the world (*qiyama*)? Is it a sign of God's creation and lesson? How should one distinguish between the roles of science and religion? He attempts to answer these questions in light of the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet Muhammad.

The Role of Religion and Science

The pandemic not only is a physical health issue, Görmez indicates, but also has spiritual aspects. Science explains the problem and its causes. Philosophy encourages us to think according to reason. Religion provides meaning. It guides us to think about the visible and invisible implications of the pandemic. Religion is not indifferent to the explanations of science and philosophy because science is

²³ Mehmet Görmez, "Coronavirüs Özelinde Musibetleri Okuma Usûlü," İslâm Düşünce Enstitüsü, YouTube video, posted March 20, 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=3a6GWYC3Yk.

the interpretation of God's signs (*ayat*) and creation in the universe. Reason and thinking are God's greatest gifts to humans. Religion always played a major role in addressing people's fear of death and anxiety in the midst of calamities. Like in history, we can understand the meaning of what we are going through via religion without being indifferent to science and philosophy. Before the coming of the revelation (*wahy*), people would often interpret calamities as wars among gods, their punishments, or signs of evil people.

The Pandemic as a Divine Sign versus Punishment

If we think in light of the revelation, these trials are divine signs. We cannot think of a pandemic such as COVID-19 as a punishment. Görmez supports his interpretation with a verse from the Qur'an: "If God were to punish people for what they have earned, there would not be a single creature left on the surface of the earth. But He respites them until a specified time, and when their time comes, surely God sees His servants."²⁴ In another verse, the Qur'an stresses the justice of God: "Your Lord is never unjust to His creatures."²⁵

As many people have claimed, the pandemic is not a sign of the end of the world either. Even Muhammad did not have the knowledge of the end of the world. On one occasion, a person came to the Prophet and asked him about the end of the world. The Prophet asked: "What have you prepared for it?"²⁶ He also told believers that if they knew tomorrow was the end of the world, their responsibility was to plant the tree they have in their hands.²⁷

Commenting on "So take a lesson, O you have insight!" from the Qur'an, Görmez indicates that the pandemic should be seen as a lesson from God.²⁸ Even the disaster inflicted on the prophet Noah's people

²⁴ Qur'an 35:45.

²⁵ Qur'an 41:46.

²⁶ *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab al-adab, bab 'alamah hubb al-allah 'azz wa jall.*

²⁷ *Hadislerle Islam, 7:377.*

²⁸ Qur'an 59:2.

was not a punishment but a lesson, as pointed out in the Qur'an.²⁹ People will naturally have different interpretations of the pandemic. Some will say it is because of the injustices in the world; some will say it is because of the way people treat God's creation; some will say it is because of the injustices done to Muslims in China, Myanmar, Syria, Palestine, Yemen, and so on; and some will say it is the result of people forgetting their creator, violating the rights of their families, or being indifferent to the starvation in Africa. However, the pandemic should be a means of thinking about our own responsibility, which can turn the pandemic into a mercy from God. When it is read as a sign of God, then humans can reconsider their actions and their relations with one another and with their Creator. It is also incorrect to associate the pandemic with the wrongdoings of a particular group of people. The signs of the pandemic cannot be exhausted.

Listening to Medical Experts and Prayer in Action

The recommendations of medical experts should also be taken as the instructions of the religion. The safety of people is one of the major objectives of Islamic law. Rules concerning the pandemic are consistent with the teachings of the Prophet. Following the rules initiated by medical experts is part of our religious duty. The works of scientists and medical experts are sacred because finding a cure to save lives has the highest spiritual merit. In one of the hadiths, Muhammad said the best of humans are those who benefit people.

Lockdowns can be turned into blessings. While we are away from mosques, we can turn our houses into places of worship. Görmez encourages people to rely on prayer and points to this verse: "We sent messengers before you [Prophet] to many communities and afflicted their people with suffering and hardships, so that they might learn humility. When the suffering reached them from Us, why then did they not learn humility? Instead, their hearts hardened

²⁹ Qur'an 25:37.

and Satan made their deeds appear good to them.”³⁰ He also notes that the best prayer is one that is done in action. He provides a few examples:

- Landlords can waive their rents during the pandemic.
- People can extend their hands of generosity to those who are in need.
- Employers can continue to employ their employees and pay their salaries even if they are unable to come to work because of the pandemic.
- You can take care of your neighbor and run the errands for them if needed, especially those who are vulnerable.
- Because of the pandemic, you may not be able to give hugs, but you can still touch the hearts of people with your actions.

Görmez finishes his talk with the prayer of Job in the Qur’an: “Remember Job, when he cried unto his Lord, ‘Suffering has truly afflicted me, but you are the Most Merciful of the merciful.’ We answered him, removed his suffering, and gave him back his family along with others like them, as a mercy from Us and a reminder to the worshippers.”³¹

I end this chapter with Nursi’s interpretation of the Qur’anic statement that God “created everything in the best way.”³² It illustrates the Islamic theological approach to evil and suffering, including plagues and pandemics. His comments are lengthy but worth quoting:

In everything, even the things which appear to be the most ugly, there is an aspect of true beauty. Yes, everything in the universe, every event, is either in itself beautiful, which is called “essential beauty,” or it is beautiful in regard to its results, which is called “relative beauty.” There are certain events which are apparently ugly

³⁰ Qur’an 6:42–43.

³¹ Qur’an 21:83–84.

³² Qur’an 32:7.

and confused, but beneath that apparent veil, there are most shining instances of beauty and order.

Beneath the veil of stormy rains and muddy soil in the season of spring are hidden the smiles of innumerable beautiful flowers and well-ordered plants. And behind the veils of the harsh destruction and mournful separations of autumn is the discharge from the duties of their lives of the amiable small animals, the friends of the coy flowers, so as to preserve them from the blows and torments of winter events, which are manifestations of Divine might and glory, and under the veil of which the way is paved for the new and beautiful spring.

Beneath the veil of events like storms, earthquakes, and plague, is the unfolding of numerous hidden immaterial flowers. The seeds of many potentialities which have not developed sprout and grow beautiful on account of events which are apparently ugly. As though general upheavals and universal change are all immaterial rain. But because man is both enamoured of the apparent and is self-centered, he considers only the externals and pronounces them ugly. Since he is self-centred, he reasons according to the result which looks to himself and judges it to be ugly. Whereas, if, of their aims one looks to man, thousands look to their Maker's Names.³³

Nursi maintains that there is no event in the universe that does not have beautiful and meaningful aspects. The transitions from one season to another manifest this reality. Humans can only see the beautiful picture behind what seems to be evil if they overcome their self-centered views and look at the events of creation from the perspectives of the divine names.

³³ Nursi, *Words*, 241.