

The prevention and treatment of pandemics from a religious standpoint – is cleanliness a cure or a way of life?

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As science undergoes significant developments and mankind has found new cures for various diseases on earth, we are still no closer to discovering the mysteries of life and its secrets. There are many complexities that shock mankind and push them to search for an all-powerful creator. Humanity has been stopped in its tracks by the smallest and apparently weakest of creations, and even after the advanced civilisation we inhabit and the technological resources we possess we have no answer to the Coronavirus. This goes to show the difference in strength between the creation and the creator: “[It is] the work of Allah, who perfected all things” (Surat al Naml 88).

This virus is a microorganism that cannot be seen by the naked eye; it is all around us however. It is part of a larger family of pathogens, some beneficial and some harmful that come in different shapes and sizes and play differing roles in the ecosystem. These pathogens live in different places in the human body, with some occupying the digestive system, others the respiratory system and so on. Some pathogens enjoy symbiotic relationships in the human body and are found naturally within it. Some however invade the body which leads to a battle with the immune system which can lead to illness and in the worst case scenario, death.

The spread of pandemics amongst humanity depends on a variety of factors. Amongst them is the presence of animals which carry said diseases, and other factors include the ability of the pathogen to spread in the air and in fluids. Moreover, the strength of a person’s immune system must be borne in mind as this can play a large part in the severity of a disease (1). The Islamic faith has focussed on the importance of taking care of one’s health; in the first instance this involves preserving the natural environment and eating only what Allah has made permissible and following the Sunnah of the prophet PBUH as this relates back to the cleanliness of the individual and the good of society as a whole and prevents the spread of diseases.

1. Individual cleanliness in Islam

Islam has honed in on the importance of cleanliness and has emphasised its link to general health. From the Shariah perspective this is focussed on in terms of wudu and ghusl and their importance for prayer but these activities go beyond rituals before praying. If practised generally on a daily basis they can go some way to combatting diseases through the spread of good hygiene practises. As the hadith of the prophet PBUH narrated by Muslim says “cleanliness is half of faith”. Cleanliness is explained in detail in books on fiqh and this underlines its importance in faith. Below are more detailed examples in the Shariah on individual cleanliness:

Wudu

Prayer is obligatory upon every Muslim five times per day - “O you who have believed, when you rise to [perform] prayer, wash your faces and your forearms to the elbows and wipe over your heads and wash your feet to the ankles” (Surat Maida verse 6). For one’s prayer to be permissible, a Muslim has to perform wudu and part of this is cleaning areas of one’s body which tend to be exposed like the hands and the face for example. The Sunnah of the prophet PBUH was to clean every exposed area three times. This continuous washing on a daily basis helps clean the exposed areas of an individual’s skin which are constant contact with pathogens which could include up to ten million pathogens per square centimeter. The washing of the nose and mouth as part of wudu helps protect the internal organs as they are the gateways to pathogens entering the body.

The Miswak and oral hygiene

The mouth contains huge numbers of pathogens and the plaque on one’s teeth can contain up to 100 billion of them. Some of these pathogens feed on the remnants of food in the mouth, they then release secretions which can result in mouth odor. Some pathogens gather even after tooth whitening takes place (2). Therefore, the prophet PBUH spoke of using the miswak to complement the act of wudu

to protect against the plethora of pathogens in the mouth. He even went as far as to say “Were I not afraid that it would be hard on my followers, I would order them to use the miswak (as obligatory, for cleaning the teeth)” (3). If the Prophet PBUH prayed at night, he used the miswak prior. The use of the miswak is not simply connected to eating and drinking only, it should be used at all times and even when fasting and it was narrated by Bukhari that the Prophet PBUH stated that “The miswak is cleansing for the mouth and pleasing to the Lord.”

Ghusl

Our religion has obligated the cleaning of the entire body with water, in some parts of the body this is obligatory and in some this is preferred. As the prophet PBUH stated “It is a duty for Allah upon every Muslim to perform a ritual bath at least once every seven days, washing his head and his body.” Ghusl from janabah is obligatory as prayer is not permissible in this state. An individual who undergoes ghusl then washes away any pathogens from his skin. Studies have indicated that bathing can get rid of up to 90% of these pathogens from one’s skin.

