

RESPONDING TO COVID-19 PANDEMICS AND AFFLICTIONS: A SUFI PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to approach the Covid 19 pandemic from the vantage point of the Sufi tradition which is the spiritual dimension of Islam. Based on the guidance of the Qur'ān and the Prophetic examples, Sufis have contributed to the Islamic spiritual and psychological domains to the extent that their science, Tasawwuf, itself was termed by them Psychology, *'ilm al-nafs*. Utilizing some of the basics of their tradition and employing analytic methodology accompanied by insights from semantics, philosophy, psychology, and history, the paper endeavours to present the Sufi approach to pandemics in simple language. The aim is to draw attention to this usually ignored approach in the context of this pandemic and to highlight some of what, I believe to be useful means of solace for the modern man who is caught between the rim and axis of this affliction. It also can provide him with some necessary inspiration as to how to free himself from depression and be optimistic, especially in times of pandemics and afflictions. The paper also seeks to remind the reader of the importance of the worldview one holds in any discussion related to human life and cosmic events.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic; Divine mercy; *ibtālā'*; *tawbah*; Islamic worldview.

Khulasah

Makalah ini merupakan satu usaha membincangkan pandemik COVID-19 dari sudut pandang tradisi sufi yang merupakan dimensi kerohanian Islam. Berdasarkan panduan al-Qur'an dan teladan Nabawi, para ahli sufi telah menyumbang kepada lingkup kerohanian dan psikologi sehinggakan disiplin ilmu mereka iaitu Tasawwuf itu sendiri digelar sebagai psikologi atau *'ilm al-nafs*. Dengan menggunakan beberapa asas tradisi sufi serta mengaplikasikan metodologi analitik yang disertai dengan penelitian semantik, falsafah, psikologi dan sejarah, makalah ini bertujuan membentangkan pendekatan sufi terhadap pandemik melalui bahasa yang mudah. Matlamatnya adalah untuk menarik perhatian kepada pendekatan yang biasanya diabaikan ini dalam konteks pandemik serta dalam masa yang sama untuk menyerlahkan beberapa perkara yang dipercayai merupakan kaedah berguna untuk mensejahterakan manusia moden yang terperangkap dalam penderitaan ini. Ia juga dapat memberi inspirasi kepada mereka yang memerlukan bantuan tentang bagaimana membebaskan diri daripada kemurungan serta bersikap optimistik terutama sewaktu wabak dan penderitaan berlaku. Makalah ini juga bertujuan menjelaskan kepentingan pandangan alam yang dipegang oleh seseorang dalam sebarang perbincangan berkenaan kehidupan manusia dan kejadian alam ini.

Kata kunci: Pandemik COVID-19; rahmat; ujian; taubat; pandangan alam Islam.

Introduction

Coronavirus disease 2019, popularly known as Covid-19, is seen by the majority of people throughout the world as a unique type of pandemic; one that humanity had not witnessed in recent history. Perhaps in the known history of mankind, no pandemic perpetuated such a "comprehensive change in the lives of individuals and communities" the way this one did. Conspiracy theories

and allegations of all kinds regarding its emergence or creation and then proliferation, and the involvement of scientists, politicians, pharmaceutical companies, and business enterprises continue to emerge, leaving the masses in a state of perplexity and fear. Until a few months ago, the virus, with its various and continuing mutations, had left scientists and researchers in the medical field unsettled and groping for a sure footing regarding its unexpected nature and behaviour. All praise be to God that feeling of uneasiness has subsided giving room to a sense of control and understanding.

The negative impact of the pandemic, through its continuing variations, stretched indiscriminately to all walks of life; education, health, business, agriculture, industry of all kinds, and activities of all types. During various phases of the pandemic, when governments were unable to respond to the situation following the expectations of the public, life became intolerable for many people. While some opted for suicide, many others lost faith in life and began questioning rather, questioning the meaning of life a matter, many people in the so-called developed part of the world seem to have become indifferent to. Several webinars, conferences, and discussion forums were organized. Nevertheless, despite the new normal with which people learned to familiarize themselves to, the situation remained unpredictable in its process and progress. Amid all this one thing remained certain; life had changed, face masks had become the hallmark, and human beings were somehow convinced that freedom was certainly not absolute; and that there were invisible forces at work controlling their life and influencing their destiny.

However, this change is not without its positive side too. People learned to appreciate and subsequently revive many forgotten human values and virtues. They began to question the materialistic approach to life and the

extremely individualistic philosophies and ways of life. They also seriously started questioning the atheistic trend of "this worldliness", reconsidering the spiritual meaning of life, which had largely been ignored, marginalized, and even written off by the advent of modernism and secularization of human life. It is in this polarized atmosphere and eye-opening ambience that this paper endeavours to look at Covid 19 – and through it at pandemics in general – from a Sufi perspective, which is the spiritual dimension of religious life.

I will begin by briefly explaining what I mean here by the "Sufi perspective", and its significance. I hope that the paper will be able to identify some psycho-spiritual benefits that emerge from the Sufi perspective which might contribute to the development of a constructive and positive attitude towards not only pandemics, rather all forms of calamities as well. The paper will also demonstrate how pandemics, seen from a Sufi lens, can be viewed as a source of enhancing the human self by returning to God, the real source of happiness and guidance.

