

# COVID-19 and the sacredness of human life

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While COVID-19 is wreaking havoc across the globe, one thing is becoming increasingly clear. People are getting ever more considerate and caring. Global compassion and cooperation levels are reaching an all-time high. If the situation can be sustained in the future, when better times arrive again, this pandemic will not be regarded as all doom and gloom.

People are beginning to show the extent and power of their inborn capacities. They are becoming genuinely human. Their coming-of-age made them value their lives and their being humans as greatest assets. It made them see and appreciate the most important things in life.

Some people became extra religious, others extra "themselves". Regardless, they all became better. Religion is as much human and natural, as being human and natural is religious. The two spectrums have far more in common than that which divides them.

Thus, if the COVID-19 scourge is religion, culture and race-blind, so should be humankind's response to it. This is a transnational battle for humankind and the earth. Any strategy short of this outlook will mean that COVID-19 will eventually win and man will lose. At best, the battle is set to be long and hard, straining humankind's resources to the breaking point.

The most conspicuous thing the world seems to be speaking with one voice about is the sacredness of human life. Human wellbeing and safety top the agenda of each and every country. Everything else takes a back seat.

This is yet another issue where both spirituality and temporality unite, and where religions and secular systems get together and cooperate. In principle, they are unanimous that every person enjoys the inherent right to life, which must be protected by law. Violating that right results in the most indictable offences.

That is why in Islam, by way of illustration, killing an innocent person is comparable to killing all mankind, and saving a person is comparable to saving all mankind (al-Ma'idah, 32). It is noteworthy that the word used here is *nafs* (human soul). It means that the matter in this context is purely humanist. It has nothing to do with religious affiliations, or with people being Muslims or something else.

### **"Trust in Allah, but tie the camel first"**

Of course it is only Almighty God who gives and takes life, but man in his capacity as God's vicegerent on earth is entrusted to enjoy as well as preserve that heavenly gift. Man's entire life striving is to revolve around that thrust. Human culture and civilization is to be but human wellbeing and human life-centric.

Hence, preservation of life is one of the fundamental objectives of Islam and its Shari'ah (Law). It is a goal of everything that carries the adjective "Islamic".

It is true that God as the Creator and Lord of the universe is in charge of human and earth's destinies. However, Muslims are bidden to resourcefully oscillate "between one decree of God and another", as well as to "trust in Allah, but tie the camel first".

The Qur'an sums up the matter by saying: "Then when you have taken a decision, put your trust in Allah" (Alu 'Imran, 159). There is a causal relationship between events and things. The vicegerent on earth must respect it most of all. In his quest for happiness in both worlds, man is at once a free and fated agent.

People must do whatever is necessary to optimize the relationship between causes and effects, and between actions and reactions. There is nothing in this (in righteous epistemology, science and technology) that is unreligious, or that challenges the authority of God. On the contrary, being a passivist or an extreme fatalist, is unreligious. It defies both the religious and common sense.

To stand up to the pandemic in the name, and with the help, of God, mobilising the powers of Heaven and earth, and such as are under the jurisdiction of man on earth and those of the spiritual forces in Heaven, is a praiseworthy attitude.

In opposition, to do nothing - or just little, which will be far below the intrinsic capacities of man - and to keep scratching the head about whether the pandemic is a mere curse, punishment, or trial, and that only prayers, plus a supernatural intervention, will help, is a blameworthy attitude.

The COVID-19 pandemic is primarily an earthly problem. It unfolds right on man's home turf. Man, therefore, must take charge and face it most valiantly, displaying in the process the subtle interplays between his freedom and his predestination, between his dependence and his independence, between his strengths and his weaknesses, and between his built-in mortality and looked-for eternity in Heaven.

### **Practical examples**

That explains, as a small digression, why prophet Yusuf (Joseph) accepted to cooperate with a non-believing king of Egypt (many claim, including the Bible, that he was a Pharaoh, but the Qur'an as a teacher and a reference that corrects history and other references, is explicit that he wasn't).

Yusuf did so purely on the grounds that the welfare and sheer existence of people - in Egypt and beyond - were on the line. He as a prophet of God was expected to do something about it more than

anybody else. The condition transcended the levels of religiosity and nationality, so Yusuf acted accordingly.

