



A PERSPECTIVE on the PANDEMIC

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Bi'smi'Llahi 'r-Rahmani 'r-Rahim

Taking a normally familiar stroll through Cambridge's city centre I find myself rather staggered by the difference these two weeks have made. The little roads call to mind the way Sundays used to be: they are nearly deserted; but this particular day of rest will stretch on for weeks and months, and it is likely that at least some of these shuttered shops and restaurants will never trade again. I step over the prone and huddled homeless, still sleeping in their bags; this most dismal sight seems to be the only one which has remained unchanged. At the chemist's shop a Perspex shield protects the pharmacist not only from deadly coughs and sneezes, but also from insults; a minimum-wage Muslima who works in a supermarket tells me that some customers throw their coins at her or fly into a strange and panicky rage. The sad, nervous queue attempts 'social distancing', toeing a yellow taped line, and not only from obedience; no-one wishes to stand too close to Azrail, the Angel of Death.

The consumer carnival, the Mardi Gras of our product-addicted age, is over; this feels like a morning-after, a hangover. We used to reach happily for the goods in the shops, which shone and sparkled before our entranced and childish eyes. Now we hesitate and touch gingerly, reluctantly, as though touching the skin of a corpse; I press the keys on the ATM, wondering if my hands, instruments of so much heedless taking in past years, are now carriers of my own demise. A twenty-pound note, the most recent banknote to be plasticised, may be a filthy lucre which can kill us; we want to sanitise it; the thrill of wealth is over.

The world is fasting, in a certain way, this is an *imsak* of capitalism, whose Belshazzar's Feast has abruptly broken up; as for the daytime visitor to a stunned city centre, much is off-limits; as a Ramadan hadith tells us, the devils are chained, *sufidat al-shayatin*. The wary shoppers are interested not in nice things but in survival; old habits of absentminded browsing seem absurd. Our Prime Minister, baring his hedonist's soul, has closed the bookshops but kept the off-licenses open; but even they do not seem to be busy. Many people are polite and caring, but everyone is chastened, subdued, sober, watchful.

Of course this sudden crash is falling differently upon different heads. For the old, my absent-minded sneeze may bring a terrible death; for the young men who are standing together and laughing, waiting for their bus, the risk seems trivial; and what young blade worth his salt shuns a risk: this game of Russian Roulette that they play every day is new and edgy, and they feel immortal, blithely confident that they at least will be standing for the same bus next year.

So Heaven has given us to live in interesting times; we are entering the gravest global crisis in many decades; and it is right for Muslims to reflect, taking advantage of these newly long and quiet days. But before we do so, let us self-quarantine from the panicky and sensational media, let us click away and block up our ears against the second-rate fumbling politicians; let us look from our windows upon the eerie emptiness of the streets, and consider what God might mean by this.

Even the atheist brain knows ours for a time of hubris: we madly ravage and violate nature and walk upon the moon; every other species cringes from us as ecosystems die; our gamed financial system is increasingly parasitical

upon the poor. From our human perspective Covid-19 is an infection which disorders our world; but seen from the world's perspective humanity itself has, over the past age, become a still more deadly disease: like a fungus or a hookworm we suck the blood of the host, multiplying insantly until the ecosystem itself, the planet which we vampirize, starts to sicken and die. Bani Adam, released from the natural restraints urged by religion, has itself become a disease, in its planning and its wisdom no more intelligent than a microbe. We have become a Qarun-virus.

And now God's world is paying us back with this invisible miasma which makes us afraid even to inhale. Putin and Trump, masters of nuclear arsenals, are staggering back from its influence, discovering, perhaps, the Naqshbandi rule of *khush dar dam*, mindfulness in every breath. So small an enemy to have overthrown our world: too tiny to see, the corona literally a crown: this microscopic flimsy protein, this almost nothing, is now king of the world.

