



Coping with Pandemics: Psychological and Spiritual Lessons from Islamic History

RANIA AWAAD
YUSIF SALAAM CONN
MERVE NURSOY-DEMIR
HOSAM HELAL
SARA MAKLAD
IMAN FARAJALLAH

Author Biography

Rania Awaad M.D., is a Clinical Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the Stanford University School of Medicine where she is the Director of the Stanford Muslim Mental Health Lab, Associate Chief of the Division of Public Mental Health and Population Sciences, and Co-Chief of the Diversity and Cultural Mental Health Section. She is currently a Senior Fellow at Yaqeen Institute and ISPU. In addition, she serves as the Director of The Rahmah Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to educating Muslim women and girls. She has previously served as the founding Clinical Director of the Khalil Center-San Francisco as well as a Professor of Islamic Law at Zaytuna College. Prior to studying medicine, she pursued classical Islamic studies in Damascus, Syria and holds certifications (*ijāzah*) in Qur'an, Islamic Law and other branches of the Islamic Sciences. Follow her @Dr.RaniaAwaad

Yusif Salaam Conn is a member of the Stanford Muslim Mental Health Lab. He is currently pursuing a BA in Islamic Law and Theology at Zaytuna College.

Merve Nursoy-Demir is a member of the Stanford Muslim Mental Health Lab. She obtained her BA degrees in Psychology and History as well as her MA in Clinical Psychology in Turkey.

Hosam Helal is a member of the Stanford Muslim Mental Health Lab. He serves as Imam and Youth & Education Manager at ISNA Canada as well as an Associate Muslim Chaplain at Brock University. After completing his Islamic studies at Al-Azhar, Hosam is currently pursuing graduate studies at the University of Toronto in Qur'anic exegesis.

Sara Maklad, M.D., is a member of the Stanford Muslim Mental Health Lab. She graduated from Alexandria University Medical School in Egypt and completed research in psychiatry and neuroscience.

Iman Farajallah, PsyD, is a Doctor of Psychology, who also holds a MA degree in Clinical Psychology from Sofia University, a MBS degree in International Relations from San Francisco State University, as well as other certificates. She

currently teaches at Sofia University and is a Psychological Assistant with the Bay Area Psychiatric Group. She is a member of the Stanford Muslim Mental Health Lab.

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Abstract

Though the COVID-19 pandemic may seem novel, pandemics are not new to the greater human experience. This paper highlights the psychological and spiritual coping mechanisms that early Muslims drew upon from Islamic teachings when they endured similar plagues. We analyze Muslim experiences of communicative diseases with a focus on their personal, communal, and public responses throughout history. This perspective provides valuable insights as to the role played by faith and spirituality in the responses of the Muslim community. By examining a selection of plague outbreaks between the 8th-19th centuries across the lands broadly defined as the Islamic Mediterranean, we highlight psychological and spiritual coping mechanisms that can serve as a model for dealing with similar contemporary challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. By analyzing the responses of previous generations of Muslims, modern Muslims can construct adaptive responses guided by Islam's rich resources of meaning-making to thrive in the face of the challenges of the current pandemic.

Introduction

With no clear end to the COVID-19 pandemic in sight, it is imperative that we shift our focus from discussing temporary coping mechanisms to developing long-term adaptive strategies. While the current pandemic may be unique in many ways, surviving a pandemic is not new to the human experience. In this paper we highlight the experiences of our noble Muslim predecessors—particularly their psychological and spiritual responses as they braved previous plagues. From the early caliphates to the late sultanates, we have uncovered numerous accounts of the difficulties, challenges, and responses to communicative diseases that occurred across the Muslim world. By discovering and adapting the psychological and spiritual coping mechanisms employed by early Muslims who endured some of the

same trials we now face, we too can prosper despite the current atmosphere of uncertainty.¹

In this paper, we examine the psychological responses in Muslim communities affected by the outbreaks of plague in the 8th-19th centuries across the lands broadly defined as the Islamic Mediterranean—from the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa to the Levant and Anatolia.² We pay particular attention to highlighting the guidelines and coping mechanisms that Muslims extracted from traditional Islamic sources as models for facing similar contemporary challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. We argue that the Islamic tradition efficiently provides a rich set of resources not only for meaning-making in the face of a deadly pandemic but also for responding in an ethical and adaptive way to various forms of adversity.

In this paper, we also explore three basic types of responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, the first and most fundamental of which is the personal, psycho-spiritual response. As Muslims we believe that our Lord, Most High, will not change our condition until we change ourselves.³ As such, the personal response takes precedence for every one of us. Though it is the type of response that we have the most control over, it does not mean that it is the easiest to control. Many of us are now faced with numerous stressors and anxieties which, if left unchecked, will not only interfere with our psychological well-being but will also seep into our spiritual lives, challenging our faith as we try to make sense of everything happening around us.

¹ Roy M. Anderson, Hans Heesterbeek, Don Klinkenberg, and T. Déirdre Hollingsworth, “How Will Country-Based Mitigation Measures Influence the Course of the COVID-19 Epidemic?,” *The Lancet* 395, no. 10228 (2020): 931–32; Sima Asadi, Nicole Bouvier, Anthony S. Wexler, and William D. Ristenpart, “The Coronavirus Pandemic and Aerosols: Does COVID-19 Transmit via Expiratory Particles?,” *Aerosol Science and Technology* 54, no. 6 (2020), 635–37; Yuvaraj Krishnamoorthy, Ramya Nagarajan, Ganesh Kumar Saya, and Vikas Menon, “Prevalence of Psychological Morbidities among General Population, Healthcare Workers and COVID-19 Patients amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” *Psychiatry Research* 293 (2020): 1–11; Jianyin Qiu, Min Zhao, Zhen Wang, Bin Xie, and Yifeng Xu, “A Nationwide Survey of Psychological Distress among Chinese People in the COVID-19 Epidemic: Implications and Policy Recommendations,” *General Psychiatry* 33, no. 2 (2020): 1–3; George Davey Smith, Michael Blastland, and Marcus Munafò, “Covid-19’s Known Unknowns,” British Medical Journal Publishing Group, 2020; Paul Starr, “Using Controlled Trials to Resolve Key Unknowns About Policy During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *JAMA*, 2020, 2369–70.

² Nühket Varlik, *Plague and Contagion in the Islamic Mediterranean* (n.p.: ISD LLC, 2017), ix.

³ Qur’an 13:11.

The second form of response is the communal response. A major part of many Muslims' lived experience of Islam takes place in social settings. For example, the importance of keeping *ṣuḥbah ṣālihah*, righteous companionship, is a major principle found in the teachings of the Prophet ﷺ. The communal aspects of the Islamic faith deepen our experience and connection to it—whether by praying shoulder-to-shoulder in the *masjid*, learning from *khuṭbahs* delivered by our imams or simply by sharing an *iftār* with a fellow Muslim. As these communal aspects disappear from our lives during the pandemic, the question becomes how do we adapt our communal attitude to ensure the endurance of our social health as well as our communal religiosity?

Another layer to the communal response is how Muslims view the pandemic. While some view the pandemic as a punishment for the deviations within our own community, others offer the promising view that this is a test of our patience for which we will be rewarded. Is there a definitive opinion on these different views within our tradition? How did Muslims before us handle this weighty issue of deciding God's intention behind calamity?

The final form of response is the public response to the pandemic shared by all—Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Especially as citizens in non-Muslim majority countries, many of us will be faced with executive orders and mandates from the government that outwardly contradict Islamic legal injunctions. From the closing of *masājid* to the cancellation of *tarāwīḥ* and Eid prayers, there is an apparent conflict between scientific advice and religious rulings. The way we reconcile these differences is essential for our identity as Muslim minorities.

Another area of public response relates to our attitudes and opinions of others. As with any time of heightened anxiety, fear, and angst, many take to aggression and scapegoating. However, when critically analyzing the teachings of Islam and the precedent set by the Islamic tradition, does this align with the appropriate Islamic response?

In each of these cases, it is important to realize we are not the first to endure such trials and tribulations. Our tradition is rich with accounts of similar and far graver situations that Muslims have emerged from without losing their faith or communal identity. To better make sense of our current state and develop effective attitudes and behaviors for the long haul ahead, we can learn from the successes and trials of our noble predecessors. In this way, we too will endure this adversity only to be bettered by our experience, if Allah wills.