Preaching pure religion and religious values was reserved for different circumstances, like with the two young men who happened to go to prison at the same time as Yusuf. According to some commentators of the Qur'an, Yusuf's conversations with the king are devoid of a conspicuous religious sentiment because doing so would have been out-of-place and yet, perhaps, misunderstood by the king under the given circumstances. As an example, Yusuf did not say distinctly "if God wills" when talking about the future events, which under normal conditions would be strange for a believer.

Why to get overinvolved in ineffective pursuits - and so, get hindered - when improving people's wellbeing and saving their lives proved most critical? About the former, nothing much could have been done, whereas the latter for the most part depended on Yusuf's abilities and commitment.

It is worthwhile, furthermore, to compare Yusuf's spiritually loaded conversations with his family members, who were his coreligionists, with his worldly and nonspiritual, as it were, conversations at the royal court where he functioned as the treasurer and inspector of Egypt's storage chambers. Concerning the latter, Yusuf talked only in ways that appealed to the people's innate principles and values.

Yusuf let his actions and integrity do the talking. They were the language everybody understood, and were the values everybody appreciated. They denoted universal standards, corresponding to the universal nature of the problem he helped to solve.

Similarly, when Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) migrated from Makkah to Madinah, he established the first and exemplary Islamic state. At the outset, it was a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society *par excellence*. The fundamental human rights of the members of each religious and

ethnic group were enshrined in the Constitution of Madinah as the first written statute in history.

The first sentence in the Constitution emphasized that all groups in Madinah - Muslims and non-Muslims - constituted one nation: Ummah (community). Which means that equality and brotherhood in humanity are as important as those that run along the religious lines. They are to be pursued simultaneously and together. If attempted separately, or at the expense of each other, neither will be fully realized. They will persistently hold each other back.

The notions of universalism and inclusiveness, when it comes to honouring people's basic rights, have been demonstrated time and again throughout the history of Islamic civilization, especially following Muslims' victorious entries into the leading international religious and cultural centres, such as Jerusalem, Damascus and Constantinople (Istanbul).

It follows that people should utilize the COVID-19 pandemic to strengthen their perceptions and appreciation of human life. This should be done as part of an emerging total ethos, encompassing and deeply influencing the spheres of philosophy (theory), education, legislation and, most importantly, implementation. The ethos should be adopted and promoted due to principle rather than expediency.

A hint at how important this new culture will be and that realizing it is not a farfetched prospect, is presented by the fact that the pandemic has brought to an end all largescale human hostilities, and have toned down all serious political quarrels. All of a sudden, people realized that those were secondary issues, and that there were more important problems to worry about.

Towards this end are U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' continuous calls for an immediate cease-fire in conflicts around the world, and also for an end to trade wars and economic sanctions, so that people could concentrate on tackling the COVID-19 pandemic.

## "Playing God"

As a consequence, how paradoxical it is that before the pandemic, people in many countries were ruthlessly oppressing and taking the lives of each other, while the rest of the world kept watching and even siding with and supporting certain groups (e.g. in Syria, Yemen, Palestine, Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Kashmir, India, China, etc.). Then, after the eruption of the pandemic, the whole world started to preach universal peace, values and safety. Incessant haranguing that saving human lives must take priority over everything else, could be heard and seen everywhere.

The questions that impose themselves are: What to do after the COVID-19 pandemic? Will people return to their old ways, becoming hypocrites and trampling over their religions and humanness? Will personal and political interests prevail over the collective and broader ones? Or will people continue on their journeys of affirming the humanness of man and the inviolability of human life and dignity?

In any case, if people revert to their old bad habits - which is most likely - that will spell a modern and perhaps most depraved version of "playing God". It will signify a pretentious act of "giving life and causing death".

According to it, people will frantically endeavour to save lives during pandemics, crises, and whenever they so wanted and so was in their interests ("giving life"). They will conceitedly believe that as "super-humans" they can easily cope with everything worldly and otherworldly forces might throw at them. For many, seeking human immortality will also be in the offing.

On the other hand, such people will likewise take lives mercilessly through wars, military annexations, oppression, tyranny, economic sanctions, etc., and whenever they so wanted and so was in their interests ("causing death").