In this divine irony we remember old fables in the mouse and the elephant genre. The Holy Prophet, whose entire message is a challenge to the love of *dunya* and fear of death, was born in the Year of the Elephant; how often we repeat that *sura*, as though it were a nursery rhyme: but Abraha the tyrant remains a perennial symbol of the arrogance which seeks to displace the things of God: the *Sira* writers tell us that the birds which rained clay pellets upon him and his army also brought a disease, so that their flesh started to rot on their bones while they still lived. It was a kind of terrible Ebola, eating them alive. *Faja'alahum ka-asfin ma'kul*.

Microbes, then, which are part of the symphony of the world's balanced ecosystem, also belong to the army of God. At times they serve us through the Divine names *al-Razzaq*, *al-Latif*: our stomachs and intestines are crawling with them, and without them we could not digest our dinners; on the land they then break down dead matter and return it to the soil; they limit populations naturally, maintaining the balance, *mizan*, of creation, in which every species has the right to its space. But at other times, no less necessary for the balance, they serve the Divine names *al-Qahhar* and *al-Muntaqim*, the Compeller, the Avenger, and thus did Allah use them to strike down the oligarch Abraha and his elephant, his commandos and his marines.

Allah says that He is with the poor and broken-hearted: *ana 'inda'l-munkasirati qulubuhum*. The Qur'an makes us uneasy with its uncompromising prophetic arguments against status, pride and the hoarding of wealth. The Sharia, with its Zakat and its inheritance laws, aims to break up fortunes, smashing them with the hammer of God's justice; by contrast the parasitic modern schemes of *homo economicus* have led to a historically unequalled hoarding of wealth by the global one percent.

And so the great Qur'anic stories of truth confronting power tell us, again and again, that Pharaoh is overthrown not by another superpower, but by a mere prophet in rags, a member of a despised subject race made up of imported labourers and immigrants, a man who has even doubted his ability to speak clearly. Barefoot he stands before the throne of Memphis, defying the magicians of the autocratic state whose wealth is directed insantly to the creation of marble mausoleums for the rotting dead; the autocrat turns away in scorn, and the plagues of Egypt fall upon his land. What power can his minister of defence marshal against the frogs, the blood, and the infection which covers him and his people with festering boils? Again, the smallest members of nature's kingdom are used by Providence to strike against a destructive and unjust megastructure of oppression and pride.

And again, let us recall the heroic standing of Abraham in the court of Nimrod. This comes in the surat al-Baqara:

"Have you not beheld the one who argued with Abraham about his Lord; God having given him the kingdom. And Abraham said: My Lord is He that gives life and death; And he replied: I give life and death."

The commentators record Nimrod, at that point, displaying his power by proudly and hard-heartedly pardoning a prisoner, and executing another: a ruler's godlike power of amnesty.

“And Abraham said: Allah brings the sun from the east, so bring it, you, from the West; and thus the one who disbelieved was refuted; and God does not guide the unjust people.”

The *tafsir* authors mention that the populace would come to Nimrod, and affirm him as their Lord, *rabb*; he would then give them food.

And then Abraham comes, and when he is asked the same question, he says, “*Rabbiy alladhi yuhyi wa-yumit*”, My Lord is He that gives life and death.

Thrown out from the tyrant’s presence and returning to his family, Abraham fills his food sacks with sand, so that at least for a while they will think that he has brought them something, and be consoled. He falls asleep; and when Sara his wife opens the sacks she finds them miraculously filled with the finest grain.

As for Nimrod, the chronicles mention that while he was dispensing this form of justice, a mosquito or a gnat crawled into his nostril: *faba’atha’Llahu ‘alayhi ba’uda, fadakhalat fi mankharihi*. It bit him, and this caused him such excruciating torment that he started to hit the walls of his palace with his head, until, after years of pain, he died.

The point, of course, is again that the smallest creatures can overthrow the proudest human hubris. And in our time it is the virus that wears the crown, and the mighty who are helpless and humbled. Look at the politicians across Europe who have persecuted the honourable traditions of Islam: it is they, now, who are forced to wear the *niqab*.