Issue One: Personal response

God states in the Qur'an, "Verily Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves."⁴ If we set this to be the basis of our response, our highest priority is to turn our attention inward to the psychological and spiritual states we all experience. Even if in our personal lives we have been only barely affected by the pandemic, the deluge of negative news regarding the progression of this situation, the attitudes of others, and even our own inner thoughts regarding the circumstances may contribute to an atmosphere of despair and stress. For many of us, our lives will remain directly affected by the changes brought by the pandemic for the foreseeable future. Many have lost their jobs, while others must adjust to continue their occupation under nonideal circumstances at home. Many children will not be returning to school this year, leaving parents with another added stress to contend with. Many college students face this same issue along with the uncertainty of their ability to finish the education they set out to complete.

Countless stressors have been introduced into our lives. That much has been made clear. What remains unclear for many is the best way to deal with these stressors. The first thought that should cross our minds in moments of stress and anxiety are the words of our Lord, "Allah does not burden a soul beyond its capacity."⁵ While

⁴ Qur'an 13:11.

⁵ Qur'an 2:286.

we are all susceptible to the trials of stress and anxiety, exegetes of the Qur'an took this verse as an indication that, out of God's immense mercy and favor towards mankind, He would not take anyone to task for what they did not have power over nor the capacity to accomplish.⁶ Whatever tests we find ourselves in have only been placed upon us due to our Lord's knowledge that we have the capacity to persevere through them with faith and religiosity intact. This is evidenced by those generations of our ancestors in the Islamic tradition who endured tragedies equal to and exceeding those we find ourselves facing today. For us all, we inevitably face intense stress in hardships as severe as a pandemic. We can benefit from viewing the conditions those before us experienced, how they persevered throughout them, and how they were able to emerge with the blessing of having shown patience and gratitude in the face of tribulation.

Confronting the fear of death and loss during pandemics

Many of the same concerns we are faced with today in our pandemic were faced by those before us. Psychologically, facing the plague for the first time or during an unpredicted interval brought uncomparable shock and fear to people.⁷ For instance, the plague that emerged in the winter of 832 H/1429 CE in Egypt was reported to be particularly severe because pestilence during winter was an unknown phenomenon as previous epidemics had taken place during spring (or fall), which made this tribulation especially unexpected for people.⁸ Vulnerable groups in the society, such as children, slaves, and women, were affected the most and fatality of the youth increased to the point that there were almost no children left in Cairo, even though the plague affected every layer of the society eventually, including the physicians, high-ranking officials, scholars, princes, and so on.⁹ The community was described to be immersed in horror and panic within this context. The number

⁶ 'Abd Allāh al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-ta'wīl*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.), 166; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm*, ed. Ḥikmat b. Bashīr b. Yāsīn, vol. 2 (Dammam: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 2010), 307.

⁷ Nükhet Varlık, *Plague and Empire in the Early Modern Mediterranean World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁸ A. al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk li-ma'rifat duwal al-mulūk* (Cairo: Lajnat at-Ta'līf wa-al-Tarjamah wa-al-Nashr, 1973), 821; İlyas Gökhan, "El-Eşref Barsbay Döneminde Memlûk Devleti'nde Salgın Hastalıklar ve İktisadî Buhranlar (1422–1438)," *Tarih İncelemeleri Dergisi* 23, no. 1 (2008): 110.

⁹ Gökhan, "Memlûklerde Salgın Hastalıklar."

of the dead was so high that there were not enough resources to bury them;¹⁰ people were reported to bury the dead of their household inside their houses during the night because of the lack of ability, service, and space for burials. The prominent Egyptian historian al-Maqrīzī (d. 845 H/1442 CE) said that houses were turned into graveyards. Sources also indicate that survivors of the plague were preoccupied with taking care of the dead and people would spend almost all of their time washing, shrouding, and burying their lost ones.¹¹

During this plague in Cairo, chroniclers residing in the region mentioned a severe epidemic in Bursa, Anatolia as well.¹² Here, we see the communication of news regarding the outbreaks across different centers of the Islamic Mediterranean. Thus, news about the devastation of the disease and the high rates of death in distant territories of that time was circulating, partly similar to the observation of COVID-19 cases globally despite the fact that the nature and speed of communication differed considerably. Moreover, according to contemporary witnesses, communities would get easily alarmed solely by the hearing of plague such that even the youngest members of the society, children, would talk about the coming of the plague in the streets when such news was heard.¹³ So, even when plague was not existent, fear related to it was observable.¹⁴ Despair, catastrophe, and apprehension within the society because of the fear of getting sick which was believed to bring a quick death, bearing the loss of loved ones, separation from multiple significant family members (e.g., parents, siblings, offspring, spouse, etc.) sometimes all at the same time, and constant exposure to the dead as part of daily life (e.g., unburied bodies in the streets, numerous funerals at the mosque, etc.).¹⁵

Upon examination of the psychosocial impacts of plague outbreaks on Muslim communities across the Mediterranean world during the medieval and early modern period, a natural question emerges regarding the responses and ways of

¹⁰ Ömer Tokuş, “Büveyhiler Döneminde Bağdat’ta Doğal Afetler, Gök Olayları, ve Garip Hadiseler (H. 333–447/M. 945–1055),” *Tarih Okulu Dergisi*, Sayı 25 (2016): 547–48.

¹¹ Gökhan, “Memlûklerde Salgın Hastalıklar.”

¹² Gökhan.

¹³ Gökhan.

¹⁴ Lawrence I. Conrad, “Tā’ūn and Wabā’ Conceptions of Plague and Pestilence in Early Islam,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient/Journal de l’histoire Economique et Sociale de l’Orient*, 1982, 281.

¹⁵ Gökhan, “Memlûklerde Salgın Hastalıklar.”

coping during such adversity. Exploration of responses to outbreaks reveals two intertwined dimensions of the subject: attitudes and responses of Muslim communities as well as ethical and religious standpoints of Muslim scholars.

Attitudes of Muslims in the face of pandemics

Traditional Islamic sources point out that the exact reason behind an incidence, including plague, cannot be determined by humans but is known only to God.¹⁶ Nevertheless, religious guidelines provide a number of wisdoms to reflect upon. Disease outbreaks could be understood as a blessing for the believers, which was clearly stated by the Prophet ﷺ in one hadith, as a sign from God to reflect upon the working system created by Him, or as a punishment for persecutors.¹⁷ Likewise, calamities such as the plague could be for advancement, cleansing, contemplation, or correction of people.¹⁸ Whether a divine punishment,¹⁹ or reward,²⁰ or a natural calamity God created,²¹ we cannot know for sure; however, Muslims believe that God is the ultimate power over everything occurring in the universe and, as such, can remove any calamity at any time.²²

In line with various wisdoms provided by Islamic tradition in understanding the plague, there was a spectrum of beliefs, explanations, attitudes, and ideas about the meaning and reasons behind the plague's emergence in Muslim communities.²³ Additionally, there was a dynamic process of change over the centuries as plague

¹⁶ Hasib Noor, "Prophetic Guidance on Epidemic Disease: Coronavirus 2020," The Legacy Institute, 2020, <https://legacy.institute/prophetic-guidance-on-epidemic-disease-coronavirus2020/>.

¹⁷ Anna Akasoy, "Islamic Attitudes to Disasters in the Middle Ages: A Comparison of Earthquakes and Plagues," *The Medieval History Journal* 10, no. 1–2 (2006): 387–410; John J. Curry, "Scholars, Sufis, and Disease: Can Muslim Religious Works Offer Us Novel Insights on Plagues and Epidemics among the Medieval and Early Modern Ottomans?," 2017; Gökhan, "Memlûklerde Salgın Hastalıklar"; Russell Hopley, "Contagion in Islamic Lands: Responses from Medieval Andalusia and North Africa," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 2010, 45–64.

¹⁸ Hasib Noor, "Prophetic Guidance on Epidemic Disease."

¹⁹ Justin Stearns, "New Directions in the Study of Religious Responses to the Black Death 1," *History Compass* 7, no. 5 (2009): 1363–75.

²⁰ Michael W. Dols, "The Comparative Communal Responses to the Black Death in Muslim and Christian Societies," *Viator* 5 (1974): 269–88.