The Sufi Perspective

What then, is the Sufi perspective? A clear understanding of this perspective is vital for a sound appreciation of its possible impact and contribution within our present context. At the very outset, it must be pointed out that many scholars from outside the Sufi tradition still approach *Taşawwuf* as an independent system of philosophy or a current of Gnosticism or mysticism that grew and proliferated in Muslim societies without necessarily being an aspect of the religion of Islam. *Taşawwuf* is nothing of that sort; it is not mysticism or a kind of spirituality the way one witness in other religions or even in some modern forms of pseudo-spiritualities such

as the James Jones'¹ phenomena or those of psychopaths like David Koresh² or Osho³.

Contrary to that, *Taşawwuf* is an applied science that concerns itself with the inner dimension of Islam or the spiritual depth of Islam known as *Ihsān*, and as such, it is an integral part of Islam. No understanding of Islam is complete or authentic when this part is ignored. It is the science that deals with the duties of the hearts (*a'māl al-qulūb*), which constitute the center of the outward practices of Islam with which *Fiqh* is concerned. *Fiqh* and *Taşawwuf* together joined with '*Aqīdah* (creed or the science of faith) constitute the religion of Islam in theory and practice, in all their dimensions. While *Fiqh* and '*Aqīdah* are theoretic in the sense that they both answer the "what" question, i.e. what do you believe or do, *Taşawwuf* remains both theoretical and practical in that it answers the 'what' and also the 'how' question that is, how to live the spiritual dimensions in real life and to realize Islam in one's self.

Taşawwuf as theory highlights the way and explains it to the wayfarer and as practice provides practical

¹ James Warren Jones (1931-78), founder of the People's Temple in Indiana, USA in 1950s; he moved to Jonestown, Guyana in 1976, where in 1978, he committed suicide with his nine hundred and thirteen American followers by self-administered cyanide poisoning. See Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence* (London: Vintage, 2015), 308.

² An American Christian cultic leader (d. 1993). For more on him see *Memories of the Branch Davidians: The Autobiography of David Koresh's Mother* by Bonnie Haldeman as told to Catherine Wessinger (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007).

³ Acharya Rajneesh (d. 1990) from India, popularly known as "Osho". He was also known as Rajani Swami. He founded a new anti-traditional popular religious movement; migrated to the United States and became popular for his so called spirituality. He was forced to return to India owing to allegations of moral and financial corruption. See Judith M. Fox, *Osho Rajneesh* (USA: Signature Books Publishing, 2000).

guidance and training to transform the human self through the path of realization. Sufis, those who practice *Ṭaṣawwuf* or are the followers of the spiritual path, uphold this tripartite understanding of Islam as its true representation, as has been confirmed by their great authorities throughout the ages. By virtue of concentrating on the *Ihsān* dimension of Islam, Sufis developed, earlier in time, a complete system of intellectual and spiritual theories for understanding the human psyche and personality as well as contemplative and devotional practices that assist in transforming the self to higher realms.

With these transformational practices, their foundational concepts, and the subsequent insights, *Ṭaṣawwuf* has emerged, and rightly so, as a science of applied ethics and spirituality within Islam. You may call it the science of psycho-spirituality, or even Islamic psychology.⁴ It guides individual souls, which seek

⁴ Literary recordings of these perspectives, which form one aspect of Sufi dynamics, and represent a very high stage in the development of Islamic Spiritual quest, started, according to the popular view, by the beginning of the third/ninth century. Ḥārith bin Asad al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857) may be considered the possible pioneer in this regard. However, we have enough evidence to challenge this popular conviction. One of the earliest Sufis who has been identified with some innovative works in this area could be Abū 'Āṣim al-Antākī (d. 220/835 or 239/853). He accompanied the Syrian Sufi, Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī (d. 215/830) and most probably his disciple. According to al-Qushayrī, al-Dārānī has called al-Antākī "the spy of the hearts". Two titles from al-Antākī's lost works are of great importance for those interested in exploring the development of early Sufi contributions to psychology. One is *Dawā' dā' al-Qulūb* (Medicine for the disease of the Heart) and the other is *Kitāb al-Shubuhāt* (Book of Confusions). A book, thought to be written by al-Muḥāsibī, may well have been written by al-Antākī according to some modern scholars. If this is established, it will not come as a surprise. Al-Muḥāsibī, who is another important personality in the area of Islamic psychology, has been his disciple. Al-Muḥāsibī's numerous works on psychology, especially on anxiety and

proximity to God, through faithful devotions and practices based on love, grace, compassion, thankfulness, patience, and a spirit of gratitude.

Following the example of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the lessons from the lives of the companions, training of wayfarers and spiritual aspirants, who longed for achieving spiritual excellence and sought proximity to God, was well underway in an organized manner from the time of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) and his disciples.⁵ The experience that Sufis gained through their experiences obviously has been one of the important sources for their achievements in the field of spiritual-psychology and moral philosophy, in addition to the scriptural sources of Islam and the traditions of the period of the companions (*Ṣahāba*) and the earlier generation of successors (*Tābi'ūn*). They developed different perspectives to deal with different internal, psychological, spiritual, and even

overcoming related diseases have been remarkable even by our modern standards. His place among the Sufis themselves is very prominent; he has been a prolific writer at that early period of *Taṣawwuf*. In addition to him, we also have Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz, (d. 286/899) al-Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 298/910) and al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 295/905), to name some of those who have produced written works. Most of the literary treasures, which belonged to the Sufis of the early period have been lost or are hitherto unidentified. Sufi hagiographies such as those by al-Kalabādhī, al-Makkī, al-Tūsī, al-Qushayrī, al-Hajwīrī and al-Iṣfahānī, however, provide us with enough aphorisms and sayings of these masters from the time of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī to help in the reconstruction of this aspect of Sufi history.

