

Covid-19: The Science of Bodies or the Science of Religions?

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Covid-19 has taken the world by storm. What is happening now is unprecedented. The whole world is terrified, for the 'scourge' seems to know no boundary. All are affected; irrespective of East or West, socioeconomic status, and other schisms that have divided people. The disease does not discriminate.

Many countries are imposing forms of lockdown to counter the 'onslaught' of the virus. These and other measures have been taken by the authorities, but they have not given people much confidence. At this time of uncertainty, how can we make sense of this forced isolation, fear, anxiety, insecurity, and confusion that is encircling our 'normal' lives? With the passing days and the increase number of cases and deaths, many are overwhelmed with fear, grief and distress, so how should we appraise the situation?

Here, we put forward two views of reality pertaining to Covid-19 (the term for the 2019 form of the coronavirus): the (bio) medical model of allopathy and the model based on the traditional religious view of Islam. The former is currently the more familiar and prevalent view and it regards Covid-19 as a virus and therefore treatment is symptomatic, as a vaccine has yet to be developed (at the time of the writing of this essay). The latter religious or theological view sees the Divine as the source of every existence, including diseases.

Within these two views, how is Man understood? Is he acknowledged only as a phenomenon or more than a mere body? Only then can we respond appropriately.

Man, from the Medical Model

To understand the dominance of this model, we need to go back in time, to its historical and philosophical beginnings for developments in medicine have to be viewed as part of the larger historical and societal changes occurring within Western civilization. The Reformation period of the 16th Century marked a radical shift from the medieval understanding of the world and the universe. In medieval Christian thought, earthly life was inevitably prone to striving, suffering, and death because of the concept of 'original sin.' The constant reminder of Man's original sin and the guilt associated with it, and people's bondage to the Church and feudal lords made this a dark period in Western civilization.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564) inspired a new world religious movement to liberate the masses from their old religious bonds. The movement together with new philosophical insights advocated new ways of thinking that encouraged people to look for rational and logical interpretations of the world, and, in doing so, laid the foundations for modern science and a new theory of the physical world.

Starting with the radical theoretical innovations of Kepler and Galileo, and ending with Newton, a new reality of the world was conceived. In this natural philosophy (or physical science as it is now known), Galileo distinguished between primary and secondary qualities of natural objects, the former being objective and the latter subjective. Natural philosophy's focus was on the primary qualities. He also advocated modern science to concentrate on the microscopic atoms that aggregated to form the macroscopic objects. Descartes (1596-1650) continued with this new vision of reality, completing the total mechanization of nature by replicating what Galileo did to the external physical world within the human self. He separated the mechanical world/*res extensa* from the *res cogitans*, resulting in the well-known Cartesian mind-body dualism, which has a strong bearing on how Man is later conceived. He viewed the human body and brain as a machine though acknowledging that humans have an immaterial soul, which he termed as 'mind.'¹ Because the latter is immaterial, the former is emphasized. Though recognizing that this is an incomplete conception of Man, he

¹ He was the first major thinker to use the word 'mind' (Latin, *mens*) as an alternative to the word 'soul' (*anima*). To Descartes, mind and body, one immaterial and other material, influence each other via the pineal gland.

pointed out that this aspect of Man could be separated out and analyzed using the methods of science. Despite its criticisms, many continue to rely on this segmented, contested conception of Man as comprising of instrumental rationality and material self-interest. By the end of the Enlightenment period, modern science had reduced Man from spirit to mind, mind to brain, and brain to anatomical structures. Thinking, which is what defines Man becomes merely 'an epiphenomenon of the neuronal machinery of the brain.'² God as the Source of all existence is no longer seen to be transcendental; God too has become natural. The physical world lost its spirituality and became a 'machine' where everything moved along mindlessly by the motion of inanimate objects that passed on momentum, no longer by God.

This pervasive viewpoint made its way in nearly all aspects of life. In the medical field, for example, Descartes' view prevailed over Pascal's (1623-1662) more holistic approach to medicine.³ This mechanistic view of the human body maintains that illnesses are a result of the failure of the mechanical functions of various parts of the body. Hence, the practice of modern medicine is subjected to the belief that the body can be manipulated and cured by repairing and replacing parts or introducing chemical mixes into the mechanical system of the body.⁴ Medical research continues with developing better surgical procedures and finding new drugs. In privileging the body, other aspects of human existence like emotions, death, spirituality, and God, are pushed aside. The expectation is that medical practitioners will fix the condition with patients taking on a passive role. Thus, the current medical model is basically a 'science of bodies' or of phenomena.