²¹ Varlik, *Plague and Empire*.

²² Hasib Noor, "Prophetic Guidance on Epidemic Disease."

²³ Dols, "Comparative Communal Responses"; Justin Stearns, "Contagion in Theology and Law: Ethical Considerations in the Writings of Two 14th Century Scholars of Nasrid Granada," *Islamic Law and Society* 14, no. 1 (2007): 109–29; Stearns, "New Directions"; Varlik, *Plague and Empire*.

recurred in shorter intervals, which brought even more diversity to the accumulation of Islamic discourse regarding epidemics.²⁴ In line with this, variation in responses to the epidemics was observed as well.²⁵

One of the major issues individuals during these times had to cope with was that of corrupted morals due to opportunities posed by desperation. With 9 out of every 20 residents of rural areas dying from the outbreak in 15th century Cairo, the cost of burial skyrocketed as the demand grew, causing morticians and gravediggers to become lucrative careers that attracted other professionals who were struggling to find work. Some gravediggers took advantage of the situation and intentionally collaborated to boost the cost of their services. Al-Maqrīzī recounts the moral regression that followed.²⁶ According to his account, corruption, manipulation, selfishness, and exploitation became rampant with the closure of mosques and the deaths of many spiritual and moral guides. With the large death toll, gravediggers rushed to complete as many burials as quickly as possible. The rush was often coupled with negligence, as many graves were not carefully sealed. Animals were often seen rummaging through graves and walking away with limbs and other body parts. The trauma and horror associated with these scenes contributed to growing superstitious tendencies as Damascene villagers flocked to astrologers, dream interpreters, psychics, and magicians who falsely claimed to predict the areas where outbreaks would hit, when they would end, and what could cure specific individuals. In an attempt to explain the prevailing sadness and anxiety, people feared the power of black magic and envy over them. For example, when a child named Maṣṣūr, the son of the deputy in Damascus, died from the outbreak in 909 H/1503 CE, many attributed his death to the evil eye, commenting that people were overly impressed with his “pleasant physique and demeanor” when they saw him praying with his father in the Umayyad mosque.²⁷ This caused some to resort to superstitious habits in hopes of protection from harm.

²⁴ Stearns, “New Directions”; Varlik, *Plague and Empire*.

²⁵ Curry, “Scholars, Sufis, and Disease”; Dols, “Comparative Communal Responses.”

²⁶ Mubārak M. al-Ṭarāwanah, “al-Awbi’ah wa-atharuhā al-ijtimā’īyah fī bilād al-shām fī ‘aṣr al-mamālīk al-jarākisah,” *al-Majallah al-Urdunīyah Lil-Tārīkh Wa-al-Āthār* 4, no. 3 (June 30, 2010): 54.

²⁷ Ṭarāwanah, 55–56.

Others, however, found Islam to be a reliable basis for coping. Inspired by prophetic instruction, many Damascene residents saw the pandemic as an opportunity to serve the community and initiate philanthropic projects. For example, several religious scholars traveled to rural communities with the intention of educating their residents, despite the risk of contagion. In one chronicle, Shaykh Muhammad al-Husni returned to one of the rural villages in Damascus that he had left earlier with the intention of helping its locals overcome superstitions, grief, and fear.²⁸ He dedicated his sermons to instilling them with positivity and encouraging them to remain hopeful in God's capacity and mercy. Citing the hadith literature, others saw the pandemic as a blessing. Expressing his view, Masrūq ibn al-Ajda' (d. 62 H/682 CE) wrote, "I see [the pandemic] as an opportunity to disconnect from everyone and reconnect with my Maker."²⁹ In his poetry, Ibn al-Wardī (d. 749 H/1349 CE) described his internal state a few days before his death during the pandemic of 749 H/1349 CE in Syria, "Unlike others, I do not fear the pandemic, for it affords me two possible outcomes, each better than the other. If I die, then I find rest away from the contagions [of this world]. If I live, I get to witness [more of the world] through the healing of my ears and eyes."³⁰

From these examples, we see two general types of response. One is the self-centered approach to try to ensure one's security with whatever means present themselves first. This approach is not so easy to overcome. In moments of stress, it is natural to jump at the first opportunity we see that we think could be beneficial. This manifests itself through hoarding supplies one fears they will need, rationalizing breaking safety regulations for their own benefit, or other acts that are easy to categorize as selfish when we see them in others. When we allow this selfish nature to overcome our reason, we begin acting without thought. This leads to disregarding the Divine wisdom behind experiencing an adverse event such as an epidemic.

²⁸ S. Abed-Kotob and M. Muṣṭafá, *Mufākahat al-khillān fī ḥawādith al-zamān: Tārīkh Miṣr wa-al-Shām* (Egypt: al-Mu'assasah al-Miṣrīyah al-Āmmah lil-Ta'līf wa-al-Tarjamah wa-al-Tibā'ah wa-al-Nashr, 1962).

²⁹ Muḥammad ibn Sa'd, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, vol. 6 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Īlmīyah, 1990), 81.

³⁰ Zayn al-Dīn al-Wardī, *Qasīdat lāmiyat al-'Arab wa-yalīhā a'jab al-'ujub fī sharḥ lāmiyat al-'Arab wa-yalīhā ayḍan sharḥ al-maqṣūrah al-darīdīyah wa-yalīhā ayḍan dīwān al-Shaykh al-Imām al-'Allāmah al-Adīb al-Alma'ī Zayn al-Dīn Abū Ḥafṣ 'Umar ibn Muzfir ibn 'Umar al-Wardī al-Shāfi'ī Wa-rasā'iluh* (Maṭba'at al-Jawā'ib Qaṣṭanīnīyah, 1882), 341.

The second type of response is that of deeper understanding. One recognizes the opportunity associated with tribulation. In contrast with the selfish, immediate response of the former approach, this approach often takes a great deal of energy to actualize in our lives. It involves carrying mindfulness of our core beliefs in every situation. We believe in an All-Powerful Provider (*al-Razzāq*), who will never give us less than what has been written for us to receive. As such, we can rationalize that trying to secure provisions to a point that others may not be able to find what they need is unnecessary and misaligned with our confidence in the provisions of our Lord. We believe that the Muslim is he from whom others are “safe from his hand and tongue.”³¹ As such, it violates our principles to disregard protocols placed to ensure the safety of others and act without due respect. With this second approach, we rationally match our actions to our principles. What is important to note here is that the opportunity for reward and blessings opens up as one establishes this reality in one’s heart. It does not matter the circumstances. As long as one is committed to seeking the good in any situation, they will, with the aid of their Lord, be given the providence to find it.

Coping with psychosocial impacts of pandemics

In his treatise on the plague, the prominent scholar Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 852 H/ 1449 CE) mentions some examples of positive coping and resilience during a severe outbreak, “...it prompted people to detach from [false] hopes, to improve their behaviors, to wake up from complacency, and prepare for their journey [to the hereafter].”³² He goes on and tells us about the socio-psychological impact of the epidemic. Some began rectifying their relationships with their enemies, becoming kinder and gentler with their neighbors, setting slaves free, improving their characters, reassessing their values, and forgiving those who had betrayed them. Also, a few indulged in hoarding out of fear for what was to come. In the long

³¹ “The Muslim is he from whom the people are safe from his hand and his tongue.” Aḥmad al-Nasā’ī, *Kitāb al-mujtabā*, 1st ed., vol. 7 (Cairo: Dār al-Ta’šīl, 2012), p. 527, bk. 48, hadith 5039. Commentators on this hadith mention that the meaning is that the perfection of one’s Islam comes with protecting others. Other narrations have “The Muslim is he who the Muslims are safe from his hand and his tongue.” Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī and Muḥammad al-Sindī, *Sunan al-Nasā’ī bi-sharḥ al-Ḥāfiẓ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī wa-ḥāshiyat al-Imām al-Sindī*, vol. 7 (Beirut: Dār al-Ma’rifah, 1991), 478–79.

³² Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Badhl al-Mā’ūn fī faḍl al-tā’ūn*, ed. Aḥmad al-Kātib (Riyad: Dār al-‘Āshimah, n.d.), 378.

term, however, psychological degradation was visible, “and the [epidemic] persisted for a long time upon the *ummah*, leading to intense [psychological] pressures and anxiety... Moodiness and depression became prevalent, contributing to the demise of people and cities. This was a matter that is completely unprecedented... making every other preceding epidemic seem like a tiny drop.”³³

Ibn Hajar also notes the relationship between the psychological state of individuals and social/spiritual order. Observing that the disturbed psychological state led some to commit sins as a coping mechanism, losing hope altogether; some began to indulge in lusts and break public possessions, opening up the door for further destruction.³⁴ He adds, “and nothing stopped us from fleeing from it except the hadith [of the Prophet ﷺ]. So we got up to ask Allah SWT together [each in his household] and prayed for His aid.”³⁵

One significant indication of the severe psychosocial effects of the plague is that characteristics of the disease itself were described in such a dramatic sense which could be read as the intensity of fear and agony it created in the minds of its witnesses.³⁶ For instance, the Byzantine-Ottoman chronicler Kritovoulos provided a striking description of the bubonic plague and its effect on the human body based on his own experience during an outbreak in Istanbul in 1467.³⁷

Examination of medical texts produced in Ottoman realms during the 14th and 15th centuries also provides insight about the psychological atmosphere, specifically the sense of confusion, uncertainty, and vulnerability regarding the pestilence outbreaks. While emphasizing the plague as the most threatening medical condition, writers of the Ottoman medical treatises generally discussed it unsystematically outside of the ordinary scientific classification of illnesses, provided a short mixture of medical and mystical information regarding the

³³ Al-‘Asqalānī, 383.

³⁴ Al-‘Asqalānī, 383–84.

³⁵ Al-‘Asqalānī, 378.

³⁶ Varlik, *Plague and Empire*.

³⁷ Charles T. Riggs, *Kritovoulos: History of Mehmed the Conqueror* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 221.

etiology, epidemiology, and treatment of the condition.³⁸ Historians of plagues argue that this trend in Ottoman medical texts changed in the wake of the 16th century, when a transformation of medicalization was clearly observed thereafter.³⁹

Taken together, historical writings illustrate the severe impact of plague outbreaks on Muslim communities for ages. Psychosocial effects of plague were deeply rooted in the context where people experienced constant fear of being caught up by a deadly disease with no cure, loss of multiple loved ones, famines, and other tragedies brought to their personal lives, a struggle to provide religiously appropriate burial services to the deceased, continuous exposure to the dead in large numbers within the community, and also spread of rumors and news of devastating outbreaks in different corners of the Islamic world or nearby.⁴⁰ Correspondingly, there was a strong sense of helplessness, lack of control, anxiety regarding the unknown nature of the situation, and uncertainty of what was coming next, especially during early periods when the plague experience was more severe and recent.⁴¹ Some would interpret the situation as a sign of the end of time.⁴² Many believed that there was nothing they could do other than seek refuge in God as contemporary sources, including medical texts, mentioned spiritual remedies and help from Allah (and his servants, *awliyā' Allāh*) as the only ways out of the calamity.⁴³ On the other hand, others urged to seek a cure for the disease wherever possible, emphasizing the causes as intermediaries of God's creation.⁴⁴

Coping with isolation

³⁸ Varlik, *Plague and Empire*, 208, 226.

³⁹ Varlik, *Plague and Empire*.

⁴⁰ Conrad, "Tā'ūn and Wabā'," 302.

⁴¹ Riggs, *Kritovoulos*, 221; Varlik, *Plague and Empire*.

⁴² Curry, "Scholars, Sufis, and Disease," 45; Gökhan, "Memlûklerde Salgın Hastalıklar"; Varlik, *Plague and Empire*.

⁴³ Curry, "Scholars, Sufis, and Disease"; Varlik, *Plague and Empire*.

⁴⁴ Curry, "Scholars, Sufis, and Disease," 53–54; Heath W. Lowry, "Pushing the Stone Uphill: The Impact of Bubonic Plague on Ottoman Urban Society in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries," *Osmanlı Araştırmaları* 23, no. 23 (2003).

For many individuals across the world, one major lasting effect of the pandemic is the isolation it has caused. The calls for “social distancing” and quarantining at the beginning of the pandemic are now a way of life for many. Many academic institutions and work locations have remained closed with their operations moved to a virtual format. With the threat of transferring the virus to those we love barring us from much of our social interaction, feelings of loneliness and isolation may become overwhelming. While these feelings may be intensified due to the length of isolation further elongated with the assistance of modern technology, our Islamic tradition also offers supportive responses to this challenge.

We do not deny the importance of social interaction and support in the lives of Muslims. The importance of the Muslim community in Islam is attested to throughout the Qur’an and the Sunnah, perhaps most strongly in the form of the love and concern the Prophet ﷺ had for his Companions and the Muslim generations to come. We see in the life of the Prophet ﷺ that much of his time was spent engaging with others, speaking to them, teaching them, and even joking with them. The Companions similarly encouraged one another to perform good acts in order to strengthen their faith. Just as we can acknowledge the importance of social interactions for our spiritual health based on the practices of the righteous predecessors (the *salaf*), empirical evidence shows that social support can help protect individuals from many of the negative symptoms induced by stressful situations and trauma.⁴⁵

While we can make attempts to establish safe social interactions until our situation allows for the fulfillment we need, many of us will still be left with these feelings of isolation and loneliness. Imām Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Sakandarī (d. 709 H/1310 CE), an Egyptian jurist and scholar of spirituality, wrote in his *Aphorisms*, “When [God] isolates you from His creation, know that He wants to open the door of intimacy with Him for you.”⁴⁶ This reminds us to look for the true meaning behind our condition. While we hope that our isolation and loneliness is only a passing

⁴⁵ Leia Y. Saltzman, Tonya Cross Hansel, and Patrick S. Bordnick, “Loneliness, Isolation, and Social Support Factors in Post-COVID-19 Mental Health,” *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 2020, S55.

⁴⁶ Aḥmad ibn ‘Ajībāh, *Īqāz al-himam fī sharḥ al-Ḥikam* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyah, n.d.), 209.

state, perhaps it is a unique opportunity to reconnect with God and focus on our devotion to Him. We have the chance to look at how we benefit from those around us and what harm we receive as well. We can see what might have been distracting us from having a personal relationship with God in our day-to-day life and how we can establish that more effectively. In this way, when we return to our social interactions with others, we will appreciate the good company we are blessed with more while maintaining our spiritual connection to God as well.

Issue Two: Communal response

As the current pandemic, quarantines, and isolation drag on, anxiety may arise for many of us regarding the future of our Muslim communities. The reality is that the Muslim experience is an inherently communal one. Our *dīn* puts heavy emphasis on the importance of the *ummah*, the greater Muslim community, as the Prophet ﷺ said in a hadith reported by Muslim, “The religion is sincerity... to God, His Book, His Messenger, and the leaders of the Muslims and the masses of the Muslims.”⁴⁷ As we find ourselves in a situation where we are cut off from the rest of our communities most of the time, we may feel stress and anxiety resulting from this separation from an essential part of our lives.

What is important to remember is that the Muslim community has endured far worse situations in our history. We learn from our history that this *ummah* has endured invasions, civil wars, drought, famine, crusades, and countless other life-threatening disasters. For those who lived through plague in the Muslim world, responses came in two forms: actions and beliefs. One could respond positively with their actions, showing resilience and determination to support their community either through communal service for the ill, dead or, at the very least, through observing public health directions such as social isolation and quarantine.

⁴⁷ Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1st ed. (Riyad: Dār al-Ṭaybah, 2007), p. 44, bk. 1, hadith 55.

Acts of communal service as a response to pandemics

Historically, we see examples of Muslims benefiting their communities either with their wealth or with their efforts during similar times of need. During plague outbreaks in Samarkand (439 H/1047 CE), Muslims increased their charitable work, stepped back to reflect and repent, spent more time reading the Qur'an, and collectively rid their city of unlawful instruments and intoxicants.⁴⁸ While confronting several epidemics between 784 H/1382 CE and 922 H/1516 CE, the residents of Mamluk-ruled Egypt and the Levant set a good example for healthy coping. Wealthy merchants and notables sponsored sections within the *bimaristans* (hospitals) that specifically treated those affected by the outbreaks. These wards also cared for people psychologically and offered social services including covering the cost of washing, burials, and funeral services for the socioeconomically disadvantaged among the deceased.⁴⁹ Volunteers in Jerusalem (863H/1459 CE) also took it upon themselves to go through the streets and honor the unattended bodies. These bodies were washed, shrouded, and given proper burials, with precautions taken to avoid contagion. With limited budgets, volunteers employed creativity as they used doors and ladders as stretchers to carry and transport the ill and the deceased.⁵⁰ Announcements were made encouraging people to fast, offer vigil prayers at night, get rid of sins in their lives that were getting in the way of a genuine connection with God, and a call was made encouraging communal repentance to God.