⁵ Abū Tālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996) in his *Qūt al-Qulūb*, the third of the three important early Sufi classics, mentions al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī as the 'father' of the science of *Taṣawwuf*. See Abū Tālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-Qulūb*, 'Āṣim Ibrāhīm al-Kayālī (ed.) (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 2005), 1/258.

The other two works are Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj al-Tūsī's *al-Luma'* and Abū Bakr al-Kalabādhī's *al-Ta'arruf*. Al-Baṣrī's disciple 'Abd al-Wāḥid bin Zayd is believed to be the first to build a sufi lodge in 'Abbādān in the second/eighth century.

external aspects of human life. This rendered them into the much-desired psychiatrist, who can provide counselling on matters of anxiety, mental health, and psychic disorders, in addition to their original engagement with spiritual counselling, training, and their personal devotional practices. These concepts and ideas about human personality and well-being developed by the Sufis, and which are also intrinsically connected to the inner dimension of Islam and a Muslim's spiritual quest, are what I mean here by the Sufi perspective.

If this is clear, then it follows that the Sufi perspective represents the Islamic perspective. It is thus possible to replace the phrase "Sufi perspective" with the alternative phrase "Islamic Perspective". I chose the first, however, to remind the reader of the fact that, it is the Sufis who are the representatives of these dimensions in Islam. Therefore, the phrase "Sufi perspective" simply means the Islamic perspective as articulated by the Sufis, and both would be interchangeably used in the context of this paper. This perspective rests on the following ideas:

1. The primary sources of Islam are the *Qur'ān* and the *Sunnah* (teachings and practical examples of the Prophet Muhammad [PBUH])
2. The traditions of the early generations of Muslims
3. *Kashf* and *Ilhām*: Spiritual intuitions of different ways and means
4. Experimental discoveries of Sufis themselves through their own realizations of psychological realities and spiritual transformation, or through the experiential knowledge they gained by training their disciples.

As one can see, this perspective enjoys a great deal of foundational authority and perhaps that is the reason why it spread far and wide in Muslim lands and continues to enjoy immense respect among the masses.

The Islamic Worldview as the Starting Point

Exploring the Sufi perspective must start with a reference to the Islamic worldview, which is the foundational block for all discussions under the umbrella of Islam. The Islamicity of any opinion, theory, concept, perspective, or philosophy rests on this. It follows that a real Sufi approach to "Covid-19", or to any pandemic or calamity for that matter, must start here as well.

The most important characteristic of the Islamic worldview is that it is theistic. It is founded upon the belief in God, the creator and the sustainer of the universe. Everything is created and governed by Him. He saw it wise that there should be a Divine order⁶ or system to which everything in the universe submits.⁷ The Qur'ān declares, "Surely your Lord is none other than Allah who created the heavens and the earth in six days, and then ascended His Throne, who causes the night to cover the day and then the day swiftly pursues the night, who created the sun and the moon and the stars making them all subservient to His command. Lo! His is the creation and He is the command. Blessed is Allah, the Lord of the whole Universe" (7: 54).

Commenting on the word 'command', Mawdūdī says, "God is not merely the sole creator but also the only One who commands and governs. It is not true to imagine

⁶ Alluded to in the Qur'ān as *Sunnat Allāh*, which translates as Allah's System or Allah's way. See verses, 35: 43, and 48: 23. The Qur'ān refers to this Divine system as *Taqdīr*. See the Qur'ān 36: 37-38, where Allah says "And the night is another Sign for them. We strip the day from it and they become plunged in darkness. The sun is running its course to its appointed place. That is the ordaining of the All-Mighty, the All-Knowing". Verse 40 states "neither does it lie in the sun's power to overtake the moon, nor can the night outstrip the day. All glide along, each in its own orbit."

⁷ See for example the Holy Qur'ān 25: 1-2 and 41: 9-12. The Qur'ān is replete with verses referring to Allah's sovereignty over His creation. There is hardly any chapter of the Qur'ān which does not allude to this pillar of Muslim faith.

that after creating He has detached Himself from His creation, leaving it to the care of others who might rule over it as they please".⁸ Thus, nothing stands outside the folds of God's governance and control no matter how evil it might appear to be.⁹

Pandemics are Part of the Divine System

When we approach pandemics based on this worldview, we have to pay attention to some basic principles which constitute the framework for analysing any event. They are:

1. Pandemics are part of the Divine system.
2. Divine mercy is a cosmic power, and it precedes, rather overcomes, and precedes Divine wrath.
3. They are afflictions and trials that are found or exist for more than one reason, determined by God's wisdom.

This faith entails an important ontological principle that nothing takes place in the universe without being a part of the Divine order, and naturally, pandemics are not excluded.

However, there is no word in the Qur'ān, that explicitly and exclusively refers to pandemics in the sense we understand them today. There are, nevertheless, a few key terms that can include pandemics as one of its kinds such as the word 'trial' or 'test' (*balā'*, *ibtilā'*, *imtiḥān*), calamity, misfortune, death, and disaster (*muṣībah*). Some terms are closely linked to these meanings and their various manifestations; terms such as *fitna*, (trial, temptation, social calamity), *'adhāb* (chastisement, pain,

⁸ Sayyid Abul A'lā Mawdūdī, *Towards Understanding the Qur'an: Abridged version of Tafhīm al-Qur'ān*, translated and edited by Zafar Ishaq Ansari (Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 2006/1427), 318.

