

COVID-19 Pandemic: Perspective of the Holy Quran

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This qualitative paper maps relevant verses and concepts from the Holy Quran to the COVID-19 pandemic and adversities in general. The findings of the mapped verses are then linked to other relevant verses of the Quran, academic and newspaper articles, books, essays and scientific research in order to obtain a broader perspective of the arguments and rationales presented in the Quran. The Quran informs us that calamities of a global scale are consequences of human actions which in turn are a result of the degeneration of the collective consciousness of humanity. However, calamities can help trigger a correction of the collective consciousness. The Holy Quran also informs us that trials and tribulations can work like a filtration process to mark out the best individuals of a community and help in the development of humility.

INTRODUCTION

After COVID-19 infections were first detected in China in December 2019, it spread insidiously, within a few months, across many parts of the world and the situation was declared a pandemic in March 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO). During this period, in addition to an impending global economic recession, evidences of a global mental health crisis were also pouring in and cases of domestic violence were also rising globally (Jones and Isham, 2020). Clearly, individuals, societies and communities were struggling to cope and make sense of the reality that was unfolding during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Existing articles, essays and research indicate that religion can help individuals and communities cope during difficult times. According to Pargament (1997: 3), “every religion offers a way to come to terms with tragedy, suffering, and the most significant issues of life”. McIntosh (1995) argues that religious beliefs can provide a framework for understanding events. However, the detailed nature of the framework that the various religions provide to help individuals and communities cope with and make sense of difficult times have been scarcely explored in the academia. Hence, in this article we investigate a theological perspective on trials and tribulations; in particular, we look into the perspective of one of the major religious texts of the world, the Holy Quran, on the COVID-19 pandemic and adversities in general.

The Quran is divided into one hundred and fourteen chapters which are composed of verses ranging from three to two eighty six. According to the Quran, the Quran is the last in a series of books of guidance for humanity from the Creator and Governor of all existence (Asad, 1980) and it contains explanation for everything (Pickthall, 1930). This paper aims to find the explanation and guidance in the Quran vis-à-vis the COVID-19 pandemic by mapping relevant verses of the Quran to the pandemic. The rationales and guidance from these verses are then analyzed and discussed under the light of other verses of the Holy Quran and relevant articles, books, essays and academic research in order to obtain a more holistic perspective.

METHODOLOGY

After a reading of the translation of the Holy Quran by Asad (1980), the search function of www.quran.com was used to find verses that could be mapped to the COVID-19 pandemic and adversities in general. The search words included - calamities, trials, tribulations and test - among others. Then the relevant verses from this search were mapped to the COVID-19 pandemic. The guidance and rationales from these verses were then extracted and analyzed under the light of other verses of the Holy Quran as well as relevant articles, books, essays and academic research in order to obtain a more holistic understanding of the explanations provided in the Holy Quran.

According to Ibn Kathir as translated by Mubarakpuri (2003: 29), “the best method is to explain the Quran with the Quran itself. What is mentioned in general terms in one place in the Holy Quran, is usually explained in another place”. Asad (1980) argues that the Holy Quran must be understood holistically and one verse cannot be explained or understood in isolation without considering the fundamental ordinances of the Holy Quran. In this paper, we have followed

Kathir's and Asad's method to aid our understanding and explanation of the verses of the Holy Quran vis-à-vis the COVID-19 pandemic.

In relating the concepts of the Holy Quran to relevant articles, books and academic research, we have followed the interdisciplinary approach. According to Choi and Pak (2006: 351), the interdisciplinary approach “analyzes, synthesizes and harmonizes links between disciplines into a coordinated and coherent whole”. To explain interdisciplinary approach Szostak (2015) quotes Klein and Newell as follows: “[It] draws on disciplinary perspectives and integrates their insights through construction of a more comprehensive perspective”. Following this approach, we have tried to link relevant concepts from the academic literature to our findings from the Holy Quran in order to obtain a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of the guidance and explanations provided by the Holy Quran.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A Correction Mechanism