In short, after Descartes, Western philosophy aligned itself to two sources of knowledge—rationalism and empiricism. Rationalism holds that reason is the main source of knowledge, while empiricism argues that all knowledge comes from, and must be subjected to sense experience. Man, in this reality, lies at the apex of the animal kingdom, and

² Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge, MASS: Harvard University Press, 1978). 195.

³ F. Gremy, 'Towards a New Paradigm in Medicine and Health.' In B. Z. Nizetic, H. G. Pauli & P. G. Svensson (Eds.), *Scientific Approaches to Health and Health Care* (Copenhagen, Denmark: World Health Organization, 1986). 141-158.

⁴ Soma Hewa and Robert W. Hetherington, 'Specialists without Spirit: Limitations of the Mechanistic Biomedical Model,' *Theoretical Medicine* 16 (1995) 133-134.

is seen as no more than an animal who speaks, in the Great Chain of Being. In this thought, Man is only of this world; ‘earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust’ as in the phrase used during the funeral service. There is silence on what happens next, in death and beyond.

Islam’s Conception of Man

To understand who ‘Man’⁵ is in Islam, there is a need to go back to the Quran—the Word of God. As the Quran was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (*saw*), an understanding of his Sunnah, including his sayings or Hadith, are also needed. Several verses of the Quran (e.g., Q76:1-3) mention that there was a time before coming into this world (*dunya*) when Man was a non-existent being, though known to God. God then created him with both an inner nature and an outward form in which this nature manifests itself. Man is created in such a way as to lie between the animal/bestial and the angelic; the former completely complying with basic needs, the latter completely surrendering to God. As an in-between creature, he wavers to and fro between the two states, so he can be like either an animal or an angel. But if this in-between nature of Man is denied, the default state is that of an animal. In this case, Man is seen to be the animal that speaks.

In this *dunya*, Man is to follow God’s guidance for he is created only to worship Him (Q51:56). This guidance consists of knowledge of the outward and the inward; to apply the outward knowledge (*Shari’ah*) to his outer being and direct understanding (*ma’rifah*) to his inner being, to enable him to attain awareness of the Reality (*Haqiqah*). This is the reason for his existence—to know and remember God. The *dunya* is only a phase in Man’s journey that he has to traverse before reaching his final resting place or a path of return to God (*Mabda’ wal Ma’ad*). In this respect, he is a spiritual being on a human journey.⁶

In sum, there are three sources of knowledge in Islamic thought. These are revelation, discursive philosophy and gnosis/intellectual intuition, corresponding to the three schools of theology (*kalam*),

⁵ In the traditional usage, the term ‘Man’ refers to humanity as a whole. In this article we use ‘Man’ in this traditional gender-neutral sense.

⁶ [Abd Allah ibn Alawi Al-Haddad, *The Lives of Man: A Guide to the Human States: Before Life, in the World and After Death*. Transl. Mostafa Al-Badawi, 1991. Available at \[http://data.nur.nu/Kutub/English/Haddad-AbdAllah_The-Lives-of-Man.pdf\]\(http://data.nur.nu/Kutub/English/Haddad-AbdAllah_The-Lives-of-Man.pdf\). Accessed 8/20/2018.](http://data.nur.nu/Kutub/English/Haddad-AbdAllah_The-Lives-of-Man.pdf)

philosophy⁷ (*falsafah*) and Sufism or mysticism (*tasawwuf*). All aim to understand the three principles of faith—the unity of God (*tauhid*), Prophecy (*nubuwwa*) and the return to God (*ma'ad* or eschatology). All three accept these objects as realities to be found in the nature of things but differ in the methods used in acquiring knowledge and attaining the truth. Philosophers claim the intellect as a sufficient means in understanding the nature of things, whereas proponents of *kalam* stress the primacy of revelation. Sufis, while agreeing with the previous two, acknowledge that, on their own, each method is limited. They propose that the two approaches must be complemented by the direct knowledge given by God, or gnosis.⁸ Man, in Islamic thought, has a beginning and an end, besides his current existence in the world.