Plague and pestilence are nothing new or surprising for Islam. Look in our texts, and we find that *waba’* defined as an epidemic, and *i’da’* as contagion, and medieval Islam knew perfectly well that the result could be a massacre. Ibn Battuta, describing the Black Death in Cairo, records that twenty thousand people a day were dying; and the imams would cry out: *Shahada, Shahada!* The reference, no doubt, was to the Bukhari hadith that says that those who stay in a plague-stricken land, reckoning that nothing can befall them save Allah’s decree, will receive a reward equal to that of martyrs.

But because Muslims value medicine, and their Founder himself prescribed remedies, there was health care, provided generously by *waqfs*: I like this description of one medieval Egyptian hospital, written by the historian Lane-Poole:

“Cubicles for patients were ranged round two courts, and at the sides of another quadrangle were wards, lecture rooms, library, baths, dispensary, and every necessary appliance of those days of surgical science. There was even music to cheer the sufferers; while reader of the Koran afforded the consolations of the faith. Rich and poor were treated alike, without fees, and sixty orphans were supported and educated in the neighbouring school.”

Historians agree that the modern-day hospital in fact originated in the Islamic world: there is a good account of this in *Aramco World Magazine*, entitled ‘The Islamic Roots of the Modern Hospital’, which is easily found online, and which all medical professionals, I think, ought to read. The article begins with a quote from the *waqfiyya* of the hospital of Sultan Qalaun:

“The hospital shall keep all patients, men and women, until they are completely recovered. All costs are to be borne by the hospital whether the people come from afar or near, whether they are residents or foreigners, strong or weak, low or high, rich or poor, employed or unemployed, blind or signed, physically or mentally ill, learned or illiterate. There are no conditions of consideration and payment; none is objected to or even indirectly hinted at for non-payment. The entire service is through the magnificence of God, the generous one.”

The hospital, then, the *Dar al-Shifa'* or *bimaristan*, is one of Islam's gifts to the West, emerging from a culture in which compassion but also medical professionalism were highly valued. So much overlap and commonality between the influencer and the influenced! And yet that culture differed from our own in one key respect.

Premodern Muslim medics, and ulema who thought about contagion, assumed a social world in which human expectations from life and *dunya* were modest. Terrors about death and a love of abundance are more the *sunna* of Nimrod and Pharoah; they are the way of Abu Jahl, not that of the Seal of the Messengers; as the poets say, they reflect the materialism of the donkey, not of the Jesus who rides it. Our modern attitudes to death are very unrealistic, evasive and stressful: atheist beliefs, which have themselves spread like a virus thanks to the unclean matter which has accumulated in our hearts, persuade many that clinical death is the end of ourselves. As the Qur'an describes such people: "*They say, it is only our life of this world, we were dead, and we live, and only Time kills us.*"

Such people are tragically terrified of death; in fact, this forms the major terrorism which dismays humanity in our age: the wicked threat of a meaningless and eternal nothingness. In the old Arabia the *jahili* Arabs had no confidence in life after death; but the Man of Praise, in his saddest moment of confronting them, was told: "*the next world shall be better for you than this*". And in Surat al-A'la: "*you prefer this worldly life, but the next life is better and more permanent.*"

Death is a normal and natural part of our frail human reality, and its decree proceeds from an inexorable Divine name *al-Mumit*, the Slayer. Premodern humanity saw it on every hand, and knew how to cope; rituals helped a good deal, but even more healing was the awareness of the Divine wisdom and mercy. So the Man of Praise said, remarkably: "*tuhfat al-mu'min al-mawt*", the precious gift to the believer is death; because he or she moves on from this disappointing world to the world of pure mercy and meaning. True, the Holy Prophet tells us not to hope for death, "let none of you hope for death", for our ending is by His decree, not our preference. We simply accept it calmly as an entire expression of the Divine wisdom.

