

# Six long-term lessons from COVID-19 pandemic

## Spahic Omer

The following are six important lessons that we Muslims can learn from the raging COVID-19 pandemic. The lessons are enduring and could be shared with non-Muslims as well.

### **Man is not running the show**

Since the dawn of Protagoras' (d. 420 BC) philosophy of relativism, according to which "man is the measure of all things", and since the age of Renaissance humanism, according to which "mankind is at the centre of the universe", "enlightened" man always pretended to be in control of his own destiny. He, rather than God, was the source of all value and legitimacy. Human reason and talents, rather than any metaphysical entity or source, were placed on a pedestal.

On account of the Scientific Revolution, which took place towards the end of the Renaissance period, giving birth to the intellectual and social movement in the 18<sup>th</sup> century called the "Enlightenment", and serving as a precursor to the subsequent modern and post-modern eras, this anthropocentric view was propelled to unprecedented heights. Man started at once to believe and behave as though he was in control of the whole earth. Yet, the whole universe became the target of his exploration and conquest ambitions. The modern man believed that he had the whole world at his feet, both literally and metaphorically.

In the process, the idea of God was relegated to the forgotten "absentee landlord" who lives "upstairs" from the world which humans inhabit. There was more and more antagonism between the modern man and Heaven. The total separation became inevitable. Resulting from the separation was the Death of God theology championed by a myriad of philosophers and theologians. The doctrine denoted the rise of secularity and total abandonment of traditional religious beliefs and practices. Perhaps the most emblematic of the trend was Friedrich Nietzsche's (d. 1900) assertion that "God is dead". Equally powerful was Stephen Hawking's (d. 2018) belief that "there is no God; no one directs our fate".

Thus, the COVID-19 plague is a slap in the face for the modern man and his irreligious civilizational headway. It became obvious that no amount of scientific knowledge and technological advancement can avail man of virtually anything when a Big One strikes. It also became clear that man's scientific and technological progress - however massive it may appear to us on account of our prejudiced and flawed benchmarks - is extremely small and insignificant when juxtaposed with how infinite and complex the existential reality is.

Man's ignorance of the world will always greatly outweigh his knowledge of it. Thus, no sooner does man confront an aspect of the endless unknown, than he comes forth as a helpless and extremely vulnerable being. He wanders alone in the dark, dealing with issues on the basis of trial and error, which brings but little yield.

The way people conceive and react to COVID-19 is an unmistakable sign of humankind's smallness and vulnerability. What they normally do, as much individually as institutionally, is a combination of arrogance and ignorance, masked with incredible occasional honesty and determination.

For illustrative purposes, out of 8.7 million earth's species, 86 percent are still unknown; that is, they are yet to be accurately described and understood. Moreover, 95 percent of the world's oceans - which take up about 71 percent of earth's space - and 99 percent of the ocean floor are unexplored. This induced some to remark that we know more about the surface of Mars than we do about the ocean floor. This is the situation while extinction dramatically accelerates, and while man's wellbeing, yet his survival as a species, is increasingly threatened.

At any rate, man is only a creation and a servant (just as the virus in question is). Man has the Creator and Master, and no matter what, there cannot be an exchange of titles. Only with his Creator and Master on-board can man realize his remarkable potentials and fulfil his destiny. Only with God as the Guide and the One Who Directs, or Manages, (*Mudabbir*), furthermore, can man truly become somebody and "big", leaving a worthy legacy for posterity.

Man is not running the show on earth. It is Almighty God, the Creator of life and us, who does. Still, there are so many leading roles to play, whereby man can emphatically express himself and run after his grand goals. In doing so man is not to pit himself against God and Heaven. Rather, he is to set himself against any negativity that may hinder him from achieving his pragmatic and sensible objectives. God and Heaven are man's greatest allies on the journey.

COVID-19 should generate in the modern man a great deal of soul-searching, enabling him to think and act with both feet on the ground. His perpetual scientific and cultural haughtiness as well as waywardness are counterproductive, leading him in the long-term basically nowhere.

It is owing to this that the Qur'an reminds that man has been given very little knowledge (al-Isra', 85); that man was created weak (al-Nisa', 28); that man is in need of God Who, in turn, is the One free of need and all wants (Fatir, 15); that knowing even his very soul, which is a heavenly component inside man, and which makes him the "person" and "intelligent being", is beyond man and his limited capabilities (al-Isra', 85).

### **Shaken but not derailed**

COVID-19 is very subtle and dangerous. People must do whatever is in their power to reduce their risk of infection. They also must do their part in helping prevent the spread of the virus. Whereas the responsible parties should incessantly look for a cure, sparing no expense and every other legitimate means in doing so.