Curing and Healing

The Quran refers to itself as a healing (Q17:82, Q41:44, Q10:57), a spiritual healing that goes beyond a physical cure/treatment. Why? Because Man is comprised of body (physical or outward dimension) and soul (spiritual or inner dimension), the latter of which is the human reality which the Quran is addressing. While the physical body is earthly (dust/clay), the soul is divine (from the Breath of the All-Merciful, *an-Nafas al-Rabman*). In other words, Man is a metaphysical being. In relation to the body, the soul is of a higher dimension and it is that which governs the body.⁹ And, there is recognition that one's spiritual conditions are directly related to one's physical health; hence, the emphasis in the Quran on the physical benefits of spiritual well-being.

⁷ The term 'philosophy' as currently understood in the West is different from how it is used by early Muslim philosophers. In today's understanding, philosophy is 'the attempt by man to reach ultimate knowledge of things through the use of his own rational and sensuous faculties and [to be] cut off completely from both the effusion of grace and the light of the Divine Intellect...' (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'The meaning and role of "philosophy" in Islam,' *Studia Islamica* XXXVII, 1973, 58) in contrast to philosophy as the gaining of certainty or the discovery of truth. In other words, for the early philosophers, philosophy was more than a rational method, it was a spiritual discipline aimed at illumination, awakening and self-transformation—a quest for wisdom (William C. Chittick, 'Reason, Intellect and Consciousness in Islamic Thought.' In A. T. Tymieniecka Ed., *Reason, Spirit and the Sacral in the New Enlightenment* US: Springer, 2011, 11-35).

⁸ William C. Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Teachings of Afdal al-Din Kasbani* (US: Oxford University Press, 2001), 31-32

⁹ Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, *Divine Governance of the Human Kingdom*. Trans. Tosun Bayrak Al-Jerrahi Al-Halveti (US: Fons Vitae, 1997).



Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, in *The Medicine of the Prophet* (1998), makes a clear distinction between the soul/heart¹⁰ (*qalb*) and the body. He distinguished between the heart/soul and the body because many verses in the Quran (e.g., Q2:10; Q22:53; Q47:29) refer to 'those in whose hearts is a disease.' His central concern is with the soul and the practical aspects of Muslim piety. But there is no dichotomy between the two, for man is a single entity who is at once both physical and spiritual.

In Islamic sources, the heart as a divine subtle faculty, is the core of the person and is the seat of knowledge, consciousness and faith. Indeed, in all religious traditions, the metaphorical images of the heart include, among others, the importance of purifying or refining of its quality, the connection between the physical and the spiritual as well as between the unreal and the real. Divine vision is reflected only in the mirror of the heart, which can be polished through various practices, such as prayer/supplication and self-renunciation. While nourishment for the body is *in* this world because Man is of this world, nourishment for the soul and its spiritual dimension is *not* of this world. That nourishment is the remembrance (*dhikr*) of God. Man, then, is to cultivate within his heart, a state of piety (*taqwa*) or God-consciousness.

Al-Jawziyya mentions that the heart suffers from two types of disease: *shubha* (obfuscation) and *shahwa* (concupiscence). *Shubha* includes doubt, uncertainty or error and is directly related to man's knowledge of God and religion. One who suffers from this condition will confuse or obscure things, while one afflicted by *shahwa* or lust will follow his desires without thought of its immorality. Both are spiritual diseases and must be treated to enable the person to become whole and sound. Because these diseases are impervious to the medicine of the doctors, religious and prophetic medicines are called for. Al-Jawziyya's remedies for these two conditions are certainty (*yaqin*) for *shubha*, and patience

¹⁰ Besides the terms, 'soul' (Arabic is *nafs*) and 'heart' (Arabic is *qalb*), 'spirit' (Arabic is *rub*) has also been applied to this inward dimension of man. They do not, however, refer to distinct and autonomous entities, only to different qualities or degrees of levels of a single reality. The higher dimension of the inward human reality is the *rub* while the lower dimension is the *nafs* for the former is the origin, while the heart and soul came into being only after the attachment of the spirit to the frame or the physical body (Q15:29).



for *shabwa* or lust and temptations.¹¹

In other words, while the science of medicine is important and, in some cases, obligatory, to be used whenever needed and wherever applicable, there is also the science of religion that is meant for healing to take place for Man to be whole. Just as Man is made up of the outward and the inward, the medicine of the doctors works at one level while religious healing takes place at another level. Just as God is the source of all physical health and illness, He is the One responsible for all healing.

