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Intimacy with God and Coronavirus in Pakistan

Nadeem Malik

ABSTRACT: Intimacy with God is at the heart of Islamic practice through prayer. Intimacy with fellow congregants became central to the worship practices promoted by religious leaders during the holy month of Ramadan even when social distancing was required because of the pandemic. This was, by and large, an economic matter. Clerics and mosques rely significantly on the income generated through collective worship, especially during Ramadan. This article provides an account of people's sense of intimacy with God and fellow congregants during Ramadan and how it contributed to the spread of the coronavirus in Pakistan.

KEYWORDS: collective prayer, coronavirus, God, intimacy, Islam, Pakistan, Ramadan

I was on a research sabbatical in Pakistan during January–February and April–June 2020, which was a period that saw the significant spread of coronavirus in the country. Originally planning to do my ethnographic fieldwork on village governance in Pakistan, the coronavirus made it difficult to live in villages and do ethnography due to the health risks associated with the pandemic. Therefore, I was compelled to stay in the city of Lahore for most of my research sabbatical. I lived in Lahore during the holy month of Ramadan too. In Lahore, I had the opportunity to visit local markets and talk to people about the pandemic. I also monitored press and electronic media to draw insights on the current situation in the country. My observations and informal conversations with people from different strata of Lahore's population illuminate the overarching influence of religion on the way people perceived and dealt with the coronavirus.

In this article, I will demonstrate how the performance of intimacy with God through prayers in mosques contributed to the spread of the coronavirus in Pakistan. As will be shown, Pakistan is living in an era where intimacy with God is not considered merely a personal affair. To most Pakistanis, it is a collective concern.

Intimacy with *Allah* (God) in Islamic spirituality is defined as the presence of a relationship with

Allah that affects the individual's self-worth, sense of meaning, and connectedness with others and nature (Nasr 1997). In following the set of rituals and codes of Islamic religion, an individual strives to become intimate with *Allah* and to find personal worth and actualisation (Khodayarifard et al. 2008). An old acquaintance, Suleman Sheikh – a religiously inclined but well-read business executive working in a large textile industry in Lahore – quoted the theologian David Legge's conceptualisation of intimacy with God:

Intimacy, I think, can be broken down into several words. 'In to me see' – it would be good to remember that, 'In to me see', intimacy. So God is saying: 'Intimacy with me is you seeing into my heart; and my intimacy with you is me seeing right into you, who you are'. It's like when we discover that we are attracted to a member of the opposite sex, and then we seek to pursue them, and then it follows that we want to be around them – so it is the same with God. To know him is to love him and to love him is to want to be in his company.

To sum up, Suleman argues that intimacy with *Allah* means to love Him – the act of coming out of oneself and approaching the ultimate 'other', who we do not see. Islamic scripture provides ample evidence of such an approach. An individual's relationship with *Allah* is the focal point of Islamic spirituality. At the heart



of the human–divine relationship is divine love. *Allah's* love for humans is manifested in divine sayings: 'God says: "O child of Adam, it is your right from me that I be a lover for you. So, by my right from you, be for me a lover"' (Ibn Arabi 2004: 24). The intimacy with *Allah* is further revealed in the Qur'an, for example: *He is with us wherever we are* (57:4); and *he is also closer to us than our jugular vein* (50:16). Muslims are commanded to seek such intimacy through prayers in which they submit to him unconditionally to be close to him. The act of submission is performed through five prayers a day and recitation of the Quran. In Islam, prayers involve bodily practices such as *wuzoo* ('ablution'). The act of performing ablution involves washing the face, hands, arms and feet with the intent of cleansing and purifying oneself to hold an audience with *Allah* through prayers.