⁹ This by the way is one of the sharpest distinctions between an Islamic worldview and a secular worldview.

punishment), and *sharr*. They are defined according to their contexts in the Qur'ān and have many overlapping connotations.

Pandemics are trials, tests that manifest in many events or incidents that are usually considered unpleasant, painful, perhaps instances of extreme chastisements. They include bitter experiences of death, loss of property and wealth, loss of family and friends, and a state of fear, helplessness, and hopelessness. Considering these characteristics, we can identify two of those Qur'ānic terms as being the most appropriate with immediate relevance to be used in the context of pandemics: *'adhāb* and *muṣībah*. Although *balā'* can be used interchangeably with the other two terms, this term in many instances was not used in the sense of pain or unpleasant chastisements as we shall see below.

As we know, diversity had been declared as one of the purposes of creation and the Qur'ān makes *balā'* a logical necessity. Verse 5: 48 proclaims "...And had God willed, He would have made you one community, but [He willed otherwise], that He might try you in that which He has given you. So, vie with one another in good deeds...". This necessity is such a recurring theme in the Qur'ān that it makes clear the fact that 'trial' is a reality of life decreed by God with a purpose. In the context of this verse "the existence of different religions is a trial to distinguish the faithful from those who disbelieve".¹⁰ *Balā'* here like in many other usages of the Qur'ān does not necessarily mean inflicting pain in the forms we have mentioned above. Here 'to test' would perhaps be the most

¹⁰ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lumbard & Mohammed Rustom eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 301.

appropriate translation for the term. Verses 6: 165;¹¹ 67: 1-2¹² of the Qur'ān for instance belong to this category. But the term *balā'* is categorical in referring to pandemics in 2: 155-156 where Allah says, "and we will indeed test you with something of fear and hunger, and loss of wealth, souls, and fruits; and give glad tidings to the patient, who, when an affliction befalls them say "truly we are God's, and unto Him, we return". As can be seen here, this verse of the Qur'ān qualifies as the umbrella that facilitates discussing the covid-19 or pandemics in general. The example given in this verse for the types of trials or afflictions meets our definition above.

Types of Afflictions

Not much scholarship will be needed to identify from the semantics of these Qur'ānic terms that there can be two types of trials or tests, each with its subdivisions. The first comes as the consequence of human transgressions and unlawful behaviour within the framework of the ultimate Divine system, and the other is ordained primarily by God as tests of the spiritual qualities of His faithful servants. In both cases, God is the ultimate source. "Should Allah touch you with affliction, there is none to remove it but He; and should He touch you with Good, He has the power to do everything. He has the supreme hold over His servants. He is All-Wise, All-Aware".¹³

¹¹ "He it is Who appointed you vicegerents upon the earth and raised some of you by degrees above others, that He may try you in that which He has given you. Truly thy Lord is Swift in retribution, and truly He is Forgiving, Merciful."

¹² "Blessed is He in Whose Hand lies sovereignty, and He is Powerful over all things, Who created death and life that He may try you as to which of you is most virtuous in deed, and He is the Mighty, the Forgiving."

¹³ The Qur'ān 6: 17-18.

Many quotations from the Qur'ān can be cited for authenticating these two kinds of trials,¹⁴ which confirm the concept of the Divine order (*Sunnat Allāh*) of the universe and God's absolute sovereignty over His creatures. 7: 54 of the Qur'ān, which I cited earlier, and many others such as 7: 141, 05: 48; 03: 186, 02: 155, and 11: 7 are of great significance in this context. What emerges from the notion of the absolute sovereignty of God is the fact that God is Omniscient, Omnipotent, and aware of everything, nothing is out of His ultimate plan and control.¹⁵

Muslim intellectual history has preserved those classical debates that engaged theologians and philosophers around the nuances, semantics, and theological implications of these verses. One of the thorniest questions has been 'how to reconcile the presence of evil and suffering in the world with faith in the omniscience and all-encompassing mercy of God?' Theological and philosophical discussions of the problem of "theodicy" constitute the core contribution of their champions in all religions throughout the ages.

¹⁴ The Qur'ān 30: 41 is highly revealing with regard to the first kind, while 2: 155 comes at the forefront of the second meaning. It must however, be remembered that there are various internal varieties under the second one in accordance with the purpose of the trial as the contexts of each reveals.

¹⁵ "Praise be to God, unto Whom belongs whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is on the earth. His is the praise in the Hereafter, and He is the Wise, the Aware. He knows that which enters the earth and that which issues therefrom, that which descends from Heaven and that which ascends thereto. And He is the Merciful, the Forgiving. Those who disbelieve say, "The Hour will never come upon us". Say, "Nay! By my Lord, by the Knower of the Unseen, it will surely come unto you." Not a mote's weight evades Him in the heavens or on the earth, nor smaller than that, nor larger, but that it is in a clear Book." (34: 1-3); "Does He Who created not know? He is the Subtle, the Aware" (67: 14); "He knows the treachery of eyes and that which breasts conceal." (40: 19).

Notwithstanding any explanation given, the existence of evil and suffering will remain a mystery and a challenge to human reason. What suffices us here is to take note of the fact that absolutely nothing takes place in the universe without Divine decree, and as such, pandemics cannot in any way, be detached from God's providence. The mysterious nature of the cosmos, which continues to unveil itself more and more with the development of science itself, compels man to be humbler and to surrender to the religious view of the world.