The following verse numbered 41 of chapter 30 in the translation by Asad (1980: 849): “[Since they have become oblivious of God,] corruption has appeared on land and in the sea as an outcome of what men's hands have wrought: and so He will let them taste [the evil of] some of their doings, so that they might return (to the right path)” was found to most closely match with the COVID-19 pandemic. In this verse, the Arabic word *naas* (which has been translated as men) generally refers to humanity or mankind and the Arabic word *fasad* (which has been translated here as corruption) can also be translated as calamity (Usmani, 2017). With these points in mind, it can be understood from the above verse that calamities such as the COVID-19 pandemic is a consequence of the actions of humanity and the divine wisdom behind this particular law of cause and effect is that humanity will perhaps return to God.

Explanation of how human actions can lead to calamities such as pandemics can be found in numerous articles such as the one in DW News (2020); these articles link the COVID-19 pandemic to the destruction of wildlife and world's ecosystems. In the article in DW News (2020), Spangenberg, an ecologist, explains that “by disrupting ecosystems, we have created the conditions that allow animal viruses to cross over into human populations.” The information from these articles can help us understand more specifically the general idea of the Holy Quran that human actions lead to calamities such as COVID-19 pandemic.

Interestingly, Bentzen (2020) found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, in March 2020, Google searches for *prayer* surged to the highest level ever recorded. In the same article Bentzen (2020) cites another of her work to inform us that “earthquakes increase religiosity permanently across generations”. These findings are consistent with the rationale of the Holy Quran that calamities such as the COVID-19 pandemic might cause individuals and societies to return to God.

Although calamities such as pandemics occur as a consequence of corrupted human actions, the root cause of this corruption lies in the heart or inner psyche of human beings as implied in many

places in the Holy Quran. Therefore, according to the Holy Quran, the root cause of calamities affecting societies and communities are the degeneration of the collective consciousness or consciousness (collective consciousness is a fundamental sociological concept referring to the shared beliefs and moral attitudes within a society) of the respective societies and communities. This concept is the theme of the following verse numbered 11 from chapter 13 in the translation by Pickthall (1930): “Lo! Allah changeth not the condition of a people until they (first) change that which is in their hearts; and if Allah willeth misfortune for a folk there is none that can repel it, nor have they a defender beside Him”. The verse clearly implies that the external condition of a society or community is connected to the collective internal consciousness of that respective society or community; the same idea can be extended to humanity as a whole. Hence, when a society becomes morally degraded, it faces trials, tribulations and calamities such as COVID-19. The verse also implies that to avert and repel calamities such as pandemics, communities and societies must preserve its collective consciousness from moral degradation. Therefore, in societies and communities which believe in the message of the Holy Quran, adversities such as pandemics and epidemics can trigger a correction of the collective consciousness.

The essay, *The Fate of Empires and Search for Survival* by Sir John Glubb (1976), can help us better understand the argument of the Holy Quran that moral degeneration of societies is the underlying cause of the respective calamities that they face. In the essay, Glubb (1976) studies the great empires and civilizations that existed between 859 B.C. and 1950 and finds certain common patterns. According to Glubb (1976), the decline and fall of civilizations are preceded by a buildup of intellectual pride, decline in selflessness and dedication of its civilians, internal political hatred, corruption of the politicians, dominance of narrow self interests, indifference to religion, laxity of sexual morals and an increase in the influence of women in public life. Hence, through specific examples, Glubb’s (1976) essay helps us to obtain a better understanding of how the degeneration of the collective mind of societies can occur. The observations of Glubb also imply that the protection of the collective consciousness of societies and communities from moral degeneration can be a way of preserving human societies and communities from collapse which is consistent with the philosophy of the Holy Quran.