Such prayers signify people seeking intimacy with God at an individual as well as collective level. It is assumed that God gives rewards which are multiplied through collective worship during the holy month of Ramadan. In Ramadan, while getting a haircut in a salon, in a market close to my guest house, when I asked the hairdresser why people are gathering in mosques when they should be practising social distancing to avoid contracting the virus, he replied with religious zeal:

Ramadan is a month of beatitude. God bestows a hundred times more *sawab* ['rewards'] for praying and fasting in this month. When I was a child, my late father, while taking me to a mosque in Ramadan, used to say that collective praying in this month brings further *sawab*. Therefore, there is no substitute to collective worshiping and fasting during Ramadan. We have been collectively praying and fasting for years during Ramadan: how can we stop doing this when we face God's wrath of coronavirus? Showing our intimate love for God to seek his forgiveness through prayers in this month is the way to stay safe from this devil.

Interestingly, there is no compulsion in Islam for collective prayer in the holy month, and those who are sick or are travelling are exempted from fasting. However, despite being aware of such verses, the clerics in Pakistan generally had insisted and agitated for excluding mosques from lockdown, and for the permissibility of collective prayers. Such orthodoxy is a result of a long process of Islamisation of Pakistani society. In contemporary Pakistan, people worship God for comfort and ontological security more than ever because of the dire economic situation, increasing crime and deteriorating law and order in the country.

Intimacy with God and Coronavirus

Most people I interacted with thought that the pandemic was God's wrath on the world. The remedy, in their opinion, was collective prayer in the mosques, especially collective prayer during Ramadan. The opinion of a local *imam* ('priest') of a mosque near the place I was living signifies what people generally thought about collective prayers during Ramadan:

This is high time that we establish our intimacy with *Allah* – he will only listen if we demonstrate our love for him. Intimacy with *Allah* is not merely an intimate private but a collective affair as well. The performance of prayer establishes love with *Allah*, which is an intimate affair. Only I know my relationship with *Allah*. However, collective prayer in a mosque is preferred in Islam because it allows individuals as well as the wider community to establish love with him. *Allah* only listens to those who love him.

Citizens, therefore, crowded into mosques every day in Ramadan for collective prayer, and they fasted all day, holding feasts after sundown with family and friends. Those were ripe conditions for the coronavirus to spread. *Imams* around the world were asking people to stay home. However, in Pakistan, pandemic or no pandemic, hardline clerics were calling the shots, overriding the government's nationwide lockdown, which began a month before Ramadan. Most clerics complied with the shutdown when it was announced, but some of the most famous ones immediately called on worshipers to attend Friday prayers in even higher numbers. Devotees attacked police officers who tried to get in their way. As Ramadan drew closer, dozens of well-known clerics and leaders of religious parties – including some who had initially obeyed the lockdown orders – signed a letter demanding that the government exempt mosques from the shutdown during the holy month, lest they invite the anger of God and the faithful (Kamal 2020). The negotiations between the *ulema* and Pakistani government authorities ensued and were signs of the tensions that exist between Islamist political thinking (presented and argued in theological language) and secularised reasoning that does not rely on supernatural claims to explain the phenomenon. What the *ulema* or other Islamists of different stripes aspire to (notwithstanding differences in their method) is a state and society ordered around God's law.

In the end, the government gave in, signing an agreement that allowed mosques to stay open during Ramadan, as long as they followed the standard operating procedures (SOPs), which included the forcing of congregants to maintain a two-metre distance,

arranging their own prayer mats and doing their ablutions at home (Kamal 2020). Due to weak state governance and implementation of laws, the SOPs were hardly followed, and crowded mosques helped in the spreading of the virus on a large scale.