It is right here and right now that people need to show how responsible, compassionate and cooperative they are. This is not only about individuals, but also entire communities and the whole world. The stakes are high, and the wellbeing of humankind is on the line. It is in these circumstances that selfishness, greed and irresponsibility can hurt most, and that accountability, care and team work can be rewarding most. No risk, or threat, is to be taken lightly by any party.

However, we must bear in mind that the virus is nothing but God's creation, and the pandemic is unfolding only because God so wills. There is a purpose, yet profound wisdom, behind the occurrence, even if we failed to comprehend them. There is always a blessing in disguise. But to come to the root of the difficulty, people need to cooperate with God - apart from cooperating among themselves - more intensely and more closely.

This is positively so because Almighty God does nothing that is purposeless, senseless, and is intrinsically bad for people. His being Merciful, Kind, Benevolent, Loving and Just are most pervasive and most compelling. According to the Islamic worldview, all that God does is meant to be beneficial for man and his earthly vicegerency mission, one way or another.

We also have to remember only what God wants will eventually befall us. If He decreed that COVID-19 will affect a person, no amount of awareness, care and preventive measures could frustrate His plan. Similarly, if God decreed that a person will not be affected by COVID-19, absolutely nothing could alter His decision.

This by no means tends to promote the idea of passive fatalism, just as it does not intend to land any support to the notions of complete freedom and indeterminism either. Human life is a delicately struck balance between the two opposing domains. Human life is the result of God's divine will, plan and ultimate care. In it, there is no room whatsoever for coincidences, absurdities and injustice.

COVID-19 is another (just) act of God, which man should make the most of to deepen his knowledge of the self, others, the world and, ultimately, God. It could likewise be a test and a punishment, about which, though, people are not to pretend to be judges. So superficial is man's acquaintance with the secrets of the higher order of meaning and experience that venturing into those things will inevitably lead to the baseless acts of speculating, hyperbolizing and conspiracizing, thus adding to the widespread confusion and panic.

God says in the Qur'an: "Say: Nothing will afflict us save what Allah has ordained for us; He is our Patron; and on Allah let the believers rely" (al-Tawbah, 51).

The Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) said: "Be mindful of Allah and he will protect you. Be mindful of Allah and you will find him before you. If you ask, ask from Allah. If you seek help, seek help from Allah. Know that if the nations gathered together to benefit you, they will not benefit you unless Allah has decreed it for you. And if the nations gathered together to harm you, they will not harm you unless Allah has decreed it for you. The pens have been lifted and the pages have dried" (Jami' al-Tirmidhi).

### **Yet another sign**

Everything in the heavens and on the earth - permanent or otherwise, animate and inanimate - is a sign, attesting to the absolute truth. So is COVID-19.

The Qur'an is a revealed book of signs (*ayat*). The universe, too, with all its dimensions and manifestations, is a created "book" of signs (*ayat*). If the former is all about signs, because it is God's Word (*logos*), the latter is all about signs as well, because it is the result of God's Word (*logos*) "kun" ("Be!"), as a symbol of God's divine creative power. Nothing happens without God's will and command, symbolizing His greatness, presence, authority, omniscience, compassion and providence. All that happens also casts light on the status and character of man and his honourable mission.

COVID-19 is yet another chapter in the ontological book of signs. Through it, people should perceive God's Will and Power at work, repositioning their own wills and undertakings accordingly. While dealing with the pandemic wisely and decisively, they should use it to enrich themselves and enhance their relationships with the Creator and His creation.

COVID-19 as a sign - or a series of signs - should be used for understanding better the other equally, or maybe even more, remarkable signs that came to pass in history. By analogy to the origins, spread and impact of COVID-19, more light can be shed on earlier historical signs that created similar effects and generated parallel behavioural patterns.

All that is set to help accept and come to terms with some yet bigger approaching signs. Facts about those signs are deposited on the pages of the revealed knowledge and pertain to the end of the world and the beginning of the Hereafter. They tell us that all signs are innately miraculous events. They defy both logic and the laws of physics. For that reason is man powerless to handle them effectively alone. His *modi operandi* do not - and cannot - transcend the levels of rationality and physics.

For example, profoundly comprehending COVID-19 may help us understand the work of the nine signs the Prophet Musa (Moses) was sent with to face the challenge of Pharaoh and his elites; the failed invasion of Makkah by Abraha, the Abyssinian and Christian ruler of Yemen; God's bringing forth for nonbelievers, as a major sign of the Day of Judgment, "a creature (beast) from the earth speaking to them, (saying) that the people were, of Our verses (signs, ayat), not certain (in faith)" (al-Naml, 82); that God will destroy numerous and mighty Gog and Magog (Ya'juj and Ma'juj), as another major sign of the Day of Judgment, by attacking their necks with worms that will fill their ears and noses, thus killing them (Sunan Ibn Majah).