This is one reason, no doubt, why believers enjoy better mental health outcomes than atheists; a 2013 *Daily Telegraph* article, noting the intrinsicity of religious belief to human beings, proposed that atheism itself should be classed as a mental illness. But it is a widespread infection, with ugly psychological symptoms, and in modern Britain this is showing. The monstrous cruelty of atheist beliefs is revealed never more sharply than by the suffering of relatives as they receive the news that a loved one has died in an ICU. A void replaces a soul; there are no timeless rituals; there is not the glimmering of hope.

Our British Muslim heritage offers much inspiration here. Its story begins with Abdullah Quilliam's community in nineteenth-century Liverpool: in a rough time and place where hostility and threats were even more widespread than they are today. But Quilliam believed in Traditional Islam, and the spirit of what he called Islamic resignation runs like a leitmotif throughout his writings. For instance, he writes his characteristic poem 'The Last Journey':

When the clouds are dark and dreary
At the close of mortal way;
When with falt'ring footsteps weary
I am going home to stay-
Evermore to stay:

Then I think of lov'd ones parted
From me now full many a day,
And I feel quite blythe-hearted,
I am going home to stay –
Evermore to stay.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder,
At least so the poets say;
And there'll be no parting yonder
I am going home to stay –
Evermore to stay.

Though alone the path I travel,
Though my mortal powers decay,
My feet tread upon sure gravel,
I am going home to stay –
Evermore to stay.

Be it late, or be it early,
Comes the call I must obey;
Cheerfully I'll meet it, fairly,
I am going home to stay -
Evermore to stay.

Another author of that early age of our community was Amherst Tyssen. I like his poem on the Holy Prophet and Hazret Abu Bakr, as they sheltered in the cave from the murderous Qurayshi gangs attempting to prevent the Hijra by murdering them. The poem takes its cue from the Qur'anic record: *thaniya thmayni idh huma fi'l-ghari idh yaqulu li-sahibi la tahzan inna'l-Llaha ma'ana* – “the second of the two, when they were in the cave, when he said to his companion: do not be sad; Allah is with us”.

“Will He we live, no mortal power
Can take our lives away;
Will He we die, to Him we pass;
No need to feel dismay.”

O may we thus through life's rough voyage
With all its tempests cope;
Make God the rock whereon we cast
The anchor of our hope.

Come weal: to Him we give the praise;
Come woe: on Him we rest.
E'en death is bliss to hearts assured,
Whate'er He sends is best.

For Tyssen, and for the forerunners of our British Muslim community, Islam is quintessentially the religion of submission: not only to God's *amr taklifi*: the commandments of Sharia, but His *amr takwini*: His command which shapes every event in the world, including the command which says that we must die. Ours is pre-eminently and proudly the religion of *tawakkul*, of *rida*, of *taslim*.

Thus the *wali*, the truly Muslim person, is of those whom “*la khawfun 'alayhim wa-la hum yahzanun*”: they fear not, neither do they sorrow. For God has commanded us to say: “*lan yusibana illa ma kataba'Llahu lana*”: nothing will afflict us other than what God has written for us.

So we mourn our dead, and this is a natural and a healing reflex; and we believe in medicine; but we do not panic. Death is a natural part of the glorious system of God's universe, with its cycles of birth, growth, flourishing fertility, and death, a creation which contains *jalal* as well as *jamal*, Rigour as well as Beauty. As Ibrahim Haqqi, the Turkish poet, writes:

What comes from Thee is good for me,
The rose's blossom, or the rose's thorn,
A robe of honour, or my deathly shroud,
Good is Thy gentleness; good is Thy rigour.

Hence the modern wailing of the world which we hear all around us, including that of the Amalekites of the age, like Donald Trump, who is clearly terrified that a mosquito might crawl up his nose, is not a chorus we can join: instead, we instinctively say: "*Hasbuna'Llahu wa-ni'ma'l-wakil*", Allah is enough for us, and an excellent Guardian; or we say, "*Innaa li'Llahi wa-innaa ilayhi raji'un*": we belong to God, and to Him shall we return.