If the principle of Divine providence is adhered to and established, it becomes logically understandable that the approach and response to pandemics by those who subscribe to it would be fundamentally different from the one adopted by those who do not. Consequently, we will have two broad opposing attitudes; one religious, the other secular. Between them are many irreligious or anti-religious trends, which will have no impact on this dual classification. Atheism, agnosticism, indifferentism, individualism, and many others in this line of thinking are comfortably secular and there can be no correspondence between them and the religious view, as the Islamic understanding of religion reveals.¹⁶

Divine Mercy as a Cosmic Power

Pandemics are then part of the Divine system and remain a mystery that human reason has to struggle with. However, there is another important cosmic principle, which underlies everything and precedes all else in the Divine system of Governance. That is the principle of Divine Mercy, which cannot be bypassed or ignored in any

¹⁶ I would like to refer here to a highly advertised lecture delivered by Sherman Jackson entitled "Islamic Reform and the Islamic Secular" delivered on line on December 01, 2021. It was hosted by the College of Islamic studies at HBKU, in Doha – Qatar. I do not know what the qualifier 'Islamic' has to do here with the qualified 'Secular'.

analysis of the cosmic order or human behaviour. The Qur'ān declares, "God has written Mercy upon Himself" (6: 12). The *ḥadīth* of the Prophet (PBUH) explains its cosmic significance and place in the Divine system and says; "when God decreed the creation, He wrote on His throne "my mercy precedes my wrath."¹⁷ More revealing is the version reported by Imām Muslim "My mercy supersedes my wrath"¹⁸ and even more revealing in our context here is the Qur'ānic statement in 7:156 which states, "My mercy encompasses all things."

The attribute of mercy is the one that believers have been asked to remember Allah with, at the beginning of all acts of goodness. Each chapter of the Qur'ān, except the ninth one, begins with the verse *Bismillāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm* (In the name of Allah, the Infinitely Merciful and the Compassionate). The preference of this name over the others can be clearly inferred from the Qur'ānic verse 17: 110 which says, "Say to them (O prophet!): Call upon Him as Allah or call upon Him as *al-Raḥmān*; call him by whichever name you will, all His names are beautiful". Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) has guided Muslims to begin any meaningful work with the remembrance of Allah's mercy through the recitation of the above formula *Bismillāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*.¹⁹

Philosophy of *Innā lillāh*

For those who question the wisdom behind the existence of evil or are perplexed by their inability to reconcile

¹⁷ Muḥammad bin Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, ed. Muḥammad Zuhayr bin Nāṣir (Beirut: Dār Ṭawq al-Najāt, 1422AH), 9/160. This *ḥadīth* has been narrated by the companion Abū Hurayrah.

¹⁸ Muslim bin Ḥajjāj, *al-Musnad al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, ed. Muḥammad Fu'ād 'Abd al-Bāqī (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.), 4/2107.

¹⁹ The first *sūrah* (chapter) of the Qur'ān is very indicative in our context. It refers to Allah through four attributes: Lord of the worlds, Infinitely Merciful, Intimately Merciful, and Master of the Day of Judgment.

divine mercy with pandemics and trials, the Sufi approach could provide some useful insights that present calamities and trials as one of the ways of how divine mercy works. Paraphrasing John Hick, I will say, God's grace has many names, and the forms of its manifestations are manifold.

Since the parameters of Sufi theorization are based essentially on the Qur'ān and the tradition of the prophet (PBUH), we will try to get closer to these two primary sources to decipher the reality of the possibility of trials being a form of mercy.

Here, I will take the reader back to the Qur'ān 2: 156; at the end of verse 156 it says of those believers who are patient "when an affliction befalls them, they say, 'Truly we are God's and unto Him, we return'". This phrase *innā lillāhi wa innā ilayhi rāji'un* is the *mantra* that the Qur'ān teaches its faithful followers to remember whenever they face a calamity, trial, or any affliction. It is a spontaneous and almost immediate response a Muslim recites when he hears about the death of a person for instance. This formula is part of Muslim culture throughout the world. Naqshbandīs (one of the spiritual orders in the Muslim world) throughout the world readmit and reconfirm their faith in this by stating "O God! We have prepared (*a'dadnā*) for every affliction *innā lillāh*."²⁰

In this regard, it would seem appropriate to invite the reader to ponder over a group of verses that expound on the theme of returning to God:

- i. "And We will indeed test you with something of fear and hunger, and loss of wealth, souls, and fruits; and give glad tidings to the patient, who, when an affliction befalls them say, "truly we are God's, and unto Him,

²⁰ Muḥammad Bahā' al-Dīn al-Naqshbandī, *al-Wird al-Naqshbandī*, edited with commentary by Muḥammad Amīn al-Kurdī with an epilogue by Najm al-Dīn al-Kurdī (Cairo: Dār al-Muṣṭafa, 1424/2003), 42.

we return. They are those upon whom come the blessings from their Lord, and compassion, and they are those who are rightly guided." (2:155-157)

ii. "You will surely be tried in your wealth and your souls, and you shall hear much hurt from those who were given the book before you, and from those who are idolaters. But if you are pertinent and reverent, then that is indeed a course worthy of resolve." (3: 186).