### **The power of prayer**

Dealing with COVID-19 is risky. It is highly contagious and deadly. Nonetheless, the pandemic should be seen both as a threat and opportunity. People need to face it head-on and uncompromisingly, and

should look forward to emerging stronger and more resilient from it, for "what doesn't kill you, makes you stronger".

All these outlooks and measures have been encapsulated in some *hadiths* (traditions) of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) that forbid Muslims to enter a land in which a plague has occurred, and also forbid them to leave a land in which a plague has occurred (Sahih al-Bukhari).

The Prophet said: "The plague is a calamity (or a punishment) that was sent upon the Children of Israel, or upon those who came before you. If you hear of it in some land, do not go there, and if it breaks out in a land where you are, do not leave, fleeing from it" (Sahih al-Bukhari).

The Prophet also said: "There is no harm nor reciprocating harm" (Sunan Ibn Majah).

He likewise said that the best of people are those who are most beneficial to people, and by analogy, the worst of people are those who are most harmful and most detrimental to people (Mu'jam al-Tabarani).

Since COVID-19 exists and does what it does only due to the permission of God, these difficult and testing times should be used for enhancing our relationship with God. People should deal directly with the source. They should seek protection from, and eventual elimination of the virus, only from God. They will have to do their part, with-in and with-out themselves, but that, too, is to be seen merely as part of seeking and activating God's will in our favour.

The Qur'an reveals that "Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves (their own condition). And when Allah intends for a people ill, there is no repelling it. And

there is not for them besides Him any patron (protector)" (al-Ra'd, 11).

The Prophet taught us several prayers and supplications to recite (and actualize) for protection against harms and evils, including diseases and plagues. Some of them are as follows ([www.islamqa.info](http://www.islamqa.info)):

"In the name of Allah with Whose name nothing can harm on earth or in heaven, and He is the All-Hearing, All-Knowing" (Sunan Abi Dawud).

"I seek refuge in the perfect words of Allah from the evil of that which He has created" (Sahih Muslim).

"O Allah, I ask You for well-being in this world and in the Hereafter. O Allah, I ask You for pardon and well-being in my faith, my worldly affairs, my family and my wealth. O Allah, conceal my faults and protect me from that which causes me to worry. O Allah, protect me from before me and from behind me, from my right and from my left, and from above me, and I seek refuge in Your greatness lest I be destroyed from beneath me" (Sunan Abi Dawud).

"O Allah, I seek refuge with You from the withdrawing of Your blessing, and the loss of the well-being that You granted me, and the sudden onset of Your wrath, and anything that may lead to Your displeasure" (Sahih Muslim).

However, prayers and supplications should not be just reactive and mechanical chants, without knowing what is being said and without feeling that something extraordinary is taking place. Instead, prayers and supplications are to be seen as forms of reciprocal communication with the Creator and Master of the universe, whereby we recognize when we talk that we are listened to, and when we are talked to that we listen.

Through their prayers, people can demonstrate how pious, dedicated and enlightened they are. At the same time, they can show how insincere, selfish and imprudent they are. Indeed, people and the state of their total worship are what and how effective their prayers are. Prayers must be free of self-centredness, covetousness, superstitions, scepticism and hesitation.

Prayers connote a form of worship. They are a way of life. They are further described by the Prophet as a weapon for believers. But a weapon is only as good as a person using it. If a weapon is in a good condition and effective, if a person using it is skilled and brave, and if there is nothing to impede such a person from using the weapon, then the weapon is perfect and can destroy its target. But if all or some of the three mentioned components are missing, then the effect of the weapon will be correspondingly impinged on.

Prayers, like weapons, can be used and misused. They are answered contingent upon a person's sincerity, piety and strength of character.

### **It's the little things that matter most**

COVID-19, apart from making us feel afraid and unsure, is also making us more compassionate and more understanding. It is making us more pragmatic and more open-minded. We are made to change our perspective and see many things differently. For many people, as a result, life may never be the same again.

One of the things learned from the predicament is that in times of difficulty it is the little things that matter most. In their lives, people are usually preoccupied with big dreams, issues and challenges. Their everyday routines and the people they interact with most are regarded exactly as that: average and inconsequential procedures as well as acquaintances.

However, in times of need it is such routines and persons that prove most important and most decisive. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we are advised to take care of personal hygiene, to keep the places where we live, work, worship and play, clean, and to mind our manners when alone and with others. In other words, we are to be completely responsible and live responsibly. These behavioural principles can be dubbed "Coronaethics". In doing so, the most important persons are our family members, our neighbours, our friends and our colleagues. But all of these under normal circumstances are taken for granted and often even underappreciated.

