

Reflections on the Coronavirus Pandemic

Summary

This document discusses the Coronavirus pandemic and how we should respond as Muslims. It covers the origin of the Coronavirus, how it spreads, and its historical context. Afterwards, relevant Islamic teachings are explored along with lessons that can be learnt from this test.

Introduction

Billions of lives have been disrupted and there have been more than six million deaths around the world (as of March 2022) due to the Coronavirus pandemic. We all know people who have caught this virus. It has affected people with different degrees of severity; from fever/shortness of breath to critical conditions and tragically death. Also, the lockdowns/tier systems have affected our education, jobs, social life, family life etc. It has become clear that many will experience long term debilitating symptoms (long Covid).

What is Covid-19? Covid-19 (SARS-CoV-2) is a virus which can result in extreme breathing problems. It is caught from others by breathing in the virus via air-borne droplets. The virus enters the air when someone with the Coronavirus not only coughs or sneezes but also when they talk and breathe out etc. The virus spreads even more rapidly within indoor areas (especially crowded ones) where there is little ventilation, such as when windows are not open.

Lessons from Covid-19

Discussion point: What lessons do you think we can learn from Covid?

- Remember to strengthen our faith: putting our trust in God.
- Remember our priorities: we need to reassess/refocus on priorities such as spirituality, family, health, self-development, helping others etc. These are more important than just pursuing careers.
- Remember those we often forget, whose worlds have already been frightening everyday, e.g. refugees, people living in war zones, and people living under oppressive regimes.
- Remember that community is important: voluntary organisations have been set up to help the isolated and vulnerable.
- Remember that we have responsibilities to the environment: working from home has resulted in cleaner air due to less pollution which has benefited the environment.
- Remember that the NHS, its workers and other critical workers, should be appreciated more.

Coronavirus: its causes and conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories have flourished, aided by globalisation (through the mass media and the Internet). Theories include that the Coronavirus was developed in a Chinese laboratory as a biological weapon, it is caused by the 5-G communications network and even that it is a hoax to benefit pharmaceutical companies enabling them to spy on us (Bell, 2020).

The Coronavirus originated in China, probably from meat contaminated by bats in the wet market of Wuhan. We though, should not blame this pandemic on the Chinese people. The virus has spread so quickly across the world due to our world being so interconnected (globalisation): modern transport such as airlights facilitating business trips, holidays, migration, visits to relations and academic study across the world.

Sadly, globalisation has not led to substantive mutual aid. Instead there has been vaccine nationalism: rich countries have taken most of the vaccines, leaving poorer countries in a far worse situation.

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Pandemics in history

Pandemics have a long history though epidemics are more common. A pandemic is an epidemic which has spread internationally. An epidemic is when there are more cases of a disease in an area/region than usual which can often happen suddenly. The linguistic meaning of epidemic 'is upon the people' from the Greek words *epi*, meaning upon, and *demos*, meaning people. The linguistic meaning of pandemic means 'all the people' as it is based on the ancient Greek words *pan* which means all as well as *demos*. This indicates that the pandemic spreads far more widely than an epidemic.

One of the first recorded pandemics was during the Peloponnesian War (430 B.C.) The disease spread through Libya, Ethiopia and Egypt before reaching Athens, where possibly two-thirds of the population died from it.

Probably the most devastating pandemic was the Black Death (1347-1351) which spread across Asia, North Africa, the Middle East and Europe. This was transmitted by rats. Within Europe the population decreased from about 80 million to 30 million.

In 'modern' times the most damaging pandemic was the Spanish Flu (1918), approximately 50 million people died across the world.

Islamic teachings

Discussion point: How do you think Islamic teachings are relevant to Covid?

'If you hear about it (the plague) in a land that you are in, do not run away from it, and if you hear that it broke out in a certain land, do not enter that land.' (Bukhari)

How does this relate to our current situation? Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya (who lived during the time of the Black Death in the 14th century) explained that this means that we should take precautions by not exposing ourselves unnecessarily to the plague, in our case Coronavirus, as we could catch it and become ill: we have a duty to preserve our health as this is a trust from God. We could link this to social distancing and not unnecessarily travelling to places which are known to have large populations with Covid. In relation to not running away from a place with the plague he adds that this is because we should put our trust in God. In addition, we know today that we should be concerned about not spreading the Coronavirus to others especially the medically vulnerable who could become extremely ill if they caught it.

Interestingly, Ibn Qayyim also wrote that the plague spreads through the air which, as mentioned, we have found out is one of the ways that Coronavirus is transmitted, i.e. through sneezing which we can then breathe in. The government's guidance at the height of the pandemic to keep at least 2m apart in public and to wear face masks therefore made sense. Alhamdulillah, due to the vaccination programme we have become far more protected from severe symptoms of Covid - though we should not become complacent.

Moreover, basic hygiene that prevents transmission is well known in Islam.