iii. "And Moses chose seventy men from his people for Our meeting. And when the earthquake seized them, he said, "My Lord! Hadst Thou willed, thou wouldst have destroyed them and me beforehand. Wilt thou destroy us for that which the fools among us have done? It is naught but Thy trial, whereby thou leadest astray whomsoever thou wilt and guidest whomsoever thou wilt. Thou art our protector, so forgive us and have mercy upon us, and thou art the best of forgivers! And prescribe good for us in the life of this world, and in the hereafter; truly we have turned unto thee." He said, "I cause my punishment to smite whomsoever I will, though My Mercy encompasses all things. I shall prescribe it for those who are reverent, and give alms, and those who believe in Our signs." (7:155-156)

In these verses, we are exposed to real cases of suffering and typical examples of various types of afflictions that man individually or collectively become subjected to. These verses are introducing the basic theological foundations, principles, and characteristics, which are necessary to develop a wholesome perception of

a pandemic. We can enumerate the following from the first group of verses:

1. All types of afflictions are from God.
2. They are trials that can have multiple purposes.
3. For those who believe in God, patience should be the initial and continuing spiritual response to the pandemic.
4. This patience results in glad tidings.
5. These afflictions must become a reminder of God's sovereignty over all creation and help man to return to Him (repentance).
6. This return and repentance become the source of Divine mercy and blessings.
7. Finally, man gains success concerning his goal in life.

From the second verse, one can adduce the following:

1. God tries His servants by manifold afflictions, not necessarily a form of punishment or a result of any apparent misbehaviour from them.
2. These afflictions will be the trial of their faith.
3. When faced with afflictions, people should adhere to the virtues of patience and piety.
4. These two characteristics will make them resilient in their faith.

And from the third verse one gathers:

1. Allah has sovereignty over the affairs of the world. It is His will that is at work. God's chastisement can afflict anyone according to the will of God.
2. Divine mercy is always active and it encompasses everything.
3. Divine mercy has a special favour with those who fear God, believe in His signs, and pay their alms.

4. It is the behaviour of God-fearing people, when afflicted with punishments, to see in it an opportunity to repent and return to God and to renew their bond with God.

Pandemics and Patience (*Ṣabr*)

When a true believer faces a pandemic, his first reaction to it is supposed to be to remember God, repent to Him and return to Him. All this will take place within the framework of forbearance and patience, as the end of 7: 155 reveals. The Sufis' treatment of pandemics in conjunction with the Qur'ān takes place under the theme of *ṣabr*, but is not disconnected from Divine mercy, as we shall see.

Sufis have understood and categorised *ṣabr* in a variety of ways.²¹ So al-Suhrawardī (d. 1191 CE) for instance, talks about it in terms of *ṣabr* being necessary (*farḍ*) and supererogatory (*faḍl*). The one, which is necessary or incumbent upon everyone, is, according to him, "the patience on performing the prescribed duties and avoiding the prohibitions". The second type, which is the supererogatory one, encompasses many spiritual qualities. This kind of patience is when you face material poverty, it is in concealing afflictions and pains, and not complaining about them; it is also in concealing Allah's gifts and privileges (by not boasting about them) that He has bestowed upon you".²² This understanding of *ṣabr* seamlessly fits with its Qur'ānic treatment in the context of pandemics.

²¹ See for example the different classifications introduced or quoted by al-Qushayrī in his *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah*, the edition prepared by Anas Muḥammad al-Sharqāwī (Beirut: Dār al-Minhāj, 2017/1438), 438-446. An English translation of *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah* was done by Professor Alexander D. Knysh and published by Garnet Publishing for the Centre for Muslim Contribution to Civilization in Qatar.

²² See *'Awārif al-Ma'ārif* (Beirut: Dar Ṣādir, 2010/1431), 336.

If the Qur'ān is insisting on patience and returning to God, which is the philosophy of *innā lillāh*, the Sufi discourse on it is nothing but the adoption of the Qur'ānic instruction. The statement of al-Suhrawardī "No *tawbah* is accepted unless there is a 'sincere striving against the self', and no real striving is possible without the existence of *ṣabr*"²³ reaches the heart of the Sufi approach to pandemics and afflictions and all that involves human life and destiny when it combines patience with two other basic concepts, repentance (*tawbah*) and striving against the self (*mujāhadah*).

A pandemic in Sufi understanding is a trial that must be an eye opener for a true servant of God and a reminder to him of his origin and destiny, enshrined in *innā lillāhi wa innā ilayhi rāji'ūn*. The virtue that this situation earns or demands from him is patience. Patience in itself is a display of the servant's level of faith according to the challenges he faces in various forms. Dhu'l-Nūn al-Miṣrī said, "Patience is staying away from acts of disobedience, keeping quiet while sipping the agonies of misfortune, and showing contentment when poverty invades the arena of [your] livelihood."²⁴ And 'Amr bin 'Uthman al-Hīrī has said "Patience is to hold on to God Most High – may He be praised – and a quiet and welcoming acceptance of the afflictions He inflicts [on you]."²⁵ Sufis invoke, again in conformity with the Qur'ānic guidance, the spirit of the prophet of God, Job, in the context of afflictions. 'The true essence of patience is,' Abū 'Alī al-Daqqāq says, 'to emerge from the affliction in the same state that you entered it. Like Prophet Job – peace be upon him – when

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah (Al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism)*, translated by Alexander D. Knysh (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 2007), 197-8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 198.

he said at the end of his affliction: "Affliction has visited me, and thou art the most Merciful of the Merciful."²⁶

Returning to God and becoming firm in one's faith and dependence on Allah is the reward that comes with pandemics and calamities. They help man – who is forgetful by nature – and the believers who strive to live consciously of their faith, to revive their faith and make its presence felt at the level of what some psychologist might like to call the 'sub-conscious mind'; the Sufīs, however, would call it "spiritual awakening". Developing the sense of being in the presence of God, is the ultimate goal of the spiritual journey they undertake to realize *Ihsān*. In this resides the dimension of Divine mercy.