The month of Ramadan was considered an opportunity to pray for the control of the virus, as there is a belief that fasting and prayers in Ramadan bring rewards far greater than rewards in other months. According to Islamic traditions, the Prophet Muhammad said the following about Ramadan:

‘Who so ever performs a recommended prayer in this month *Allah* will keep the fire of Hell away from him’ . . . Whoever performs an obligatory prayer *Allah* will reward him with seventy prayers [worth] in this month.’ And who so ever prays a lot during this month will have his load lightened on the day of measure. ‘He who recites one verse of the Holy Quran will be given the rewards of reciting the whole Quran during other months.’ ‘O, People! Indeed during this month, the doors of heaven are open, therefore ask *Allah* not to close them for you; the doors of Hell are closed, so ask *Allah* to keep them closed for you. During this month, Shaytan (Satan) is imprisoned, so ask your Lord not to let him have power over you.’ (The Network 2015)

Although the above *Hadith* (saying of the Prophet Muhammad) does not mention whether the prayer should be performed in the mosque or at home, this *Hadith* was cited by many stressing the need for collective prayer to get God’s blessings against coronavirus or to get to heaven in case of death. While taking an Uber, I asked the driver what he thought of the pandemic and how to deal with it; in answer, he quoted the above *Hadith* and said:

God determines death. Corona or no corona, we will die because of coronavirus if that is our fate. However, Muslims are lucky that God’s wrath in the form of coronavirus [was] incurred in the month of Ramadan. God has provided Muslims with an opportunity to pray and get God’s blessing to open the doors of heaven to those who are destined to die and cure the sick destined to live. Lockdown will contribute nothing but prevent [the] Muslim brotherhood from praying to fight coronavirus collectively.

The above view confirms what most people I interacted with thought of the solution to fight the virus. Consequently, during Ramadan, mosques were crowded with people not following any SOPs announced by the government. The rapid spread of the virus was, therefore, inevitable. While innocent citizens following clerics engaged in collective reli-

gious practices, for *ulemas* Ramadan brought fortune due to people’s religious beliefs and economic and health insecurity caused by the virus. Clerics turned the idea of intimacy with God through prayer into an industry run for minting money and gaining political influence. Such has always been the case, but this time the dividends of collective prayer in mosques were unprecedented. In this regard, Abi-Habib and Rehman (2020) reported the following:

While clerics acknowledge that their mosques are perfect vectors for the coronavirus’s spread – worshippers gather to perform ablutions together before cramming into the mosques, shoulder to shoulder in supplication – they say they have to protect their bottom line: money and influence. ‘We know the coronavirus pandemic is a global health issue, but religious duties cannot be abandoned,’ said Maulana Ataullah Hazravi, a Karachi-based cleric. And, he added, ‘mosques depend largely on the donations collected during Ramadan.’ That point – money – was high on the list of grievances that the clerics raised in their letter last week. Worshipers open their wallets wide during Ramadan, donating millions of dollars. And in places like Pakistan, where mosques are not under the authority of the state, the money can make or break an *imam* and the followings they try to build, often to parlay into political power to challenge the government. Pakistani clerics have frequently used their religious authority to get loyalists to lay siege to the capital, for example, forcing the state to change policies they disagree with.

Secular-minded individuals arguing for a scientific solution to the problem were enormously worried. Doctors were especially worried about such views. Contrary to the above perceptions, doctors dealing with hundreds of cases every day viewed the government’s testing efforts as insufficient and the data on corona-positive cases unreliable, which they thought was a significant obstacle to devising effective strategies to control the virus. They also believed that religious practices during Ramadan would be detrimental to implementing any efforts to control the spread of the virus. On my visit to a friend’s clinic – a certain Dr. Ajmal – to record his take on the current situation of the virus in the country, he seemed disappointed. He expressed his disgust about the government’s testing efforts and not debunking misinformation and unsupported claims about Islam.

In conclusion, Pakistan provides a unique case of how intimacy with God spread coronavirus in a country. This is because, intimacy with fellow congregants became central to the worship practices pro-

moted by religious leaders during the holy month of Ramadan, even when social distancing was required because of the pandemic. Empirical evidence suggests the distance between people's collective worship and their perception of God as an attachment figure that provides comfort and ontological security to them and the scientific practices that demand social distancing to prevent the disease and deaths in the country. Religious practices were privileged during Ramadan with the belief that even if people die they would still be rewarded by God.

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