'Whenever the Messenger of God (pbuh) sneezed, he would cover his mouth with his hand or a piece of cloth...' (Tirmidhi)

'Purification is part of faith...' (Muslim). Washing hands, wudhu, ghusl and personal hygiene are all important aspects of Islam. Islam, therefore, lays down the basis of controlling the spread of viruses (this hadith also refers to spiritual purification).

We should remember that the pandemic is a test from God.

'Do you [believers] suppose that you will enter the Garden without having suffered like those who passed away before you? They were afflicted with misfortune and hardship and were so shaken that even [their]



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Messenger and the believers with him cried, "When will God's help come?" Certainly, God's help is near! (Quran, Surah Al Baqarah, 2:214)

God sends us tests to see how we will react and handle them: a means to become closer to Him. So how do we respond to a calamity? God tells us:

'Those that say when a calamity affects them "We belong to God, to Him we will return."' (Quran, Surah Al Baqarah, 2:156)

Moreover, the Prophet said:

'No fatigue, no disease, nor sorrow, nor sadness, nor hurt, nor distress happens to a Muslim, even if it were the prick of a thorn, but that God expiates some of his sins for that.' (Bukhari & Muslim)

A Muslim is patient during trials; he knows that God will never forsake him/her, nor will God burden him/her with a trial that is more than they can handle.

Are there any insights from Islamic history?

During the caliphate of Umar, whilst he was leading a group into Syria, he was informed that a plague was spreading there. After consulting with the people, Umar resolved to return to Madinah. However, someone questioned this decision, asking: 'Are you running away from the *Qadar* of God?'

Umar replied, 'We are fleeing from the *Qadar* of God to the *Qadar* of God.'

He meant that you should make sensible choices. This links to the following hadith about taking precautions.

'One day the Prophet noticed a Bedouin leaving his camel without tying it. He asked the Bedouin, "Why don't you tie down your camel?" The Bedouin answered, "I put my trust in God." The Prophet then said, "Tie your camel first, then put your trust in God."' (Tirmidhi).

In addition, the leader of the Muslims in Syria, (in the caliphate of Umar), Abu Ubaydah Ibn al Jarrah's death was caused by the plague. His successor Muadh bin Jabal then also died. Then Abdullah Ibn Amr Ibn al Aas was appointed as his successor. Because the plague was spreading so rapidly Amr Ibn al Aas told the people to spread out. As a result, further deaths from the plague dramatically decreased. We could apply this in our contemporary situation by implementing social distancing, however we should not travel from an area of high concentration of Coronavirus to an area of lower concentration as this will result in the Coronavirus spreading more.

Conclusion

Let's use this pandemic as an opportunity to develop our spirituality, increase our Islamic knowledge, develop new skills and prioritise our health (physical and mental); to spend quality time with our families and last, but not least, to help others. To show we care.

References

We would like to thank the Woking Study Circle for allowing us to use this material. This is basically an abridgement of two of their study circle notes which includes the following reference:

Phillip Bell 'Ten lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic' [Ten lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic \(newstatesman.com\)](https://www.newstatesman.com)

There were also some additional resources used:

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Glossary

Qadar: God's decree which is based on His knowledge of what will happen in the future and His wisdom. We do not know what this will be and so should take precautions/act (as part of putting our trust in God); not be fatalistic.

Handout

Lessons

- Strengthen our faith: trust in God.
- We need to reassess/refocus our priorities.
- Remember those we often forget – refugees; people living in war zones.
- Community is important.
- Responsibilities to the environment.
- The importance of the NHS, its workers and other key workers.

Pandemic Causes and Conspiracy Theories

- Origin from bats in China.
- Should not believe in conspiracy theories e.g. Chinese biological warfare, 5-G communications.

Islamic Teachings

‘If you hear about it (the plague) in a land that you are in, do not run away from it, and if you hear that it broke out in a certain land, do not enter that land.’ (Bukhari)

Personal Hygiene:

‘Whenever the Messenger of God (pbuh) sneezed, he would cover his mouth with his hand or a piece of cloth...’ (Tirmidhi)

‘Purification is half of faith...’ (Muslim, Hadith 23 in An-Nawawis 40 Hadith)

Life is full of tests:

The Prophet said:

‘No fatigue, no disease, nor sorrow, nor sadness, nor hurt, nor distress befalls a Muslim, even if it were the prick of a thorn, but that God expiates some of his sins for that.’ (Bukhari & Muslim)

Our Attitude to tests:

‘Who, when disaster strikes them, say, “Indeed we belong to God, and indeed to Him we will return.”’ (Quran, Surah Al Baqarah, 2:156)

Insights from Islamic history

Caliph Umar turned back from going to Syria when he heard there was a plague there.

‘One day the Prophet noticed a Bedouin leaving his camel without tying it. He asked the Bedouin, “Why don’t you tie down your camel?” The Bedouin answered, “I put my trust in God.” The Prophet then said, “Tie your camel first, then put your trust in God.”’ (Tirmidhi).

Abdullah Ibn Amr Ibn al Aas, governor of Syria, recommended that the people should scatter about (social distancing).