Remembrance of God (*Dhikr Allāh*) and the Realization of the Reality of *Innā lillāh*

The heart of Sufī life manifests itself during times of pandemics through the overpowering effect of the mantra or *dhikr* of *innā lillāhi wa innā ilayhi rāji'ūn*. It influences his mind at all levels and fuses the spirit of "unquestioned faith in God's supremacy" so an extent he finds himself in a state of the true essence of trust in God. This is the state that Muḥammad bin 'Atā' has defined as "when anxiety about things of this world does not prevail over you despite your dire need of them and when your reliance upon God prevails in you despite your dependence on such things."²⁷ With this, we come to the psychology of the process of spiritual internalization of *innā lillāh*, mastering which enables the 'self-awakened' people to cope with pandemics positively.

If we recall verse 2: 155-7, we listen to God who guides us by telling us that whenever an affliction inflicts us we have to hold fast and be patient and say *innā lillāhi wa innā ilayhi rāji'ūn*. Those who do that are rightly

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 202.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 180.

guided, and they receive God's mercy and blessings. Receiving God's mercy and blessings is the end of what a believer can hope for and there is nothing beyond.

The question that presents itself to all reflecting minds is, how does the mere utterance of the verse *innā lillāhi wa innā ilayhi rāji'ūn* change the course of the pandemic or the trial. How does the afflicted become worthy of this highest reward, which of necessity takes the person beyond the question of pain and sorrow to a state of complete happiness and endless bliss.

This takes us to the psychology of remembering God (*dhikr*), which is one of the pillars of the Islamic spiritual quest i.e. *Taşawwuf*. Sufis as we know give utmost importance to *dhikr*. There is nothing to be surprised about here. Everyone who reads the Qur'ān will recognize the prominence that has been given to *dhikr* in it. The Qur'ān, when it instructs believers on *dhikr*, it very often does it with the adjective "more". It says for example "Believers! Remember Allah much and glorify Him morning and evening" (33: 41-42); "Believers! When you encounter a host in battle, stand firm and remember Allah much, that you may triumph" (8:45) etc. Similarly, the Prophet (PBUH) urges believers to practice *dhikr* in abundance and taught many formulae to be repeated several times through the course of the day.

It must be understood that "*to remember God much* is not a matter of mere quantity of time, but of being conscious and aware of God's Presence in a way that is not affected by habit or forgetfulness."²⁸ It is, as Sufis see it, a continuous and conscious practice that takes the practitioner to the depth of his inner being and opens up the ways of higher realms before him. Thus, he becomes absorbed in Divine theophanies. This is how *dhikr*

²⁸ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lumbard & Mohammed Rustom eds., *The Study Quran*, 926. Quoting al-Sulamī while commenting on verse 26: 227.

transcends the personality of the practitioner to remain in a state of witnessing things as they are in their reality.

Abundance and repetition are the keys to transforming the formula of *dhikr*, whether it is *innā lillāh* or any other, into a spiritual force that infuses divine energy into the personality of the invoker (*dhākir*) and makes him surrender himself to God in a way that he becomes the receiver of the divine blessings and theophanies of divine qualities. This is the stage where the human personality becomes totally awakened to its true nature.

Dhikr is in reality a process of controlling our thought. Keeping our mind and spirit away from distractions or disturbing thoughts and infusing correct thoughts in them effectively. By repeating a certain formula with total mindfulness, the spirit that is echoed through those words becomes part of the personality. It starts shaping the actions and reactions of the person under its control. It helps to transform the self into a "transcendent self".

The great Sufi scholar Ibn 'Atā' Allāh of Alexandria (d. 1309) defined *dhikr* as "purification from heedlessness and forgetfulness by the constant presence of the heart with God."²⁹ Summarizing what Ibn 'Atā' Allāh wrote, Carl Ernst writes:

"He [Ibn 'Atā' Allāh] conceives of *dhikr* as a multileveled process, in which all of the faculties are employed, beginning with the tongue as the outermost, then engaging the heart, the soul, the spirit, the intellect, and the innermost conscience called the secret. *Dhikr* must be undertaken in a state of absolute sincerity as the psychological precondition for remembering God without distraction. It also

²⁹ Carl Ernst, *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 2011), 93.

requires scrupulous religious behavior regarding proper and clean clothing, as well as strict adherence to the laws of diet and purity. He describes how in preparation one should sit in a place that is sweetly perfumed to welcome the angels and *jinn*, sitting cross-legged facing the direction of Mecca even if alone, with palms on thighs and eyes closed. Even if in sight of one's master, one should visualize him between the eyes, as the companion and guide, whose power of assistance ultimately derives from that of the Prophet."³⁰

The Sufi martyr Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 922), who faced his crucifixion on the cross with a smile and complete serenity, can be a good example of the type of transformation that renders the self-transcendent.