For Muslims, these two views are not mutually exclusive, for medicine focuses on the body while religious healing works at the higher level of the heart—its inward spiritual aspect. The medical model focuses on curing and targets the elimination of disease at the bodily level, whereas religious healing emphasizes holistic healing, focusing on the person becoming whole. But certain conditions can only be cured if underlying imbalances are addressed. In these cases, cure is only sustainable when healing happens on a deeper level—in the heart, where it needs to work from the inside out. In other words, healing that goes to the heart changes everything. Unless this deeper work is carried out, other measures act only as temporary aids. The Quran as the Word of God is meant to heal the whole person to make one sound, for if the heart is diseased, one's actions will be corrupted. Thus, these two—curing and healing are not synonymous because one can be cured without healing, just as one can heal without curing.

Reactions to Covid-19

The reactions to Covid-19 in the West have been largely informed by its modernist ethos. In the West, beginning with the Renaissance in the 16th Century through to the Enlightenment of the 17th Century, religion that once included metaphysics and cosmology was pushed out, leaving Man without a transcendent God. The heretofore religious man was

¹¹ Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya, *Medicine of the Prophet* Trans. Penelope Johnstone (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1998); Gino Schallenberg, 'The Diseases of the Heart: A Spiritual Pathology by Ibn Qayyim al-Gawziya.' In Urbain Vermeulen & Jo Van Steenberghe Eds., *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk Eras III: Proceedings of the 6th, 7th and 8th International Colloquium organized at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in May 1997, 1998 and 1999* (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2001, 422-424).

now replaced by a more psychological one. This is akin to Nasr's¹² depiction of the Promethean Man from the Greek myth of Prometheus, who steals fire from the gods, and rebels against Heaven. Promethean Man, viewed as a product of the Renaissance, is what characterizes modern Man's understanding of himself. He has lost the sense of the sacred and lives only for this world. Promethean Man is contrasted with Pontifical Man, the traditional religious person who sees himself as a bridge between heaven and earth, with an awareness of a spiritual reality that transcends him. In uniting between the One and the Many, the universe depends on him for its continued existence. In other words, Pontifical Man is a bridge between the Divine and natural realms. He is the microcosm in which all attributes of the Divine are united.¹³ Promethean Man, on the other hand, sees himself as independent and self-sufficient, so the influx of Covid-19 with its resultant fatality has jolted him out of this illusion of self-sufficiency. This imminent threat results in fear, an intense emotion that triggers changes within him to take actions, whatever that may be. This fear, however, if prolonged, may be diffused and turn to anxiety, because his heart is filled only with the trappings of the world. And this is the reaction that we are currently seeing.

Thus, the fear associated with Covid-19 in most people may include loss, poverty, uncertainty of the future, as well as the fear of death itself,

¹² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989). 138-140.

¹³ 'Man is the microcosm in which all attributes are united, and in him alone does the Absolute become conscious of itself in all its diverse aspects. To put it in another way, the Absolute, having completely realised itself in human nature, returns into itself through the medium of human nature; or, more intimately, God and man become one in the Perfect Man—the enraptured prophet or saint—whose religious function as a mediator between man and God corresponds with his metaphysical function as the unifying principle by means of which the opposed terms of reality and appearance are harmonised' (Reynold A Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* US: ZuuBooks, 2011, 84-85).

among others. Promethean Man is terrified of death¹⁴ for two main reasons. First, death is looked upon as a great loss, a regret, a life cut short that still has much remaining to be accomplished. Second, having abolished the transcendent, death is seen as the ultimate nothingness, a feeling of dread, apprehension or angst. 'Terror management theory' posited by Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski¹⁵ describes the terror resulting from the inner conflict that derives from the basic human desire to live against the inevitability of death—to not die and cease existing. To counter this terror, Man embraces certain cultural beliefs or symbolic systems to provide him with meaning and value. The never-ending pre-occupations with wealth, possessions, and worldly status that characterize contemporary living are but a defence against the inescapable reality of one's own mortality. Consumed by this 'rat race,' people vie against one another until this heedlessness becomes second nature (Q102:1-8). Death then is the last thing on one's mind. For, without a God, Promethean Man is his own god. The world has become his oyster, to do with he pleases, resulting in all sorts of corruption. Put differently, corruption starts within the heart—in the essence of Man, when he severs his relationship with God (Q2:27). He corrupts himself and this corruption spreads outwards to affect other relationships because he feels he no longer needs to answer to a higher Power—the creative principle and ultimate ground of all existence. He becomes engrossed with the trappings of the world, thinking that he will remain forever in

