

Religiosity During Lockdown: The Role of Faith-Based Communities During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Bismillah Irrahman Irraheem. In the name of God, the most gracious, and the most merciful.

In the Quran, Allah states, “so be patient; indeed, the (best) outcome is for the righteous.” [11:49]. Few would deny that patience is a virtue, and in my faith tradition, I am called to believe that God promises good tidings to those who look beyond the trials and troubles of the world around, maintain perspective, and aspire for a peace of mind rooted in faith. Surprisingly, such verses have real health implications as well.

Public health emerged as a pivotal and invaluable discipline during the pandemic. What was before confined to public health departments and academic spaces became dinner table conversations for Americans all over the country. From

mask mandate ethics to the benefits of vaccination, people became increasingly versed in the language of public health and how its core functions — assessment, policy development, assurance — are employed to keep populations healthy.

Although many consider income, housing, and education to be the most prominent social determinants of health, religion is often overlooked for carrying equal weight. Religiosity and spiritual practices have been shown to predict favorable social, physical, and psychological health. Especially among youth, mindfulness and spirituality should be fostered, encouraged, and taught as a mode of ensuring positive health outcomes. Although such a shift in perspective

can offer benefits at any point in life, it is especially potent during trying times.

The pandemic has demonstrated the fragility of our dunya — the temporal world and its materialistic concerns. In the blink of an eye, social structures including our educational institutions and occupations crumbled under our feet. We became isolated amid the forceful turbulence of an ever-changing world. Even now, as we begin to return to ‘normal conditions’, COVID-19 has left its mark on the world; surgical masks remain in parts of the world, as do vaccination requirements and quarantine enforcements. The world we once knew will likely never be fully returned to.

Yet, during a period when stability was all but a recent memory, and during a time when we often questioned the true meaning of life, two polar paths arose: to lose faith or to strengthen it. As we found difficulty in navigating our new lives, many of us found ourselves either straying away from or growing closer to our respective faiths. Many Muslims in and around Boston, though, were exceedingly fortunate to have Arkanum: a faith-based



Mosques throughout the world were closed during the pandemic, leaving a spiritual gap in the lives of people of faith. For many, this resulted in negative health outcomes.

youth program that was on a mission to ameliorate the consequences of the pandemic, and offer its community members an unmatched growth experience.

Many Muslim youth call Boston and the surrounding towns home. On Saturdays, a number of these youth choose to spend their day with Arkanum, which serves to develop religiosity and global mindedness holistically in our community’s upcom-

ing generation of leaders. As minorities on many fronts in their respective neighborhoods, time spent with those who hold the same faith is cherished. Typically, Arkanum hosts sessions and events at the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center (ISBCC). Resting on the corner of Malcolm X Boulevard and Elmwood Street in Roxbury, this mosque is known as a hub for community events and scholastic pursuits. However, the rapid emergence of Covid-19 forced the mosque to close, and with tighter social distancing and social gathering regulations, Arkanum transitioned to Zoom. Guided by an ethos of educating the youth and building community, the Arkanum leadership team was determined to make this lockdown a memorable, spiritual experience.

Mahmoud El-Rifai, a research scientist at Harvard Medical School and a Master's in Psychology candidate, is also a mentor at Arkanum. As someone who I hold in high esteem, I have enjoyed reflecting with Mahmoud on our shared pandemic experience. His perspective was educational. "The pandemic forced us as humans to act against our natures. We are social

beings — we like to have friends, leave our homes, and be active in our communities. I personally know people who were devastated. People were depressed, people lost their jobs, and people became isolated — especially students who moved to the U.S. to study and ended up alone at home."

When I raised the topic of Arkanum's response to the pandemic, the mood of the conversation shifted.

"For people who wanted to connect, the creativity button was pushed. We had to come up with an exceptional and creative way to let people socialize safely. We created games online for seventy to eighty people on Zoom. For people who didn't show up virtually, we reached out to them and checked on them."