Now, when we come to the formula *innā lillāh* of the Qur'ān; we will see that its repetition inculcates in the spirit of the person, or one may call it in the subconscious mind, the reality of belonging to Allah and the fact of He being the final destiny. This is the same with other formulae that Sufis teach their disciples, such as *Ilāhī anta maqṣūdī wa riḍāka maṭlūbī* (Oh my God! It is You who is the object of my search and Your pleasure is my desire).

By repeating these formulae with sincerity and, as we mentioned earlier, with detached mindfulness³¹ the

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ It might be appropriate to quote here what al-Qushayrī has said, "There are two types of remembrance; the remembrance of the tongue and the remembrance of the heart. The continual remembrance of the tongue eventually brings the servant to the remembrance of the heart. The true effect, however, lies in the remembrance of the heart. If the servant is able to perform remembrance with both his tongue and his heart he has achieved perfection in both his personal state and his wayfaring." Al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah (Al-Qushayri's Epistle on*

practitioner develops, by the grace of Allah, the spiritual power to bear the agonies of life without panicking or becoming filled with unnecessary anxieties. This is what is known in *taṣawwuf* as the state of *Riḍā* or satisfaction with Divine decree.³²

I am to My Servant as He Thinks of Me

The effectiveness of the transcendence of the self through the process of return to God, besides being facilitated by repeated and continuous *dhikr*, is also blessed and enhanced by God's favour. In a famous *ḥadīth qudsī*, a prophetic narration attributed to God, God says, "I am to My servant as he thinks of Me."³³

When the practitioner repeats the formula while he is conscious of the meaning of what he repeats, it necessarily implants in him the idea of Allah being with him. The idea becomes part of his personality and overwhelmingly influences his thought, actions, and reactions. If I think of Him as my saviour, he is no doubt that for me according to His promise. In the end, the personality of the person becomes divine-like, and as such, he is annihilated from himself and substantiated by God alone. Here lies his transcendence and transformation.

Sufism), translated by Alexander D. Knysh (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 2007), 232.

³² Al-Qushayrī recorded that in response to a plea from Moses, Allah said, "My satisfaction lies in your satisfaction with My decree." Al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah (Al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism)*, 207.

³³ Muḥammad bin Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, 9/121. Owing to the importance of the remaining part of this ḥadīth as far as practice of *dhikr* and its effect on the *dhākir* are concerned, I would like to quote it in full here. "...and I am with him if he remembers me. If he remembers me in himself, I too remember him in myself; and if he remembers me in a group of people, I remember him in a group that is better than they; and if he comes one span nearer to me, I go one cubit nearer to him; and if he comes one cubit nearer to me, I go a distance of two outstretched arms nearer to him; and if he comes to me walking, I go to him running".

This whole idea is in fact about positive thinking. Even in ordinary life, Islam teaches positive thinking as a fundamental social value, which has a tremendous impact on one's health, well-being, and ability to cope with trials and challenges of life. This notion of positive thinking springs from the spiritual foundation of *ḥusn al-ẓann bi'llāh* (to think well of Allah), to which the above ḥadīth alludes. This notion dictates a positive attitude towards Allah's creation and His works in it. It demands a wholehearted acceptance of the Divine system. And this is the secret of a happy life in this world and the hereafter.

From the Sufi point of view then, afflictions and trials, epidemics, and pandemics are sources of return to God and means of self-transformation. They are seen as a source through which the spiritual intelligence, which consists of the inner forces of human beings that are named by Sufis as the heart, the soul, the spirit, the intellect, and the innermost conscience called the secret,³⁴ are awakened and natural forces are overpowered. They are then opportunities for a human being to know himself as he is in reality and turn towards constructive introspection to identify his real nature. This is what the great Sufi master Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 848) meant when he said "trials of all kinds are gifts from God."³⁵

³⁴ Sufi manuals and classical sources differ in enumerating these forces, which are also known as 'Subtleties'. They all, however, revolve around these. Central Asian Sufis have been prominent in discussing these Subtleties, which form the spiritual intelligence. See 'Alā' al-Dawlah al-Simnānī, *al-Wārid al-Shārid al-Ṭārid Shubhat al-Mārid*, critical edition with translation by Giovanni Maria Martini in Giovanni Maria Martini, *'Alā' al-Dawla al-Simnānī Between Spiritual Authority and Political Power: A Persian Lord and Intellectual in the Heart of the Ilkhanate* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2018).

³⁵ See Abū al-Faḍl Muḥammad bin 'Alī al-Sahlaī al-Biṣṭāmī's (998/1084) *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, in 'Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī's *Shaṭaḥāt al-Ṣūfiyyah* (Kuwait: Wakālat al-Maṭbū'āt, 1978), 64.

Conclusion

1. The Sufi approach to pandemics, Covid-19 withstanding, springs from the Qur'ānic notion of trials.
2. They are to be understood in the light of the divine control of the universe and the faith that nothing in the universe takes place without God's decree and out of His command.
3. Believers need to respond to calamities with a spirit of obedience, acceptance, and patience.
4. Pandemics are not excluded from the influence of the all-pervading fundamental principle of Divine mercy.
5. Pandemics are opportunities to return to God by repenting and reaffirming one utter servitude to God while invoking His blessings, mercy, and compassion.
6. In the age of forgetfulness, pandemics function as a reminder and a warner *par excellence*.
7. This Sufi approach, which is basically, the Qur'ānic approach does not make sense to those who are ignorant of the Islamic worldview or adopt various naturalistic or nihilistic worldviews.

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