¹⁴ Fear of death or '*thanatophobia*,' was first considered by Sigmund Freud. But to him, any death-related fear stems from unaddressed childhood trauma so death in itself is not seen to be a real occurrence. However, the most current theory on death is based on Ernst Becker's work. In *The Denial of Death* (1973), he argued that what we see as cultures and their activities are merely people's way to deny the terror of death. This symbolic defence mechanism helps people to survive as well as provide meaning to their lives because according to him, humans have a dualistic nature consisting of a physical self and a symbolic self, and the only way to transcend the problem of mortality is by focusing attention to the latter self. His work was taken up by Greenberg, Solomon and Pyszczynski and turned into terror management theory (TMT). TMT suggests that individuals must constantly deal with this internal conflict—the basic desire to live against the certainty of death. This conflict subsequently produces terror, and in their book, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (2015), they detail how the terror is then managed by embracing cultural beliefs, or symbolic systems to counter death with more durable forms of meaning and values.

¹⁵ Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, & Tom Pyszczynski. 'A Terror Management Theory of Social Behavior: The Psychological Functions of Self-Esteem and Cultural Worldviews.' *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 24 (1991) 93-159.



this world. Covid-19, however, brings into focus the inevitability of death, the end of one's predictable life. This is a common fear of modern Man.

For Pontifical Man or a Muslim who still remembers his covenant with God, death is not to be feared for it is a normal part of life, one of several stages that he has to go through in his journey of Origin to Return (*Mabda' wal-Ma'ad*). Death is not an annihilation; it is merely a movement from one 'world' to another. Thus, within this tradition, fear is reserved for God only, since 'Truly we are God's, and unto Him we return' (Q2:156). So fear is only meant for us to remember Him (Q2:281). In this case, the experience of Covid-19 brings a Muslim back to the remembrance of Him, to submit and surrender; 'Say: 'Nothing shall ever happen to us except what Allah has ordained for us. He is our Mawla (protector):' And in Allah let the believers put their trust' (Q9:51). And, in an even more explicit verse, the Quran says, **No calamity occurs on earth nor in yourselves but it is inscribed in the Book of Decrees before We bring it into existence. Verily, that is easy for Allah.**



No calamity can ever befall the earth, and neither your own selves, unless it be [laid down] in Our decree before We bring it into being: verily, all this is easy for God. [Know this,] so that you may not despair over whatever [good] has escaped you nor exult [unduly] over whatever [good] has come to you: for, God does not love any of those who, out of self-conceit, act in a boastful manner

- Muhammad Asad

These reminders serve to strengthen one's faith in the Almighty.

In other words, the fear brought upon by Covid-19 is a prompt to jolt and drive Man back to God. The Quran further states, 'And We will indeed test you with something of fear and hunger, and loss of wealth, souls and fruits; but give glad tidings to the patient' (Q2:155). Fear and grief, like happiness and peace, are tests from God; they are inevitable and are part of the reality of the world and of life itself.

Indeed, plagues and epidemics are not new phenomena (Sahih Muslim: 5495; see Note 6). Al-Asqalani ibn Hajar (1372-1449) composed a treatise on plagues during the plague year of 1431, and he distinguished between plague (Arabic *ta'un*) from the more general epidemic (or *waba'*). He made this distinction in part because plague, at the time, had no cure; thus, it was different from other epidemic diseases. While Covid-19 is a case of the latter, it can be categorized as *ta'un* due to the calamity it causes; i.e., its contagiousness resulting in widespread deaths.