Many years ago I used to ride shared taxis which hurtled alarmingly between the cities of Jeddah and Madinah. They were usually ramshackle conveyances packed with Yemeni workers; and on a number of occasions we narrowly escaped the Angel of Death. One night, with a driver pushing 150 kilometres an hour, a herd of camels ran across the motorway in front of us; with perhaps a ten percent chance of survival the driver reacted instantaneously, steering us through a narrow gap between the stampeding animals; and we lived. *Ya Allah*, said all the passengers, as Death suddenly rushed towards us, and then *Subhan Allah*. Afterwards, the event seemed hardly significant.

Shortly afterwards, stopping at a Saudi motorway service station, I saw an old man sitting on the concrete, selling framed Qur'anic calligraphy. He only had one text: "*kullu nafsin dha'iqat al-mawt*": every soul shall taste of death. He would not do good business at a Welcome Break on the M15. But for Muslims, death is simply another aspect of the human experience, a decree from His wisdom, its manner and time determined by the Best of judges.

The current *khawf* and *huzn*, fear and sorrow, which are paralysing our supposedly blasé and sophisticated world, are not only about death; however, but about the frailty of *dunya* as well. The FTSE all-share index has dropped through the floor: thirty-five percent in the red, and counting; unemployment is growing ten times as fast as it did after the 2008 financial crisis; businesses are folding and dying. The poor and helpless, on zero-hours contracts and gig economy jobs, are already facing hunger. This will fall heavily on our community: tandoori restaurants and taxi businesses are very vulnerable; failed asylum seekers and the visa-less can even be denied healthcare. As usual the weakest and poorest suffer most; but this is Ishmael's fate: we live on the wrong side of the Gaza wall. Again, we reflect that in an age of spiralling inequalities and titanic arrogance, God is always with the suffering weak, the hungry and the despised; the Holy Prophet himself prayed to be resurrected among the destitute.

We need our basics from *dunya*, we have the right to our *qut*, our daily bread. But the mad love of consumption which has become modern man's lethal addiction is hateful to Heaven. The Qur'an says, "*Know that the life of this world is only a game and play, and adornment, and boasting among you. And the life of this world is only the enjoyment of beguilement.*"

Our product-addiction is murdering Mother Earth; hence our idea that humanity is itself a disease killing its planetary host: we are all the Qarun virus. But it is killing our souls and our societies as well. The believer is not much given to shopping, although she or he takes pleasure in treating guests well; the Holy Prophet's home was so simple that his door was not made of wood, but of a simple length of sackcloth. *Kun fid-dunya ka'annaka gharibun aw abira sabil*, he says: "Be in this world as though a stranger or a traveller".

So the believer, in isolation, is further from *dunya*, there is a detachment, and he revives some of the key benefits of *khalwa* or '*uzla*, remembering the possibility of experiencing clear-heartedness when distractions and worldly

pleasures are at arm's length: the Blessed Virgin saw the angel when she was on her own in the desert, and the same angel came to the Best of Creation when he was alone, *yatahannath*, in the Cave of Hira.

Our moment, then, is an opportunity to reactivate the honourable and richly-rewarding Islamic customs of *khalwa* and *I'tikaf*. Perhaps, if Mr Hancock's predictions of an unlocking at the end of April come true, it will be a forty-day retreat. Literally, a true quarantine, an *arba'in*, a *chilla*. During this time the atheist materialist world will be suffering from boredom, fear and financial anxiety: its dilemma is clear: either leave people in their homes, or revive the economy: the fear of death and the fear of poverty are two agitated giants clashing in their hearts.

To the extent that we have internalised our Islam, we will not suffer much from such clashes or from such fears. The future is God's, not man's; all is His, and we travel into it as He decrees.