We see from our cited sources that Muslim communities were generally adherent to the practice of neither fleeing nor entering a plague-stricken land.⁵¹ There was a sense of shared responsibility to put the good of the community before the welfare of the individual.⁵² In his discussion about the response of the Ottoman community to the plague during 17th and 18th centuries, Ayalon refers to the writings of an

⁴⁸ Al-'Asqalānī, *Badhl al-mā'ūn*, 365.

⁴⁹ Ṭarāwanah, "al-Awbi'ah," 46–47.

⁵⁰ Ṭarāwanah, 51.

⁵¹ Yaron Ayalon, "Religion and Ottoman Society's Responses to Epidemics in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in *Plague and Contagion in the Islamic Mediterranean*, ed. Nükhet Varlık (n.p.: Arc Humanities Press, 2017), 188–89; Dols, "Comparative Communal Responses"; Lowry, "Pushing the Stone Uphill."

⁵² Dols, "Comparative Communal Responses."

English physician residing in Aleppo and provides examples of individuals, such as family members, servants, pupils, looking after close ones who fell sick and not leaving until the very end of the patients' lives.⁵³

Perhaps one of the greatest and simplest ways those before us served their communities during a pandemic was through preventing the spread of disease through quarantining. While it may seem as though many were not aware of the passing of communicable diseases, we see others that understood the importance of social isolation. Al-Sakhāwī (d. 902 H/1497 CE), for example, wrote about a notable man named Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad ibn Qārīlūq who isolated himself from his people in a private garden, fearing contagion. He refused to break this voluntary distancing even when he heard the news of his wife's death and refused to attend her funeral prayer.⁵⁴

If we cannot serve our communities through providing care for those in need, we should serve one another through encouragement and setting a good example. Our tradition has been built upon righteous companionship between people, whether it be the upright encouraging the struggling to improve their ways through the example they set, or those of similar piety engaging in healthy competition to increase in good acts, as God says, “and in that let the competitors compete.”⁵⁵ If we cannot physically meet for the community events we used to enjoy, we should create new ways to engage with one another for the sake of our communal psycho-spiritual health.

While maintaining social isolation, we should encourage one another to fill the extra time we have due to the absence of commutes and social activities with acts that promote a healthy psychological and spiritual life. These can be in the form of virtual book clubs, sharing online lectures, or even the simple act of striking up a

⁵³ Yaron Ayalon, “Plague, Psychology, and Religious Boundaries in Ottoman Anatolia,” *Turkish Historical Review* 9, no. 1 (2018): 1–17.

⁵⁴ M. I. A. R. al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi' li-ahl al-qarn al-tāsi'* (Beirut: Dār al-Jabal, 1992), 156–57.

⁵⁵ Qur'an: 83:26. Imām Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī mentions that this verse invites the believers to hasten to serve Allah so they will enjoy the bliss of Paradise. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī*, vol. 31 (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), 101.

conversation with someone we used to see in person. These acts of community in times of isolation can bring immense reward for encouraging one another to increase our religiosity as well as for caring for the health of a fellow Muslim.

Communal beliefs as a response to pandemics

As for our beliefs regarding pandemics, there arose two general perceptions of the tribulation. The first of these was the view that plagues were sent as punishment from God for people who had not repented from their sins. Another view was that tribulations provide opportunities to display patience, submission, and gratitude. They saw these epidemics as tests of character and spirit that would give rise to heavenly rewards in the Hereafter. This follows in the spirit of the hadith recorded by Muslim, in which the Prophet ﷺ says, “How wondrous is the affair of the believer! Verily, all of his affairs have good in it, and that is not so for anyone but the believer. If he receives prosperity, he shows gratitude, and that is good for him. If he is afflicted by adversity, he shows patience, and that is good for him.”⁵⁶ More specifically, Imām al-Bukhārī (d. 256 H/870 CE) records another hadith in which our mother ‘Ā’ishah, God be well pleased with her, asked the Prophet ﷺ about the plague and he responded, “It is a punishment God sends on whom He wills from His servants and it is that Allah makes it a mercy for the believers, as not one of them stays in his land during a plague, remaining patient, seeking reward from God, knowing that nothing can afflict him except what God has written for him, except that his is like the reward of the martyr.”⁵⁷

From this hadith, we learn that the correct view of the plague is not solely as a punishment nor only a trial, but rather, it is both. Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī comments that those who receive the plague as a punishment are the sinful and the non-believers. Evidence for this rests in the story of Mūsá and his people, as Allah used the plague to punish Pharaoh and his men for their disbelief and disobedience. Likewise, Allah sends the plague upon the sinful as a punishment for the grave sins they have committed. The mercy in the plague is designated for the believers, meaning the Muslims, as the hadith mentions. While there is seemingly a

⁵⁶ Muslim ibn Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1st ed., vol. 7 (Cairo: Dār al-Ta’šīl, 2012), p. 405, bk. 55, hadith 3116.

⁵⁷ Muḥammad al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 1st ed., vol. 7 (Cairo: Dār al-Ta’šīl, 2012), p. 378, bk. 76, hadith 5734.

contradiction here for those Muslims engaged in these grave sins Allah is punishing, Ibn Hajar explains that it is from Allah's mercy that a Muslim receives punishment for their sins in this life rather than in the hereafter.⁵⁸ If one is leading a life of sin and then the plague comes and afflicts him, he is blessed with the mercy of having his sins expiated for enduring injury⁵⁹ and, as the hadith mentions, the one who remains patient in the plague receives a reward like that of martyrdom, he was then given a special reward without having to choose it for himself. For all Muslims, then, the plague gives a chance for the expiation of sins and the attainment of a high station with their Lord. What must be critically analyzed is whether or not we are also enduring this condition as a punishment. What sins persist in our life that Allah has called us to abandon?

While this analysis of the authentic hadith seems to give a straightforward view of the plague, this was by no means the uniform understanding of all Muslims. Scholars and authors documented their different views of the tribulations they experienced in their literature. Şeyyad Hamzah (d. circa 749 H/1348 CE), a Turkish Sufi from the 14th century whose children were claimed by the Black Death, produced verses that provide insight into the psychosocial atmosphere in the face of the famous pandemic: "O Muslims, as if this were the End Times/ Is this the Doomsday, what a sign this is/ ... /What is death, it is the eternal judgment/What is plague, it is the decree of the heavens."⁶⁰ Varlık discusses the poem as a whole as a representative example of common plague perception in the Late Medieval period. Accordingly, the poet explained the plague as a divine order and a sign of the end of time, which required urgent repentance and correction of deeds. As part of a common line of thought observed among Muslim communities, the historian continues, Şeyyad Hamzah pointed to the political and moral corruption of his time as a possible reason for the outbreak.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī bi-sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol. 17 (Beirut: al-Risālah al-ʿĀlamīyah, 2013), 535–37.

⁵⁹ Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (2007), p. 1197, bk. 45, hadith 2572.

⁶⁰ Varlık, *Plague and Empire*.

⁶¹ Varlık, 211–12.

Examining historical writings shows that, regardless of the era and place of any plague, authority figures and community leaders tried to encourage a more optimistic mindset in the face of this great event rather than declaring the plague to be a punishment from God.⁶² A primary source of comfort for Muslims was the Prophetic assurance of martyrdom for those who died of plague.⁶³ This knowledge was highlighted by Muslim scholars during outbreaks as well in the face of any highly infectious disease with no cure.⁶⁴

In his historical chronicle, *History of the Prophets and Kings*, Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, (d. 310 H/923 CE) an influential Persian scholar, historian, and exegete of the Qur'an, narrated that when the Plague of 'Amwās intensified in Syria, Muslims were suffering and started to despair. Abū 'Ubaydah ibn al-Jarrāḥ (d. 18 H/639 CE), who was the leader of the Muslims in Syria at that time, spoke to the public to urge them to stay strong and be patient, reminding them that the plague was the result of the divine decree upon them and that, according to the Prophet Muhammed ﷺ, such a calamity is in fact a mercy to the believers.⁶⁵

Promoting balanced attitudes and ethical responses through religion

Throughout the writings of Muslim scholars on the plague, who were not only religious authorities but also front-line representatives of the Muslim community,⁶⁶ we see a diversity of responses suggested as virtuous ethical conduct during the time of epidemics.⁶⁷ Even though scholars disagreed on the particulars regarding life in a pandemic, they had the common principle of prioritizing the welfare of the *ummah*, the greater Muslim community, rather than health and safety of the

⁶² Dols, "Comparative Communal Responses."