Ibn Hajar was well-informed on the views of doctors working within the Islamic-Greek traditions, and he criticized the miasma theory of plague.¹⁶ According to him, true answers to such calamity are religious, so one needs to go back to the Quran and Hadiths of the Prophet (*saw*). Based on the Hadiths¹⁷ relating to plagues and pandemics, the religious understanding of plagues is that it is a mercy (*rahma*) to believers but a chastisement to others. His recommendations included repentance, supplication, and prayer along with medical instructions.¹⁸

Interweaving Responses

Indeed, after Descartes, God becomes Man's own creation and in this modern world where he now lives, reality is seen only from this 'science of bodies.' Cartesian philosophy with its disaggregated way of thinking has pervaded all aspects of contemporary life. Thus, belief in God and the quest for existential truth becomes exceedingly difficult for many in the current environment. Man, who was once understood as a whole, integrated spiritual being, is reduced to only the physical self.

¹⁶ See Michael W. Dols, 'Plague in Early Islamic History' *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 94 (1974) 371-383, who reported the history of plague in the Middle East after the Black Death (or the second plague pandemic) in the mid-fourteenth century based on the Arabic plague treatises, with Ibn Hajar's treatise being one of these. Due to their recurring nature, these epidemics have resulted in medical and religious-legal explanations and prescriptions that have influenced the reactions of Muslims toward the disease. Based on the Prophet's (*saw*) teachings, three principles were drawn up to confront the disease: (i) plague was a mercy and a martyrdom from God for the faithful Muslim and a punishment for the infidel; (ii) a Muslim should neither enter nor flee a plague-stricken land; and (iii) there was no contagion of plague, because disease came directly from God (p. 377). These three principles, however, have provoked controversy. While they did not unanimously describe the Muslim response to the disease, they did set the framework for the community's behavior

¹⁷ Hadiths: (i) "Plague is a calamity which was inflicted on those who were before you, or upon Bani Isra' il. So when it has broken out in a land, don't run out of it, and when it has spread in a land, then don't enter it" (Sahih Muslim: 5495); (ii) "It [*ta'un*] is a punishment that Allah sends upon whoever he wills, but Allah has made it a mercy for the believers. Any servant who resides in a land afflicted by plague, remaining patient and hoping for reward from Allah, knowing that nothing will befall him but what Allah has decreed, he will be given the reward of a martyr" (Sahih al-Bukhari: 5402); (iii) "...The martyrs are of five kinds: one who dies of plague; one who dies of diarrhea (or cholera); one who is drowned; one who is buried under debris and one who dies fighting in the way of Allah" (Sahih Muslim: 4705); (iv) "There is no disease that Allah has created, except that He also has created its treatment." (Sahih al-Bukhari: 5678).

¹⁸ Michael W. Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977).



This narrow notion of the self, seen as a construction of identity based on personality and memories is confined only to this temporal world. Muslims too have become this Promethean Man, a creature of this world, no longer a traveler who is just passing through on a journey of return. Thus, the fundamental aspect of Man's origin in a pre-temporal world, where all souls made a covenant with God, the start of his journey, is lost (Q7:172).

The Quran appeals to the inner life of Man, to his heart and mind. It talks about the importance of fearing God. Fear of Allah comes through one's belief and faith, in the recognition that He is responsible for all the good and bad in life. The Quran is replete with narrations of how past generations were tested with both hardships and ease for God tries humanity with both good and bad fortunes. When hardships replace ease and when wealth and children multiply, worldly gains give Man a false sense of security, and he forgets God. In other words, human beings were tried with adversity to soften their hearts, to generate humility and modesty, so as to enable them to place their trust once again in the All-Powerful One, for He is the ultimate cause of everything, Covid-19 being no exception, and, He is the only Refuge.

Fear, according to al-Ghazali,¹⁹ is a state of the heart which is gripped by pain (of burning fire) in anticipation of a future calamity. This state is contingent on knowledge of the cause of the calamity, and the fear experienced is in direct proportion to this knowledge. As a consequence, certain actions are taken. And, this is precisely what is occurring with Covid-19.

The science of bodies or the medical fraternity has drawn up a list of advice to prevent the spread of the virus. How each person perceives and understands this information differs, and it is this subjective understanding that will determine the intensity of his fear and, subsequently, his actions. This fear has also resulted in collective actions taken, notably some forms of lockdown by governments.

