

## Research Notes

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### The Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at in the Era of COVID-19

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**ABSTRACT:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been episodes of intolerance towards the Ahmadiyya community, particularly in Pakistan. However, in compliance with the Quranic precepts, the Ahmadis have not responded with violence to the persecutions suffered. On the contrary, they have carried out, thanks to the dynamism of their communities, numerous initiatives of solidarity with the populations most affected by the pandemic. They have also spontaneously adopted COVID-19-safe methods of worship, and thus have been able to limit the numbers of community members infected.

**KEYWORDS:** Ahmadiyya Community, Ahmadis, Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at, Religion and COVID-19 Pandemic, Ahmadis and COVID-19 Pandemic.

“Those who spend in prosperity and adversity,  
and those who suppress anger and pardon men;  
and Allah loves those who do good” (Qur. III, 134)

#### *1. The Experience of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at in Pandemic Times*

Natural disasters and epidemics have often been interpreted as a divine punishment for the wrong behaviour of humans. As evidenced by sociological and anthropological studies, the reactions to the sense of helplessness and bewilderment caused by such events often result in persecutory attitudes and intolerance. They are perpetrated to the detriment of those who are considered “different,” and are often referred to as voluntary spreaders of contagion. But the

crisis may also lead to an awakening of conscience, implemented through a recovery of ethical sense and a progressive refuge in the spiritual dimension.

On the one hand, the idea that natural disasters are to be attributed to divine wrath for human sins determines the resurgence of discriminatory and violent acts. They are comparable to the acts often identified as the cause of divine punishment, and are often perpetrated against those in a minority position and socially vulnerable. On the other hand, the same ideas may lead to recover a community dimension of greater sharing and solidarity.

In this sense, the experience of Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic is paradigmatic.

The Ahmadiyya movement was founded in 1889 by Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908) in a village of Punjab in India. It was discriminated against for theological differences with orthodox Islam since its birth, especially in present-day Pakistan. It has also recently suffered targeted attacks, motivated by a veiled religious intolerance. The movement is considered heretical, since the proclamation of its founder as a reformer of the divine mission of Islam appears to reopen the seal of the prophets, considered by orthodox Islam to have been closed by the Quranic revelation to Muhammad.

In Pakistan, in the second quarter of 2020, there has been a sharpening of the persecution of the Ahmadis, as they have been unfairly held responsible for the spread of the virus, or even declared a greater threat than the virus itself.

However, even in this difficult situation, the typical Ahmadi activism in the face of adversity took concrete form as a strong drive of solidarity and spirituality. Its root can be found in the inner effort to maintain an attitude of meekness with respect to violence and aggression. One reason this activism was effective is the organization on which the Jama'at is structured. Its articulation in multiple diasporic communities, present on different continents, finds its unity through the direct connection of the nationally organized Jama'ats to the Caliph.

## *2. Eschatology and Calamities in Ahmadiyya Community Theology*

In Muslim eschatology, based on the Quran and the traditions of the first centuries of Islam, the precursor signs of the day when souls will be judged for

their conduct, related to the advent of the *eschaton* and the universal judgment, are of particular interest.

In the theology of the Ahmadiyya Community, among the eschatological signs is the progressive proliferation of calamities and diseases. As attested recently by the Caliph of the Community,

the frequency of storms, earthquakes and pandemics has increased greatly in the world. Generally, these pandemics and calamities come to caution mankind that they should fulfil the rights of their Creator as well as His creation (Masroor Ahmad 2020b).

The calamities, therefore, while not constituting a specific sign indicated in the Scriptural references relating to the advent of Judgment Day, are a warning to humankind. They are also a call to respect the precepts willed by the Creator to promote a virtuous, happy, and prosperous life based on the principle of solidarity.

For Muslims, as is well known, practices of solidarity and philanthropic acts constitute an essential element of religious practice. There are numerous Shariatic references to the equitable redistribution of wealth, based on the Islamic anthropological and religious conception of a close link between faith and action.