This vividly evokes the case of king Namrud who during the time of prophet Ibrahim claimed to be a god himself. On account of Almighty God giving him power and kingship, testing him thereby, Namrud, having failed the test, repudiated Ibrahim and arrogantly argued with him.

"When Ibrahim said: "My Lord is the one who gives life and causes death," he said, "I give life and cause death" (al-Baqarah, 258). Namrud is said to have "substantiated" his claim by bringing forth some of his prisoners, whose lives were "at his mercy". He then killed some of them ("causing death"), and set others free ("giving life").

People's fight for preserving human lives must intensify and continue. After the pandemic, it needs to take on a different dimension. All life sectors, in particular where lives are often needlessly and carelessly lost, should attract as much focus as the pandemic does now.

This is the case because life is the same during and after the pandemic. Its preciousness and sacredness are no less important after the pandemic as they are during it. Undeniably, there is nothing in economic, political and social terms that is worth risking a single human life.

### **The case of Malaysia**

We in Malaysia, for example, keep observing and counting on a daily basis COVID-19 cases and deaths (just as the rest of the world in their own countries do). We do so with a great deal of sadness and concern. Reports of new fatalities are accompanied by an instant outpouring of grief, the feeling of empathy for the families affected - and by additional fear.

I believe that almost everyone at any point of time knows the approximate number of cases and deaths. Many people lose sleep over the matter, and are depressed. The situation could yet turn stressful on mental health.

As of today (April 18, 2020), Malaysia has 5,305 confirmed cases, with 88 deaths.

However, I also believe that not many people know - let alone seriously worry or get depressed - that in Malaysia, "road accident death rate is the third highest in Asia and matches those of some African countries. Malaysia registered a death rate of 23 per 100,000 population. Based on these statistics against the estimated population of 30 million, 7,000 to 8,000 people in the country die on the roads every year." "The World Health Organisation's 2013 statistics stated that Malaysia was among the emerging countries with the riskiest roads after Thailand and South Africa" (<https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/letters/2019/09/518489/keeping-death-rate-check>).

Nor do many people know and lose sleep over the fact that "the (Malaysian) Occupational Safety and Health Department's (DOSH) statistics recorded 169 deaths and 3,911 accidents in the construction sector for 2018" (<https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/02/565830/construction-related-deaths-and-injuries-alarming>).

Nor do many people know and feel alarmed by the statistics according to which the number of dengue cases in Malaysia in 2019 was the highest ever recorded. There were 119,198 cases, with 162 deaths. During the last six years, there were 1,274 dengue-related deaths. (<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2019/12/01/number-of-dengue-cases-set-to-hit-all-time-high>).

The point here is that efforts for saving, preserving and promoting the sacredness of human life must spread across all life sectors. Doing so during the COVID-19 pandemic - as critical and nerve-wracking as it is - should merely be part of a bigger and perennial struggle. Unfortunate episodes, such as COVID-19, should strengthen people's resolve to value and preserve the biggest divine gifts even more.



That means that the intensity and scale of the strategies intended to combat COVID-19 should be replicated in other critical life segments as well. We should hear, for instance, about serious and sincere concerns to have better and safer roads, better traffic laws and regulations, better and more efficient implementation of such laws and regulations, better education, more enlightened and responsible citizens, better and cleaner man-made and natural surroundings, better building codes, safer and healthier work and living environments, etc.

All those plans and strategies are as important as those specifically meant for COVID-19. They all aim to save and preserve in different ways the same thing: human life. They all should be treated in the same way.

Based on the prevalent statistics, one can imagine how many lives could be saved on the roads, at work, and at home, endangered by preventable accidents, disasters and some man-exacerbated diseases, if people across the board - individually and institutionally - were more truthful, more earnest, and more responsible. If they were more honest to themselves, their religious beliefs and their consciousness, things would be different.

Indeed, a life saved during COVID-19 is by no means more valuable than a life saved on a road, at a construction site, at home from dengue fever, etc. If people only did justice to human life and regarded it universally as most precious and most sacred, there will be not only more, but also better quality lives all around us.

Let the COVID-19 pandemic be a lesson and eye-opener. Let people's humanity and the sacredness of their lives be the winners in this unfortunate chapter of history.