From the science of religion, a person whose heart is sound (one who is perpetually present with God) is not perturbed by this fear of the virus, for he fears only God. That fear is contingent on his knowledge of his soul and the majesty of God which then subjects him to be continuously

¹⁹ Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *Book of Hope and Fear*. Trans. William McKane (Leiden: Brill, 1965) 25.

vigilant. Hence, fear is meant to burn up doubt, uncertainty and lust and to incite in Man a state of piety or God-consciousness. Anything that makes him forgetful of God is a distraction that has to be removed. So, fear in this respect is both metaphysical and eschatological. From this perspective, fear is seen as a therapy for the heart to become whole in the remembrance of God.

In the science of bodies, physicians study the structure of the human body simply for medical purposes. But early Muslim scholars studied the body for a higher purpose—as a means to know the Almighty and His perfections. As mentioned by al-Ghazali,²⁰ ‘The knowledge of anatomy is the means by which we become acquainted with animal life: by means of knowledge of animal life, we may acquire a knowledge of the heart, and the knowledge of the heart is a key to the knowledge of God.’ Because Promethean Man has severed himself from God, this science of bodies stops short at just a physical heart. Thus, the response from this perspective is all externally oriented, as in the actions taken at both the individual and social levels—proper sanitization, wearing masks, social isolation and distancing, together with some forms of public lockdown.

In the science of religion that looks at Man as a metaphysical being, those previous measures alone are not enough; they only act as band-aids. In this perspective, the vertical relationship between the Creator and the created is central, and is taken into account just as the horizontal relationship among the created and with the rest of creation. Cure is important, but it is healing that is the lasting remedy, and this happens only on a deeper level, that of the heart, the medium that needs to work itself from the inside out. In other words, healing goes to the core and changes everything. It is the knowledge of the soul which cannot be obtained except through self-training and strivings in one’s own private space away from the vanities of the world and its lures.

Incidentally, the lockdown or forced quarantining has caused people to withdraw from the busyness and distractions of the world and thereby to confront the hidden self that lies underneath the busyness and the persona that is projected outwards to the world. Man may not recognize the hidden self but it is the beginning of knowing oneself. This journey towards a deeper awareness, afforded by the event of Covid-19, may

²⁰ Abu Ḥamid Al-Ghazali, *The Alchemy of Happiness*. Trans. Henry A. Homes (New York: Munsell, 1873) 39.

also provide an opportunity to re-connect with God, the Source of all existence. The practice, however, can only be done in one's heart, the vessel receptive to gifts from God, in the silence of the innermost self. This is how healing takes place; to make Man sound and whole, the work needs to be carried out within the heart and from here actions are brought forth. The Quran as the Word of God is directed to the heart for it to remember its primordial nature so that it can return to that state again—whole and sound, a fully integrated spiritual being. For the science of religions has, at its fountain-head, God—'Allah to Whom we belong and to Him we shall return' (Q2:156), our journey's end. But if the metaphysical is removed, then only the body remains. In this case, this world is all there is.

For the science of religion, Covid-19 serves as a stark reminder to human beings of their position vis-à-vis God—that of their mortality and frailty as creatures and how needful they are. God in His *rahma* is providing humanity with this opportunity to search within themselves to make amends for their forgetfulness and corruption. So, this is a time to self-reflect and to re-connect with Him, to trust in *Al-Wakil* and be at peace in His guarantee and to rely on *Al-Mukmin* for security and refuge, and it is a potent reminder that His is the only Refuge and protector from harm, both visible and invisible. As Al-Jawziyya states, we must, when blessed, give thanks; when tried, persevere; and when sinful, seek forgiveness.

Going Back to the Origin

The science of bodies views man only as an existent within a temporal world, and is silent on the subject of his beginning and end. Because he is a creature of this world and lives only for this world, at death he ceases to exist, for his bodily functions have stopped. That is his end. He does not need or care to know what happens beyond death because this worldly life is all there is.

In the Islamic tradition, however, as in other faith traditions, there is a complete narrative to man's existence; there is a beginning (where he comes from), a middle (his existence in this world) and an end (where he heads to after death and the eschatological events that follow). The Quran states that God created man in the most beautiful stature (Q95:4),

and has honored and ennobled him through knowledge.²¹ Indeed, among the very first verses revealed to the Prophet were those related to the creation of the human being and his knowledge (Q96:1-5) for human beings are created for the knowledge of God and his creations. It is knowledge that sets Man apart from other creations (Q2:34) for when He breathed of His *ruh* (or Spirit) into him, He elevated Man (Q38:72). It is this *ruh* of God that makes him theomorphic, giving him a divine nature and an awareness of who he is vis-à-vis the Creator. So, Man is more than just a physical body, he is the connection between God and the cosmos. Indeed, Man and cosmos are mirror images of one another, both created in the image of God. Man is considered as a microcosm—complete in itself with all of God’s Names and Attributes gathered in him, while the cosmos, or the play of theophanies, is a macrocosm—where God’s Names and Attributes are manifested. In this understanding, the cosmos is the exteriorization of the human substance, whereas the human soul is the interiorization of the outside world. Thus, for the Man ‘who is able to see,’ living is consciousness, and that he is not at the same level as other creations.