Meanwhile we experience this quarantine from *dunya*. Consider the book of the German Muslim author Michaela Özelsel, *Forty Days*, which is the diary of a forty-day solitary retreat: she records how each day brings increasing self-knowledge, and gratitude and amazement at the nearness of Almighty God, and a sense of life and of creation as a pure and unmerited and astonishing gift. I like the way her spiritual guide recites prayers as she enters the apartment where she is to perform this *chille*, before closing the door with the traditional phrase: *yumuşak geçsin*, may it pass softly and easily.

For many people, the confinement is irksome and the purity of spiritual concentration seems like an unrealistic hope: children fight and need exercise, we miss our friends, and, this the greatest pain, in Ramadan we are likely to miss the timeless majesty of our Tarawih prayers. Our hearts miss the mosques, and in this distance we learn how much we need the beautiful and healing forms of our practices, and we realise with sorrow how impoverished must be the life of the Godless.

But Islam has no priesthood and no consecrated churches; the Chosen One tells us that one of the *khasa'is*, the special characteristics, of his Umma is that "the whole earth has been made a mosque for me". In almost every home there is someone who can lead the prayer, even in a basic way; the fasting can proceed in a fully Sharia-valid manner; our *zakat al-fitr* can still be paid: Islam is entirely doable in our seclusion.

So let us relearn the traditions of seclusion, 'uzla. And let us not waste time, but seize the opportunity. We can read books more than we ever did before:

Ni'ma'l-anisu kitabu / in fataka'l-ashabu

"How good a friend is a book, when friends are unavailable."

As we spend our days in peaceful detachment, and our hearts calm down, in an uncanny way we can establish a feeling of connection with the souls of scholars of past ages, by respectfully engaging with their works; we can in some mysterious sense become their disciples, we can enjoy their company.

In the same way we must establish the prayer strongly in our homes, remembering the Prophetic commandment that our houses must not become like graves, but must be brought to life by *salat*. The *adhan* should be recited loudly and on time. We should log on to live Qur'anic recitation, rather than simply listen to recordings. We can take online Islamic classes and systematically learn things we should have known long ago, especially the basic obligations, *farid a'yan*. This can be a lifetime opportunity to increase in *ilm*, to catch up on what we should have done before, and to taste the unique blessings of increased 'amal.

In times of *fitna*, particularly amid the seditions and sorrows of the end-times, the Prophetic instruction is, firstly, to break your swords: "*wa'dribu bi-suyufikum al-hijara*", and to become a piece of furniture in your house: "*kun hilsan*

min ahlesi baytik". The intention should be to avoid the distractions of the tumultuous outside world: in many countries, for instance, the temptations of the treacherous glance in the underdressed summer months, the risks of improper conversations, of backbiting and slander, or pointless shopping expeditions and extravagant restaurant meals; but our imams, including Imam al-Ghazali, emphasise that the intention must primarily be to keep others safe from our own evils, not to be safe from theirs. By self-isolating, we avoid infecting other people with our bad habits and our poor *adab*. We now inflict less harm upon the world.

So we ask Allah, perhaps on the night of the middle of Sha'ban itself, that this opportunity for retreat be for us a blessed time, of *sabr* and of *shukr*, of *tawakkul* and *taslim*, and that He decree a blessed outcome. We were all running too fast after *dunya*, and we need to stop, and draw breath for a while. May we enter Ramadan, therefore, in a calm and well-prepared state of prayer and attentiveness to our duties and to the presence of Almighty God. May it be the best Ramadan of our lives, free of laziness and full of constructive family love, forgiveness, prayer and the gaining of knowledge. May this self-isolation end, as Ramadan always ends, not with a sense of release, but with a sense that a spiritual and special time has been experienced, and will be missed.

And we will pray, too, for strength for medical staff, for mercy upon our dead, and for greater *taqwa* in our hearts. And we will pray that the mighty will be humbled, that the dead hand of materialism will be lifted from a frantic and greedy and stressed Bani Adam, and that this be a time of *tawba* and reflection and return to *Haqq* not only for the Umma, but for all of humanity, which has suffered from its own sins for too long, and craves the merciful guiding restoration of its heart, by the grace of Heaven.



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