⁶³ Noor, "Prophetic Guidance."

⁶⁴ Curry, "Scholars, Sufis, and Disease."

⁶⁵ Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī: Tārīkh al-rusul wa-al-mulūk* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif bi-Miṣr, n.d.).

⁶⁶ Dols, "Comparative Communal Responses"; Michael Walters Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977).

⁶⁷ Birsan Bulmuş, "Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Veba Kavramları Üzerine: Mistisizmden Sosyal Reforma," *Motif Akademi Halkbilimi Dergisi* 3, no. 6 (2010): 45–51; Curry, "Scholars, Sufis, and Disease"; Stearns, "Contagion in Theology and Law."

individual.⁶⁸ Furthermore, to the amazement of some,⁶⁹ they were always careful to stick to Prophetic narrations.⁷⁰ Various accounts by Muslim scholars across the Islamic Mediterranean world highlighted the importance of communal responsibilities, mainly taking care of the sick and the dead which included “the burial of the dead, the praying of funeral prayers, and the consolation of the bereaved.”⁷¹

To help comfort those pained by losses in these trials, Islamic texts provided information about deceased children to alleviate the pain of the Muslims, stating that lost offspring would serve as intermediaries on behalf of their parents on the Day of Judgment and those who bore the pain of such heavy losses would be rewarded with paradise. Additionally, Muslim scholars further reminded the large number of progeny lost by the Companions of the Prophet ﷺ during earlier plague epidemics, highlighting the parallel experience of even the most pious group of people.⁷² This body of knowledge circulated among Muslims and provided a source of hope and tranquility during the severe losses due to the plague.

As we now assess our own responses to the situation we find ourselves in, we must strike a balance between fear and hope, as we must do between taking the measures of the *asbāb* (the everyday means that we use to achieve our ends) and having firm *tawakkul* (complete reliance) in God’s power. It would be blamefully foolish for one to say that God will protect us no matter what and so there is no need to take the precautions God created for us to utilize (the *asbāb* we have recourse to). Similarly, it would be deviant to say one does not believe God has the power to protect us and put all their concern in these *asbāb* without also having *tawakkul* that Allah facilitates our protection. In a similar fashion, we must also find a middle ground between hope and fear. While fear and hope seem to

⁶⁸ Curry, “Scholars, Sufis, and Disease”; Dols, “Comparative Communal Responses”; Stearns, “Contagion in Theology and Law.”

⁶⁹ Hopley, “Contagion in Islamic Lands.”

⁷⁰ Dols, *Black Death in the Middle East*, 93.

⁷¹ Curry, “Scholars, Sufis, and Disease,” 40; Hopley, “Contagion in Islamic Lands”; Stearns, “Contagion in Theology and Law.”

⁷² Curry, “Scholars, Sufis, and Disease,” 38.

contradict one another, a balance between the two is not only possible, but necessary. Abū ‘Alī al-Rūdhbārī (d. 322 H/934 CE), a student of Imām al-Junayd (d. 298 H/830 CE), said, “Fear (*al-khawf*) and hope (*al-rajā’*) are like the two wings of a bird. If they are balanced, the bird will be balanced and fly well. If one is lacking, then it will have difficulty in its flight. Should both wings fail, however, then the bird will be in danger of dying.”⁷³ Similarly, we should be aware of our own balance in this regard. Seeing the state we find ourselves in only as a punishment from God can lead to despair and spiritual ruin. Forgetting to examine what we should change about our lives may cause us to miss the opportunity for essential spiritual growth and correction of previous ills.

If the pandemic we are in has been sent as a punishment for sins our community is committing, then we must take such a notion seriously and examine ourselves individually and what harmful acts, behaviors, and attitudes we might contribute to our community. We should remember that through changing our interactions with one another we can bring about change across the community. When we examine ourselves and find our faults, we should not despair and think we cannot overcome them. Rather, we should remember that God is not only merciful, but He is also always ready to accept the repentance of His servants. If we begin with a small, sincere effort to change, then we will be rewarded with greater success than we expect.

As with every tribulation Muslims endure, we should hope for good and forgiveness as an outcome of what we face. The Prophet ﷺ said in a hadith reported by Muslim (d. 261 H/837 CE) that “not the pricking of a thorn nor anything greater afflicts the believer except that by it Allah raises him in rank or removes from him a sin.”⁷⁴ We do not know what outcome God has destined for us by the tribulations we face. Through maintaining patience and a good opinion of God, we can hope to receive the benefits the Prophet ﷺ mentioned are written for us. Through despair, however, we may stray from this way, so it is important to maintain good faith.

⁷³ Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayrīyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Minhāj, 2017), 360.

⁷⁴ Ibn Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (2007), p. 1197, bk. 45, hadith 2572.

Our response to hardship is having *ṣabr* (patience) with what we are enduring and realizing the *shukr* (gratitude) we owe for the blessings we enjoy in our lives. For now, many of us are having to do without many pillars of our daily life for which we were not accustomed to giving gratitude to God. We now see the special importance our social connections serve in a way we would otherwise never have seen. We see how the most basic of daily securities can vanish in an instant. How many of us gave second thought to touching a door handle, standing within six feet of another person, or just breathing without a face covering? These were all but a few of the countless blessings our Lord has favored us with. Many of us might have never considered the bounty we enjoyed had He not removed it from us.

Issue Three: Public response

When considering the responses from government agencies and public health officials elicited by the COVID-19 pandemic, apparent discrepancies between religious instruction and scientific attitudes are frequently perceived. As both local and national governments around the world began issuing orders for the closure of all non-essential businesses and services in March 2020, the *masājid* frequented by Muslims in both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority countries soon found their doors closed to their congregations. In many regions, especially in America, this remains their status under strict reopening guidelines. Even in places not under such restrictions, the scientific consensus advocates strongly for avoiding close gatherings of large people. This falls in apparent contradiction with the Islamic communal injunction to establish communal prayers for all five daily prayers, personal injunction of attending the Friday communal prayer, and the nature of the prayer involving rows of worshippers standing shoulder-to-shoulder.

In a similar light, public health officials have issued warnings about travel and limits on social distancing that make the obligation of Hajj near-impossible. For the first time in many years, our Muslim community witnessed a restricted Hajj

where no international believers could attend. When God's word says to act and authorities say not to act, how does one reconcile the contradictory injunctions?

Islamic guidance in formulating an adaptive public response

As Muslims, our theology teaches us that all matters are under the power of God alone. From the Qur'anic stories of the Prophet Ibrahim being thrown into a blazing fire and emerging untouched by the flames to the countless miracles narrated authentically in our hadith tradition, affirming the omnipotence of God in every affair is an undeniable necessity. This affirmation of God's power does not negate our understanding of natural processes nor does this deviate from our Sunnah. In a narration deemed authentic by both Bukhārī and Muslim, the Prophet ﷺ said, "If you hear that there is plague in a land, do not enter it, and if it breaks out in a land you are in, do not leave it."⁷⁵ This is not because God cannot protect a people in the face of disease even if they were to directly confront it. We affirm that such protection is completely within the power of God. Following such guidance falls in line with our understanding of the nature God created in the world. If you are in the right environment for the transmission of disease, the natural order that God created suggests that you have a high chance of contracting the disease.

It would be against the Sunnah to not take the means God provided for us to seek safety. In some cases, these means may not always be readily available. In those cases, we recall the state of *tawakkul*, or reliance on God alone. For doctors and nurses working to treat patients of these diseases, they cannot avoid contact with their patients completely. Seeking such an abandonment of their post would be a shirking of the responsibility given to them by God through their education and training. Instead, the means are taken: gloves, face masks, hand sanitizers, and caution are applied as the general means God has placed for us. The Muslim knows, however, each of these is nothing more than a precaution, while the ultimate decision of our health or ailment rests with God alone. In this we maintain our firm belief and trust in God over all else.