The mechanism through which a correction or regeneration of the inner psyche or collective consciousness of a society might take place is explained in the following verses of the Holy Quran numbered 42 of chapter 6 and numbered 94 of chapter 7 respectively (Pickthall, 1930: 39, 48): “We have sent already unto peoples that were before thee, and We visited them with tribulation and adversity, in order that they might grow humble” and “And We sent no prophet unto any township but We did afflict its folk with tribulation and adversity that haply they might grow humble”. These verses inform us that trials and tribulations faced by societies and communities can help them develop the characteristic of humility the opposite of which according to Glubb (1976) is one of the characteristics that precedes the decline and collapse of nations. In the Holy Quran, humility is related to the realization of the greatness of God, our total dependence upon Him and our humble biological origins Asad (1980); humility implies a lack of haughtiness and is associated with calmness, gentleness and easiness as implied in verse 63 of surah 25.

In order to obtain a broader perspective, let us look at humility as defined and studied in the academia. According to the researchers Wright et al. (2017; 3), “Humility is a corrective to our natural tendency to treat our ‘selves’ as ‘special,’ to strongly prioritize or privilege our own mental states (e.g. our beliefs, values, etc.) and capacities (e.g. skills, abilities, etc.) – i.e. to seek social praise, status, acclaim, influence over others – and have undue attachment to them simply because they are ours.” Wright et al. (2017; 3) also add that “humility is the understanding and experience of oneself as only one among a host of other morally relevant beings, whose interests are foundationally as legitimate, and as worthy of attention and concern, as one’s own (a state of ‘extended compassion’). In this way, humility is a corrective to our natural tendency to strongly prioritize or privilege our own needs, interests, desires, benefits, etc. – i.e., to seek ‘premium treatment’ for ourselves, even at significant cost to others – simply because they are ours.” These definitions in the academia are consistent with the concept of humility in the Holy Quran and provide a better understanding of the concept.

Although there is no single agreed upon definition of humility in psychological research where the trait has been investigated significantly, according to Wright et al. (2017; 5) “the research conducted thus far strongly supports the view that cultivating humility is a good thing”. In psychological research, the link between humility and generosity have been found to be significant; humility is also correlated to lower rates of infidelity, lower likelihood of displaying exploitative behavior, increased cooperative behavior, increased responsiveness to incentives for cooperation, fairness, and generosity.

Since the Holy Quran argues that calamities such as COVID-19 can cause individuals and societies to become more humble, these research findings on humility provide a more comprehensive understanding of the individual and societal benefits related to humility.

A Filtration Process

The following verses numbered 2 and 3 from chapter 29 (Pickthall, 1930: 126): “Do men imagine that they will be left (at ease) because they say, We believe, and will not be tested with affliction? Lo! We tested those who were before you. Thus Allah knoweth those who are sincere, and knoweth those who feign” tell us that trials and tribulations can also serve the purpose of marking out the true and sincere individuals in a society or community. According to the message of the Holy Quran, the true and sincere in faith are the ones who do not abandon faith and good deeds during difficult times.

In social science, research on societies facing collective stress indicates that during a crisis two distinct groups emerge the activists and non-activists or free-riders (Stone & Levine, 1985). According to Stone & Levine (1985) the activists become personally involved to help address and resolve the crisis. These are the ones that the Holy Quran refers to as the sincere or true to their faith. Thus, trials and tribulations can act like a filtration process which clearly marks out the sincere and true individuals of a society and community.

The concept that trials and tribulations can mark out the best individuals of a community or society is also alluded to in the following verse numbered 155 of chapter 2 (Asad, 1980: 65):

“And most certainly shall We (God) try you by means of danger, and hunger, and loss of worldly goods, of lives and of [labor’s] fruits. But give glad tidings unto those who are patient in adversity (exhibit *sabr*)”. The verse informs us that it is a Law of God that people will be tested with tribulations of various kinds and the best mode of being during these times is *sabr* (which popularly translated as patience or perseverance) also implies perseverance in doing good (Omar, 2005). Hence, activism and volunteerism during times of calamities such as pandemics is a sign of *sabr*. Stone & Levine (1985) found that the activists are more likely to feel that crises can bring about positive personal changes and changes in relations with others. These positive changes can be linked to the glad tidings mentioned in the above verse of the Holy Quran.