To consolidate and preserve Islamic brotherhood— “And help one another in righteousness and piety” (Qur. V, 2)—, numerous verses of the Quran urge Muslims to perform acts of charity and to share their goods. Indicative are the Quranic references to the paying of “Zakat,” among which are:

Observe Prayer and pay the Zakat (Qur. II, 43).

O ye who believe! Spend of the good things that you have earned (Qur. II, 267).

If you give alms openly, it is well and good; but if you conceal them and give them to the poor, it is better for you; and He will remove from you many of your sins. And Allah is aware of what you do (Qur. II, 271).

And whatever of wealth you spend, it is for yourselves, while you spend not but to seek the favour of Allah (Qur. II, 272).

Surely, those who believe and do good deeds, and observe Prayer and pay the Zakat, shall have their reward from their Lord (Qur. II, 277).

So, give to the kinsman his due, and to the needy, and to the wayfarer. That is best for those who seek the favour of Allah, and it is they who will prosper (Qur. XXX, 38).

Those who observe Prayer and pay the Zakat and who have firm faith in the Hereafter... (Qur. XXXI, 4).

And they feed, for love of Him, the poor, the orphan, and the prisoner (Qur. LXXVI, 8).

The Holy Book encourages the wealthy to contribute to the welfare of society by assisting the poor and needy, with both kindness and a sincere and non-pharisaic spirit:

A kind word and forgiveness are better than charity followed by injury. (...) O ye who believe! render not vain your alms by taunt and injury, like him who spends his wealth to be seen of men (Qur. II, 263–64).

The Islamic conception of the social function of wealth, aimed at the realization of distributive justice, requires that everyone contributes to the growth of the welfare of the community in which he or she acts. To help one's neighbour is, therefore, a basic rule of conduct of Islamic life:

And worship Allah and associate nothing with Him, and show kindness to parents, and to kindred, and orphans, and the needy, and to the neighbour that is a kinsman and the neighbour that is a stranger, and the companion by your side, and the wayfarer, and those whom your right hands possess. Surely, Allah loves not the proud and the boastful (Qur. IV, 36).

The primary function of attention to the needs of others and to the common good in Islam is therefore to achieve a fair distribution of wealth, both through direct donations and through projects of assistance for the disadvantaged and community development programs. There are also targeted interventions that allow those in poverty to make themselves economically independent.

### *3. The Behaviour of the Islamic Believer in Crisis and Adversity*

If the general attitude of solidarity normally constitutes an obligation for Muslim believers, this duty becomes even more strict in critical situations when adversity arises.

Such, indeed, is the historical moment caused by the pandemic crisis of COVID-19, during which the difficulties of all are exacerbated. Consequently, the daily and subjective effort of the Muslim to walk the path of salvation becomes even more demanding.

The Quran explicitly regulates behaviour religiously aimed at preserving humans from their own individualism. They are called to walk the “right path” to salvation. Addressing those who take action to receive divine forgiveness and

aspire to paradise, the Quran designates them as those “who spend in prosperity and adversity, and those who suppress anger and pardon men; and Allah loves those who do good”(Qur. III, 134).

This verse seems particularly significant for the identification of the method to follow to realize one’s faith. Muslims, therefore, in the face of the crisis caused by the Coronavirus must adopt a precise attitude, consisting of an active behaviour of *facere* and a passive one of *non facere*.

### 3.1 “Donate Your Assets”

Regarding the first conduct, especially in times of difficulty, believers are asked “to donate their goods.” Qur. III, 134 says that Allah loves the “muhsinin,” those who do good. Here, “doing good” implies an active commitment to the material and spiritual sustenance of all, not only of Muslims, in situations of difficulty and need.

Indeed, during the months of the pandemic, the Ahmadiyya Community has distinguished itself for its resolve. It has engaged in various solidarity initiatives undertaken for the benefit of all, without confessional distinction or theological declination, in line with the motto of the Jama’at, “Love for all, Hatred for none.”