Covid-19 is also God’s creation, one that functions as an invasion of the unseen world to remind us, who as *nisyan* keep forgetting the Lord of the Worlds, to remember Him. So God as *Al-Hakim*, ‘He who does what is proper for what is proper as is proper’²² puts things in their proper places, for much has been corrupted by men (Q30:41). Corruption is manifest on land and in the sea due to humanity’s greed and so, in His Mercy, God tries us so that we would return to Him. He Knows. As His creation, humanity can only accept, and this is our ‘submission’ to Him. While many people tend to see things from the perspective of outward appearance and to judge by merely human standards, they forget that there are also the inward realities which are based on Divine principles. Indeed, the ‘outward’ and ‘inward’ are two faces of a single unified reality.

²¹ According to Frank Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), Islamic civilization is one that is essentially characterized by knowledge (*‘ilm*). Indeed, ‘There is no branch of Muslim intellectual life, of Muslim religious and political life, and of the daily life of the average Muslim that remained untouched by the all-pervasive attitude toward ‘knowledge’ as something of supreme value for Muslim being’ (4). The Arabic *‘ilm*, however, is more than knowledge (refer to his tripartite relationship of *‘ilm-amal-adab*).

²² William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989). 174

So one response to Covid-19 is to flee to God. Just as it is God who is the source of all blessings, prosperity and ease, He also created calamities and hardships. Both are His tests, for Man to know himself and others too. What God does is out of His wisdom, for the benefit of all His creations. He needs nothing, He is the Self-Sufficient (Q4:131-132). In other words, He does not need humanity. It is humanity who is needful and poor. In the larger picture of things, Covid-19 works according to the Divine plan and His wisdom, to remind humanity to self-reflect and know what it witnessed at Alast, the time of the Primordial Covenant, when Man attested to the Lordship and Reality of his Maker. This is the *bikmah* of Covid-19.

Conclusion

Events like Covid-19 will always provide an occasion for reflection. Promethean Man is dependent on the science of bodies while Pontifical Man is more attuned to the science of religion. There is an apparent contest between the two. The simultaneous experience of individual and collective panic, and outbursts of interpretation as to why the disease has occurred and the resulting competing strategies taken are contingent on the two opposing views on the nature of Man. Because Promethean Man cannot talk about God for his science is devoid of the sacred or the transcendent, his approach is only limited to this world, though there are inklings of a malaise. As far back as the 19th century, Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) described man as a 'homo duplex,' divided between the level of the profane and driven by instincts—with desires and appetites—and a sacred level. What allows man to transcend the profane to the sacred is a collective conscience imposed by socialization or a normative system that regulates behavior. More recently, Jonathan Haidt²³ extended Durkheim's work by insisting that there must be a staircase connecting the profane to the sacred. But, because the modern secular society has been built to satisfy the lower profane self, the search for the staircase to the sacred still remains. However, note that the sacred in both is still *in* this world. Only Pontifical Man can transcend to perceive things as they are, for his heart has been strengthened by its reliance on God.

²³ Jonathan Haidt, *TedTalk: Religion, Evolution, and the Self-Ecstasy of Self-Transcendence* (2012).

Available at https://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan_haidt_religion_evolution_and_the_ecstasy_of_self_transcendence?language=en. Accessed 3/12/2020.

There is a danger in the Western scientific tendency to flatten the world to conform to its horizontalized conception. The Muslim's response to Covid-19 has to be different from that worldview. We end with a quote from al-Ghazali:

The one who claims that the Quran has no other meaning than what exoteric exegesis (*zahir al-tafsir*) has explained (*tarjama*), should know that he has acknowledged his own limitations and therefore is right with regards to himself, but is wrong in an opinion which brings everyone else down to his level.

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