As Mahmoud spoke, I reminisced about the many nights I spent with my Muslim peers digitally, playing trivia games, having animated debates, and learning from scholars about Islamic jurisprudence for hours. It was an experience marked by personal growth. Especially during Rama-

dan, the holiest month for Muslims, it was a privilege being able to connect with beloved community members during the lockdown period of the pandemic.

As a former mentee and current mentor of this youth group, I am confident that the pandemic was a truly formative experience. While grappling with constant change during my senior year of high school — much of it spent at home — and beginning my transition into college, having those long nights on Zoom with my Boston-based friends and Islamic scholars from across the sea allowed me to reflect, introspect, and make sense of my experiences. Arkanum helped me realize that although everything in the material world is fluid and irregular, and although circumstances may abruptly change, faith is constant. In a world of moving parts, one can always lean on religion for stability. Taking agency over my faith and spirituality rooted me, despite balancing on unsteady ground.

Inevitably, the spiritual experiences of the Muslim community varied widely during the pandemic. Even today, the



A momentous socially-distanced Eid prayer during the pandemic. Program director Abubakr Fakhry is pictured leading the prayer and reciting the Quran through a Zoom call.

pandemic is far from over, and friends and loved ones may still struggle with its consequences. Those fortunate enough to have pillars of support in their lives and faith-based circles to turn to may have seized the opportunity to grow. As observed with Arkanum, people and community leaders found a silver lining within the gloomy picture of the pandemic. Yet, for the majority of religious people in the United States, this was not the case.

For the latter, losing a loved one to COVID-19 may have catalyzed their loss of faith. Job insecurity and financial hardships may have propelled others into a mental prison of anxiety and stress, leaving no room for the calming serenity of religious remembrance. The lack of human connection and amplification of pre-existing personal qualms may have been an agent for melancholy and hopelessness. In my conversation with Mahmoud, such stories emerged.

“There was a student from Gaza, Palestine, who was here all alone and suddenly got stuck at home. During Ramadan, we distributed some food to people in the community to show our love, and when we appeared at his doorstep, he told us ‘you don’t know how much this means to me’. The pandemic made us appreciate the little things.”

The leadership team was able to orchestrate a socially distanced Eid prayer and invited the Gazan brother to join. He remarked that it was one of the best experiences he has had. Despite the importance of this holiday prayer, no one would have been

surprised if this event was not organized. The logistics were challenging and the time to prepare was limited, especially considering the health and safety concerns. The need for spiritual uplifting, though, was too great. The team instructed everyone in the community to drive to the Soldier’s Field Park parking lot in Allston, tune into a group call, and pray in their cars while listening to the imam recite from their phone speakers. The sense of camaraderie and resiliency was profound. For the majority of the youth, hope and faith reigned in their hearts as they overcame the challenges of this era and practiced their faith.

Looking forward, we must learn from this time in order to benefit in the future. We must dissect the positive and negative stories that emerged from the pandemic, and prepare ourselves to always make the best of inevitable hardship. All faith communities in the United States and the world must find ways to unite in the face of adversity, bind together to elevate those in need, and design ways to foster religiosity from the confines of home. We must challenge ourselves to be creative, solution-driven, and cognizant of the magnitude of influ-

ence community and faith can have in one's life. A religious perspective allows us to see the meaning behind catastrophe. It gives purpose to our struggles and lights an unquenchable fire of hope during the most dire times. For people who lead lives of faith, it can be the difference between triumph and despair during the next inescapable pandemic. Generally, religious traditions allow us to transcend our wills and desires in light of the common good. It strengthens our conviction in the validity of selflessness and service, and prompts us to reject the self-interestedness that our society and culture promotes. Instead of living in competition with one another in an endless race for wealth and honors, faith teaches us to uphold human dignity, become appreciative of the blessings we were favored with, subordinate materialism and the mundane to eternal virtuousness, and extend help to those who need it most because it is our duty to use our gifts as a tool to serve others. In public health ethics, as was elucidated by this ruthless pandemic, such a mindset could have a magnitude of influence.

I leave you with this message. When the world seems like it contains chaos at every turn and when the toxic drops of distress have seeped into the deepest crevices of your being, "Do not lose heart nor fall into despair! You shall triumph if you are believers." [Quran 3:139].