⁷⁵ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 7:375, bk. 76, hadith 5728.

While the theology of taking means to avoid transmission of disease and the scientific authorities' recommendations align in values, the legal issue regarding religious injunctions remains. Multiple *fatāwá* (Islamic legal rulings) have been issued regarding these issues of contradiction and are analyzed in light of authentic narrations, verses from the Qur'an, and statements of experts in Islamic jurisprudence.⁷⁶

The first principle these *fatāwá* establish is the necessity of following public health mandates and taking all possible measures to limit the transmission of disease. The obligation of obeying the command of the government is established in countless texts and elucidated by many scholars. The 19th-century Imām of al-Azhar, Ibrāhīm al-Bājūrī (d. 1277 H/1860 CE), notes that the obligation to obey the political authorities stands in all matters, with the only exception being if a command contravenes an explicit Islamic ruling.⁷⁷ This includes the necessity of obeying them in permissible acts that benefit Muslims. In our instance, these include mandates such as self-quarantining, social distancing, wearing facial masks, and other inconveniences mandated by the government.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Some North American *fatawa* include: "AMJA Declaration Regarding Suspension of Friday Prayer," Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America, March 13, 2020,

<https://www.amjaonline.org/amja-declaration-regarding-suspension-of-friday-prayer/>; Zulfiqar Ali Shah, "Rulings on Daily and Weekly Congregational Prayers during Coronavirus Pandemic | Fiqh Council," The Fiqh Council of North America, March 16, 2020,

<http://fiqh-council.org/rulings-on-daily-and-weekly-congregational-prayers-during-coronavirus-pandemic/>; Yasir Qadhi, "Prayer and Funeral Issues Pertaining to COVID-19," The Fiqh Council of North America, March 24, 2020, <http://fiqh-council.org/prayer-and-funeral-issues-pertaining-to-covid-19/>.

Other *fatawa* from overseas include: Azhari Committee of Chief Scholars, "Al-Azhar, Cairo, Egypt (March 15, Arabic)," Corona Guidance: Religious Norms for Navigating the COVID-19 Pandemic, March 15, 2020,

<http://web.colby.edu/coronaguidance/files/2020/03/Al-Azhar.pdf>; Aisha Mahmood, "Mufti Taqi Usmani Gives Fatwa about Jummah Prayers amid Coronavirus Crisis," Breccorder, March 27, 2020,

<http://www.breccorder.com/news/584043; Muhammad Yasif>, "Fatwa Closing All Mosques for Daily Prayers and Friday Prayers, but Maintaining the Adhan (March 16)," Corona Guidance: Religious Norms for Navigating the COVID-19 Pandemic, March 16, 2020,

<http://web.colby.edu/coronaguidance/files/2020/03/Morocco-mosque-closure-March-16.pdf>.

For an exhaustive overview of the *fatawa* issued regarding the Coronavirus, see Mas'ūd Šabrī, *Fatāwā al-'ulamā' ḥawl fīrūs kūrūnā* (Cairo: Dār al-Bashīr, 2020).

⁷⁷ Ibrahim al-Bajuri and Salih Ahmed al-Ghursi, *Hāshiyat al-taḥrīr al-ḥamīd li-masā'il 'ilm al-tawḥīd 'alā tuḥfat al-murīd 'alā jawharat al-tawḥīd* (Beirut: Maktabat Šaydah, 2013), 639.

⁷⁸ See the previously mentioned *fatāwá* for specific guidance regarding observing guidelines.

In this light, it is established in the *fatāwá* that all those having caught or at risk of infection must not visit any public spaces as ordained by the governments they are under. However, the issue of *masjid* attendance remains: can the government legitimately close the *masjid* during a pandemic? Many *fatāwá* have emerged saying that it is permissible to bar entrance to the *masjid* for this reason. Despite presenting a seemingly novel position, this ruling is by no means new to our tradition. The 11th-century Andalusian scholar of hadith and Islamic law and jurisprudence, Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr (463 H/1071 CE), arrived at a similar conclusion from an order given by the Caliph Umar. In a sermon one Friday, the Caliph warned the congregation about eating onions before coming to the *masjid*, saying that the Prophet ﷺ would have such attendees removed for the harm they caused others due to the odor coming from their mouths. If a relatively minor harm such as the odor of bad breath was enough to bar someone from attending the Friday congregational prayer, Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr posited, then the harm of a communicable disease certainly meets such criteria for exemption from attending the *masjid*.⁷⁹

Islamic guidance on vaccination

With the introduction of COVID-19 vaccines in much of the world, many Muslims may be wondering how to approach the decision of whether or not to take the vaccine. In 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccine, the World Health Organization declared hesitancy for vaccination as one of “the top ten threats to global health.”⁸⁰ Misinformation about vaccines further complicates this issue, as social media groups and other non-authoritative sources of information spread false claims and rumors regarding vaccines.⁸¹ *Fatwá* councils around the world have deliberated on the balance between possible harms and benefits presented by vaccines, based on both Islamic legal rulings and scientific evidence, so that they may provide some guidance to the Muslim community regarding the COVID-19 vaccines.

⁷⁹ Yūsuf ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *al-Tamhīd li-mā fī al-Muwuṭṭa’ min al-ma’ānī wa-al-asānīd* (n.p.: al-Fārūq al-Ḥadīthah, n.d.).

⁸⁰ Sarah Geoghegan, Kevin P. O’Callaghan, and Paul A. Offit, “Vaccine Safety: Myths and Misinformation,” *Frontiers in Microbiology* 11 (2020): 372.

⁸¹ Geoghegan, O’Callaghan, and Offit.

Before even addressing the vaccine itself, some jurists saw the need to address the spread of misinformation by non-authorities in the field. In one *fatwá*, it is stated that “practicing medicine without having qualified scholarship is as dangerous as meddling in religious sciences while lacking the necessary knowledge, thus leading to corruption in belief and religion.”⁸² In the same way as the untrained student will come to faulty conclusions based on religious texts and could then mislead others, “whoever intrudes upon medical sciences and upon every matter related to human safety as in medicine, pharmacy, and engineering jeopardizes human lives.”⁸³ As such, Muslims should be careful to take medical advice only from certified professionals and not spread unverified claims others make.

Regarding the vaccine itself, various *fiqh* councils and *fatwá* committees across North America and the rest of the world have released *fatwás* establishing that taking the vaccine is at the very least permissible (*ḥalāl*), if not recommended (*mandūb*) or obligatory (*wājib*).⁸⁴ These rulings are not based purely on modern convenience and compliance with authorities, but rather have their basis in the example of our tradition. One of the oft-cited hadiths in this regard is the statement recorded in many hadith collections, “Make use of medical treatment, for Allah has not made a disease without appointing a remedy for it, except for old age.”⁸⁵ As

⁸² “Fatawa - Non-Specialists Promoting Medical Remedies to Combat COVID-19,” Dar al-Ifta al-Misriyyah, accessed January 26, 2021, <https://www.dar-alifta.org/Foreign/ViewFatwa.aspx?ID=15735>.

⁸³ “Fatawa - Non-Specialists Promoting Medical Remedies.”

⁸⁴ Shawqi Ibrahim Alam, “al-Tat’im bi-laqaḥ karuna,” accessed January 26, 2021, https://www.dar-alifta.org/AR/ViewFatwa.aspx?sec=fatwa&ID=15762&%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%B9%D9%8A%D9%85_%D8%A8%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AD_%D9%83%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D8%A7; “In Egypt, Getting a Covid-19 Vaccine Is a Religious Duty,” Middle East Eye, accessed January 26, 2021, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-covid-vaccine-religious-duty-scholars>; “Indonesian Clerics Declare Sinovac’s COVID-19 Vaccine Halal,” *Reuters*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-indonesia-vaccine-idUSKBN29D16U>; “Fatwa MUI No 02 Tahun 2021 Tentang Produk Vaksin Covid-19 Dari Sinovac Life Sciences, Co. Ltd China Dan PT Biofarma,” *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (blog), January 20, 2021, <https://mui.or.id/produk/fatwa/29485/fatwa-mui-no-02-tahun-2021-tentang-produk-vaksin-covid-19-dari-sinovac-life-sciences-co-ltd-china-dan-pt-biofarma/>; “Part 11 - Religious Position on COVID-19 Vaccine (English),” accessed January 26, 2021, <https://www.muis.gov.sg/officeofthemufti/Irsyad/Part-11-Religious-position-on-COVID-19-vaccine-English>; “FCNA Statement about COVID Vaccines | Fiqh Council,” accessed January 26, 2021, <http://fiqh-council.org/fcna-statement-about-covid-vaccines/>; “The Ruling On Getting The COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Vaccine | AMJA Online,” accessed January 26, 2021, <https://www.amjaonline.org/fatwa/en/87763/the-ruling-on-getting-the-covid-19-coronavirus-vaccine>.