People suddenly realize that huge militaries, sophisticated weapons, material wealth, strong economies, strong governments, etc., are not the whole thing as one might expect. Many unexpected heroes emerged in the process, such as doctors, nurses and support staff of hospitals, accountable journalists, responsible employers, volunteers, and every anonymous individual at home, or on the field, who decided to be a genuine asset in the war against the virus.

As another example, we are not fully aware how significant today in the age of internet (Information Age) refraining from fanning the flames of panic is, and how beneficial desisting from spreading rumours and false news could be. Cyber heroes - and villains - are as influential as any other frontline group.

Thus, this unfortunate episode should be a lesson in the actual meaning and quality of life. People should be more sensible and pragmatic. They should revisit their life priorities, and re-evaluate their paths to happiness as the supreme goal of life. Life must not be a wasted opportunity, nor a set of illusions.

COVID-19 teaches us that people do not need to go far and wide to find the source of ultimate joy, happiness and success, because that source is always there: at home and with family and friends. Likewise, to make a contribution to the welfare and interests of society and the whole world, people do not need to think and act necessarily big.

Accordingly, it is rightly said that doing small things in a great way is akin to the act of doing great things itself, and that great things are done by a series of small things combined. Mother Teresa is reported to have said: "Be faithful in small things because it is in them that your strength lies."

The Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) said: "Take up good deeds only as much as you are able, for the best deeds are those done regularly even if they are few" (Sunan Ibn Majah).

He also said: "Whoever is not grateful for small things will not be grateful for large things. Whoever is not thankful to people is not thankful to Allah. Discussing the blessings of Allah is gratitude and ignoring them is ingratitude" (Musnad Ahmad).

### **The peril of spiritual and moral pandemics**

Along with fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, we must remember that there are many other pandemics that are equally, if not more, harmful, requiring immediate attention. They are related to the realms of spirituality and morality.

It is evident that people's level of spiritual and moral integrity across the globe is at an all-time low. So much so that there is no metaphysical meaning, value and sanctity that is appreciated, let alone followed, by the modern and postmodern hedonistic and nihilistic man. The only thing that matters is that such man's self-obsessed interests and vain desires are satisfied. Apart from the personal ego and the

styles of serving its wants, nothing seems to be sacred, nor honourable. Why to be otherwise, quite frankly, when God is "dead" and the truth is at once unknown and unknowable (the creed of agnosticism).

People and nations will recover from COVID-19 and will move on. However, the spiritual and moral pandemics will rage uncontrollably. The wounds of the former will eventually heal, whereas those of the latter will go on multiplying, and will hurt most.

Hence, COVID-19, when all is said and done, does not represent an apocalypse. The spiritual and moral pandemics do. With the former, Almighty God tests us, warns us, educates us, and rattles us in order to emerge better and stronger. With the latter, which is purely the doing of man, God denies us His favours and blessings. We are yet qualified to be punished thereby. In the former, furthermore, God is on our side. In the latter, we are left on our own; God is against us. By means of the former, we in addition can improve our lot in this world and the stakes of ours in the Hereafter.

COVID-19 should be an eye-opener *vis-à-vis* the spiritual and moral plagues. Such is not the case, however, for the latter is so widespread and powerful that it functions as an eye-shutter *vis-à-vis* COVID-19, in which case neither is seen, nor comprehended, properly.

Throughout COVID-19, the signs of people's spiritual and moral decadence and malfunctioning keep emerging. At first, the general reaction of people to the crisis is one of shock and disbelief. It then turns into a temporary empathy and broad worry, morphing in the end into the personal sentiments of angst, fear and depression. It is then that people start displaying their true colours. All masks fall off. That a great many people subscribe to the canons that "a man is a wolf to another man" and that "might is right" becomes manifest. The overall

situation is somewhat reminiscent of the metaphor of a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Thus, the discourses about COVID-19 now increasingly involve such depressing issues and problems as panic-buying, hoarding, greed, egocentricity, fighting over food and other supplies, racism (Donald Trump called coronavirus the "Chinese Virus") prompting some observers to declare that racism is detrimental to global solidarity amid COVID-19 battle, xenophobia, prejudice, discrimination, manipulation, frauds, spreading misinformation, conspiracy theories, etc.

As painful as COVID-19 is, people should take it in their stride as much as possible. The Qur'an affirms: "...And it may be that you dislike a thing while it is good for you, and it may be that you love a thing while it is evil for you, and Allah knows, while you do not know" (al-Baqarah, 216).