Among the various solidarity initiatives by Ahmadi charitable organizations can be mentioned the donation of a disinfectant tunnel to the Family Medicine Center in Pristina, Kosovo (Yvejsi 2020b), as well as the donation of food in Kenya (Machengo 2020). Also, economic aid, food packages. and disinfectants were distributed to hundreds of families in Lagos, Nigeria (Qudoos 2020). Individual and collective medical devices were donated to the General Hospital in Peja, Kosovo (Yvejsi 2020a). Help and consultation hotlines by Ahmadi medical experts and volunteers were set up in Europe and the Americas.

### 3.2. “Repressing Anger”

Qur. III, 134 also prescribes a passive behaviour, i.e. the inhibition of revenge with respect to an offense suffered.

The repression of anger, and the failure to react to the wrongs suffered, becomes a test for the believers. They are called to demonstrate their submission to the will of Allah, by cultivating love and developing the attitude of forgiveness.

During the COVID-19 crisis, there have been many attacks against the Ahmadiyya Community and its members. Its charitable activities, although also benefiting those outside of their community, have been stigmatized as non-spontaneous and pharisaic, or even dangerous. They have been interpreted as intended to highlight the discrimination in the distribution of aid suffered by religious minorities in Pakistan. Real persecution in Pakistan has targeted persons falsely labelled as “infected,” whose only “infection” was belonging to the Jama'at.

With respect to injustices, including the most violent ones, the Quran prescribes a compassionate and forgiving attitude. The Quranic exegesis of the Ahmadi on that point is clear. Qur. III, 134 describes three stages of behaviour in case of confrontations. In the first stage, when the believers are offended, they must avoid instinctive reactions and suppress anger. In the second stage, they must take a further step and grant unconditional forgiveness to the offender. In the third phase, the believers must not only grant the offender complete forgiveness, but must also show benevolence and favour.

#### *4. Worship and Contagion Prevention Measures in Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at*

At the beginning of the year 2020, in his first Friday sermon, Caliph Hazrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad stated that, “as we enter the new year, storm clouds continue to gather ahead” (Masroor Ahmad 2020a). The Jama'ats warned for the arrival of a calamity for years—mostly with reference to wars—, did not show alarmism nor dismay, but rather used their resources for preparation.

The Caliph, already before the international spread of the COVID-19 epidemic, warned that it was not appropriate to feel safe anywhere, not even in Europe. In fact, every Ahmadi was advised to stock a three-month's food ration at home to be prepared for any emergencies. Thus, at the organizational level, the Ahmadiyya community, which is particularly dynamic, was able to adapt to the pandemic crisis.

Without waiting for the pandemic alarms launched by the World Health Organization, or the social confinement decreed by individual governments, Ahmadi communities in different countries had coordinated their organizations, and implemented timely restrictions and guidelines for their mosques. They enacted provisions aimed at protecting the health of the elderly and children. They recommended to keep the distance necessary to prevent the possibility of infection. Ahmadi in other countries were alerted by the Jama'at in Italy, the first Western country to contain the spread of the virus among the population through the declaration of a state of health emergency.

Risk prevention measures have been taken in all Ahmadi mosques throughout the world, including in Germany, where only a partial quarantine was implemented by the government, and Sweden, where no general quarantine was enforced.

The philosophy of the search for unity, common good, and brotherhood characteristic of the Ahmadi, has allowed to implement, in full autonomy and even in the absence of timely governmental responses, ways of conducting worship protecting the health and safety of all.

The dynamism inherent in the organizational structure of the Jama'at Ahmadiyya, which finds its centralization in the leadership of the Caliph, has allowed a timely and effective response to the crisis. The aim was both the protection of general welfare, and a full compliance with the Quranic prescriptions on the responsibility of the faithful.

The “caring for the good of others” and the “repression of anger” in the adversities prescribed in the Quranic verse as behaviours to follow in order to be *muhsinin*, loved by Allah, are in fact evoked as the pillars of faith that animate social action. They have both an active and material and a passive and spiritual dimension (*facere* and *non facere*). They embody the spirit of the Jama'at Ahmadiyya as expressed in the motto of the Ahmadi movement, “Love for all, Hatred for none.”

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