⁸⁵ “FCNA Statement about COVID Vaccines | Fiqh Council”; *Abū Dawūd*, no. 3855.

with other matters of responsibility, Muslims must take the means God has provided to care for their own health and the safety of those around them. Having recourse to the vaccine provides this opportunity to protect Muslims and their neighbors from the harm of the pandemic.

Public safety measures and intercommunal relations in plague history

The decision to close the *masjid* was not a dominant practice in every case during plagues and pandemics in Muslim lands, perhaps due to a comparatively limited knowledge of the transmission of infections. However, certain modern regulations and methods were enforced and observed in Muslim lands during times of outbreak. In one eye-witness account by the famous chronicler Ibn Baṭṭūṭah (d. 779 H/1377 CE), we see an instance of how the religious and political authorities in the major urban center of Damascus took social measures to alleviate the affliction of their people. The first ordinance issued by the political officers was the closure of public eateries, which Ibn Baṭṭūṭah states were popular with the majority of people at the time.⁸⁶ This is similar to modern concerns over dine-in restaurants, as they create ideal spaces for the disease to spread.

While this first order (of closing restaurants) was designed to limit the transmission of disease, the second recognized the importance of *tawakkul* in Allah's power to change the situation through prayer and *istighfār*. The king called on all people to fast and pray for three days. After this, the people relocated to the outskirts of the city, a scene remarkable not only for the display of piety and desperation but also for the unification of social classes including the Jewish, Christian, and, as Ibn Kathīr (d. 774 H/1373 CE) records, Samaritan minorities of the city.⁸⁷ At the end of this event, Baṭṭūṭah records a statistical analysis of its effects, writing that the fatalities in a single day dropped down to 2,000, while in the metropolis of Cairo,

⁸⁶ Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, *Kitāb riḥlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭah* (n.p.: Akādimīyat al-Mamlakah al-Maghribīyah, n.d.), 326.

⁸⁷ Ibn Kathīr, *Kitāb al-bidāyah wa-al-nihāyah* (n.p.: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.), 261.

the fatalities in a single day reached 24,000.⁸⁸ Through both science-backed *asbāb* and sincere *tawakkul*, the people found mercy from God.

The last scene within this story enforces another important point about our public response. At times of desperation and turmoil, we must not turn to scapegoating and division. During the Black Death in Europe, the Jewish minorities were harshly blamed as the evil for which the plague had descended. Countless communities of Jews were persecuted and burnt due to this hateful, baseless idea.⁸⁹ This, however, was not the attitude of the Muslims. At the same time in Damascus, a major urban center in the Mamluk dynasty, the plague became a reason for Muslims, Jews, and Christians to come together for a common cause: praying to God for alleviation. Mamluk Damascus was not alone in this matter either. There is no historical evidence that minority populations were targeted or persecuted in the years of epidemics.⁹⁰ On the contrary, Jewish physicians were held in high regard at the time of the plague.⁹¹

In our modern day, we see a similar, if milder, trend towards xenophobia and scapegoating due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Asian communities have been targeted by boycotts, threats, and violent attacks all over the world.⁹² Muslims should abstain from and condemn such lowly behavior. As the Prophet ﷺ said in the narration recorded by al-Nasā'ī (d. 303 H/915 CE), “The Muslim is the one who the people are safe from his tongue [in speech] and hand [in actions].”⁹³ We believe only Allah knows the reason for an affliction. Any action taken without guidance, based only on our whims, should be rejected as satanic whispering.

As the communities of Damascus came together in solidarity during their pandemic, our modern communities have similarly shown unity in prayer for relief.

⁸⁸ Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, *Kitāb riḥlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭah*, 326.

⁸⁹ Samuel K. Cohn, “The Black Death and the Burning of Jews,” *Past and Present*, no. 196 (2007): 3–36.

⁹⁰ Dols, “Comparative Communal Responses.”

⁹¹ J. J. Mark, “Religious Responses to the Black Death,” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, April 2020, <https://www.ancient.eu/article/1541/religious-responses-to-the-black-death/>.

⁹² Jonathan A. Greenblatt, “Fighting Hate in the Era of Coronavirus,” *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 17 (2020): 208–21.

⁹³ Aḥmad al-Nasā'ī, *Kitāb al-mujtabá*, 1st ed., vol. 7 (Cairo: Dār al-Ta'ṣīl, 2012), p. 527, bk. 48, hadith 5039.

In April of 2020, Muslim, Jewish, Christian, and other faith communities joined in Jerusalem to pray together. Similarly, virtual gatherings of various faith leaders addressing their communities together and joining in prayer became a common occurrence across the world.⁹⁴ Many faith leaders took the opportunity to encourage their followers to increase cooperation with the other Abrahamic faiths.⁹⁵ Just as those before us, we should work to build an atmosphere of unity in this time of distress. Despite the differences we might have in faith and practice, we are unified in our recognition of God's power and our responsibility to care for our brothers and sisters in mankind.

Conclusion

As the months of COVID-19 dominating the news cycle, our consciousness, and our discussions carry on, it is important not to lose hope or despair. As with the many plagues and pandemics experienced by our ancestors, this pandemic is not the end. We have endured greater and longer disasters through our perseverance in *tawakkul* (reliance upon Allah), *ṣabr* (patience with Allah's decree), and *rajā'* (hope for the best from Allah's generosity). In the same way, we may endure yet another tribulation in our history.

As with those before us, this situation will neither be the end of our way of life nor of our faith. Times of hardship and testing of mettle are opportunities to demonstrate the positive qualities and states our religion seeks to inculcate in the believer: *tawakkul*, reliance upon and trust in God; *ṣabr*, patience with the Decree of God; *shukr*, expression of sincere gratitude for the blessings bestowed upon us by God; *yaqīn*, certitude in the power and care of God; *rajā'*, expectant hope for the mercy and generosity of God; *khawf*, fear of the power of God against those

⁹⁴ Emily Judd, "Inspiring Interfaith Moments during the Coronavirus Pandemic," Al Arabiya English, April 2, 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2020/04/02/Inspiring-interfaith-moments-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic>.

⁹⁵ Mohamed Elsanousi, Burton L. Visotzky, and Bob Roberts, "Love Your Neighbour: Islam, Judaism and Christianity Come Together over COVID-19," World Economic Forum, accessed December 30, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/religions-covid-19-coronavirus-collaboration/>.

who do not heed His warnings; *taqwá*, revering consciousness of the rights of God; and countless others. It is one blessing to learn about such states of the soul from the wisdom sent by God in the Qur'an and Sunnah and transmitted by our scholars; however, the true purpose of this knowledge is to manifest them in times of stress and dire need.

Through examining the lives of those before us, we see the importance of upholding these qualities in the tribulation we now find ourselves in. It was through these characteristics that earlier generations of Muslims endured the hardships of their time, and it is through these traits that we will endure once more. We must understand our duty to the general public, in the form of following public health ordinances and presenting appropriate public responses to our community, through encouraging appropriate perceptions of our situation and proper acts to maintain our psycho-spiritual health, and finally, to ourselves, that we monitor our own psycho-spiritual response to the atmosphere we find ourselves in. Through focusing on our own states, we can ensure that we will have a stable foundation upon which we may benefit those around us. Learning from the experiences of those before us allows us to accomplish this in an informed and deliberate manner. As we continue to adapt to the new world we are entering, having the reference points of our religion and more than 1400 years of tradition prepares us to endure all trials ahead.