Reminder and Warning

One particular story of the Holy Quran – the story of the great flood during Prophet Noah’s time – bears resemblance to pandemics. This calamity is different from all the other calamities mentioned in the Holy Quran due to the fact that it did not affect one particular community; it affected the entire world just like the COVID-19 pandemic. According to verses 11 and 12 of chapter 69, the story of the great flood of Noah can serve as a reminder of God and afterlife for the later generations. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic can serve as a reminder of God and afterlife.

Interestingly, researchers such as Atkinson and Bourrat (2011) have found evidence to support the hypothesis that belief in God and afterlife may be an important factor promoting cooperation and trust in human groups. Interestingly, God and afterlife is a common concept in many of the major religions of the world including Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism. Therefore, if calamities of a global scale can indeed remind people of God and the afterlife, then there is some evidence to suggest that it can promote cooperation and trust among a large percentage of the world’s population. This again helps us better understand the Quranic claim that calamities, such as COVID-19, can trigger a correction of the collective consciousness of humanity.

The verse numbered 25 of chapter 8 (Pictkhall, 1980: 53): “And guard yourselves against a chastisement which cannot fall exclusively on those of you who are wrong-doers, and know that Allah is severe in punishment” instructs us to take preventive measures against adversities that affect whole communities and societies. The nature of calamities such as pandemics do not only affect the morally corrupt or wrong-doers and in the above verse the Holy Quran especially instructs and warns us to guard ourselves against such calamities. According to Maududi (1994), the verse implies that a society should always remain vigilant against moral corruption and degradation of its collective consciousness and actions in order to prevent calamities.

Micro Perspective

Although the Covid-19 pandemic has generally affected societies and communities on a macro level, at a micro level every individual and every household have been facing a unique set of challenges. The unique nature of challenges faced by every individual is addressed in the last verse numbered 286 of chapter 2. The verse tells us explicitly that God does not burden a human being beyond her/his capacity. According to Khan (2013), the verse implies that the challenges

faced individually by every human being have been specifically tailored for them and every soul has been endowed with the capacity to cope with the challenge or difficult times. In another lecture Khan (2019) explains that verse 2 of chapter 29 of the Holy Quran implies that tests and trials can refine and reform individuals just like heat refines gold. These concepts of the Holy Quran can help us understand the important aspects of the framework of the coping mechanism that the Holy Quran provides at the micro or individual level.

Walsh (2003; 399) writes: “The concept of family resilience extends our understanding of healthy family functioning to situations of adversity. Although some families are shattered by crisis or persistent hardship, what is remarkable is that many others emerge strengthened and more resourceful, able to love fully and raise their children well.” Studies such as these are consistent with rationale of the Holy Quran that trials and tribulations can refine and reform individuals. In fact, these studies can help us better understand the positive changes that can be brought about trials and tribulations according to the Holy Quran.

The following flow diagram, figure 1, summarizes the main findings discussed so far:

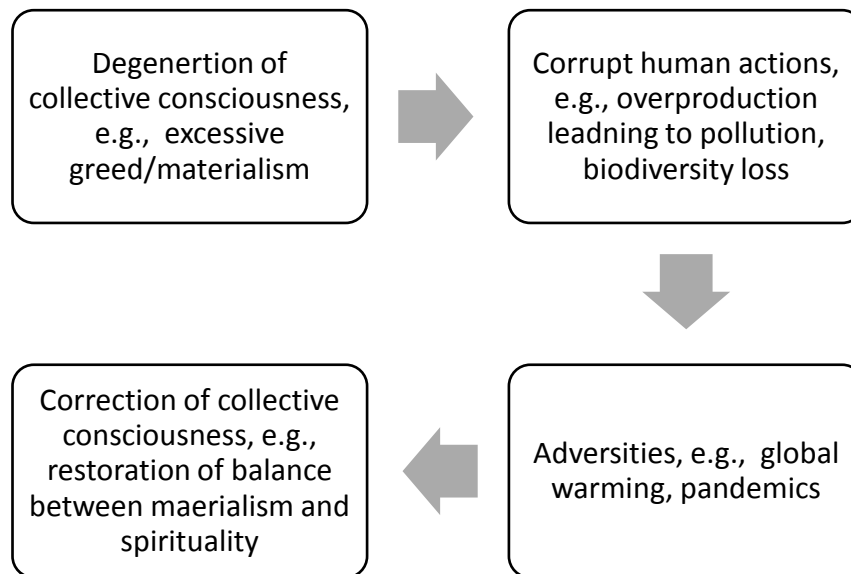


Figure 1: A flow diagram summarizing the findings of this paper

IMPLICATIONS

The Quran places great weight on the purification of the soul or inner psyche of individuals and according to its message, adversities can help individuals and societies to refine and reform their respective psyches and collective consciousness. Specifically, adversities can be used to develop the characteristic of patience, resilience and humility and other positive traits closely associated with humility in positive psychology. Therefore, a society that believes in the message of the Holy Quran is likely to see an opportunity for individual and collective reform during adversities such as pandemic.

According to the Holy Quran, trials and tribulations can help mark out the true and sincere individuals of a community. Communities can benefit from the humble and altruistic individuals that emerge during adversities by giving them leadership roles and/or other important roles in a society or community. For example, “Latest findings suggest that the trait (humility) is especially important for leaders, with evidence that displays of humility can improve strategic thinking and boost the performance of colleagues across an organization” (BBC Worklife, 2020).

Since research suggests that during adversities individuals and societies have a natural tendency to turn to God and/or religion and belief in God and/or religion can promote cooperation and trust, adversities can be the optimal time to engage in inter-faith dialogues to promote greater solidarity and tolerance, as well as benefit from the wisdom and perspectives of different religions.

Lastly, the perspectives obtained from the Holy Quran imply that societies, communities and humanity in general should guard themselves from moral degeneration. According to some research cited by Bentzen (2020), religion can play a constructive role in the prevention of moral degeneration such as criminal activities. Interestingly, most of the factors in Glubb’s (1976; 15) essay such as intellectual pride, selfishness, greed and “laxity of sexual morals” that precede the decline and collapse of civilizations are condemned by the major religions of the world. Therefore, through religious teachings and values a society can prevent moral degeneration which according to the Holy Quran has a causal connection to adversities and calamities.

CONCLUSION

According to the Holy Quran, every phenomenon that occurs in this universe does so either by God’s will or permission as part of a divine plan. However, as alluded to in many verses of the Holy Quran, God’s wisdom is unfathomable and beyond the scope of human intellect except for that which God Himself inspires and/or reveals through His prophets and messengers. One of such revelations according to the Holy Quran is the Quran itself.

This paper has tried to extract some of the rationales from the Holy Quran for calamities such as COVID-19 pandemic and link the rationales of the Holy Quran to other relevant articles, books and academic research in order to obtain a broader perspective. In brief, calamities and adversities faced collectively by humanity are due to corruption of the collective consciousness and actions of humanity. However, calamities of a global scale like the COVID-19 pandemic can help to trigger a correction of the collective consciousness of mankind, e.g., from excessive materialism towards a balance between spirituality and materialism.

Coincidentally, such correction mechanisms are also found in the life sciences (an organism corrects its temperature, water level, etc. through homeostasis), physical sciences (electrons returning to normal states from excited states), and social sciences (according to economic theory, markets and economies can recover and correct itself from a situation of overproduction or underproduction).

In the Holy Quran we are informed that God alone is the designer, creator and maintainer of all existence and in many verses of the Holy Quran we are told to study and reflect on the universe to realize His existence and creative power. For example, verse 190 of chapter 3 reminds us that “in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the night and the day are signs for those of understanding”. Interestingly, mankind’s collective study of the universe has led to discover that similar correction mechanisms exists in diverse systems like cells, atoms, environments, markets and societies. This perhaps is a sign that there is a single designer of this universe as claimed in the Holy Quran. In addition, it also leaves scope for further interdisciplinary research and building a unifying model for these self-correcting mechanisms.

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