Natural benefits mentioned in the Sunnah

It was narrated by Bukhari that the prophet PBUH said “Ten acts are part of natural instinct: trimming the moustache, letting the beard grow, using the miswak, sniffing water into the nose, clipping the nails, washing the knuckles, removing hair from the underarms, shaving the pubic hair, and cleaning the private parts with water”. This hadith lists various actions that our beloved prophet tells us to do and he mentions them a natural instincts and not necessarily Muslim actions. A plethora of publications have been written about this hadith and the importance of cleanliness from guarding against diseases. During the Coronavirus crisis, lots of people have enquired about the lack of interest amongst Muslims on the issues of the toilet roll shortage. Muslims use a more hygienic method to clean and that is via instinja which uses water. The use of water instead of tissues is also better for the environment as less trees are cut down to produce toilet paper (4).

Cleanliness of the orifices

Islam has stressed the importance of hygiene of the bodily orifices for prayer. Cleanliness from excrement is of vital importance and the body and clothes of an individual should be free from it. This is so important that the prophet said that a man experienced punishment in the grave due to leaving remnants of excrement on his clothes.

2. The cleanliness of society as a whole

Islam is concerned with hygiene in all forms; purity of the individual and purity in terms of hygiene and cleanliness. Spiritual diseases affect the faith of an individual and subsequently impact society too. In terms of physical

diseases, there are various modern methods to guard our society against them.

The cleanliness of mosques and streets

The mosque is the primary location for the congregation of Muslims hence should be clean at all times and should always smell good. Cleanliness doesn’t stop at the personal level, or that of mosques and houses but reaches to streets and the surroundings. It was said that when Abu Musa Al-Ashari reached Basra, he told its people that “I was sent by the caliph to teach you from the book, teach you the tradition of your prophet and to clean your roads for you”. Amongst the most beautiful hadith is when the prophet PBUH was asked about what would benefit others and replied “Remove harmful things from the roads of the Muslims.”

The cleanliness before congregations

Islam emphasizes the importance of personal hygiene and washing prior to being in congregations. This includes any of the five daily prayers or the Friday prayer and it is required that one wears clean clothes to stop the spread of disease.

Sneezing

The prophet PBUH also made recommendations regarding sneezing. It was narrated by Tirmidhi that he said “When one of you sneezes and praises Allah, it is a duty on every Muslim to say to him: May Allah have mercy on you. “ As we know, airborne droplets contribute to the spread of infectious diseases including influenza, polio, rubella and many others. This is why the prophet PBUH warned against breathing on food and it was narrated by Muslim that he also said, “When one of you yawns, he should hold his hand over his mouth”.

Self-isolation and quarantine

Scholars have spoken of various methods to prevent the spread of pandemics and infectious diseases though the prophet PBUH spoke of this centuries earlier. He established two main principles in the prevention of infectious diseases, one was isolation and the other was quarantine. For the first it was narrated by Bukhari that the prophet once said “do not mix the sick with the healthy.” For the second, it was narrated by Bukhari he said, “If you hear of a plague in a land, then do not go into it. If it happens in land where you are, then do not go out of it.” In that way, Islam has advised on dealing with pandemics for more than a millennium. The wisdom of isolation and quarantine are now clear to see. Scientists understand that some people may be carriers of a disease and be asymptomatic or suffer very mild symptoms but could spread it to others who may become very ill. It was Amr ibn an Aas who introduced isolation measures during the Plague of Emmaus in the year 18th post-hijra. He said “O’people, this pain is like fire, so avoid it in the mountains (social distancing) so spread” they did so and there are

close parallels with today's social distancing and ensuring that people are not close together to spread disease (5).

This is a brief summary on what Islam has advised us to do more than 1,400 years ago, when pandemics arrive. Unfortunately, some still do not heed the advice even though what Islam has advised is for the common good. The preservation of life is a crucial aspect of the Shariah. It is beyond the scope of this article to delve into other issues which may affect one's health and which Islam has advised us against such as drinking alcohol or eating pork. The researcher in this area will be pleasantly surprised to learn that the daily life of a Muslim and their attempts to remain healthy and in good spirits to continue contributing to their society keeps making a positive impact and helps ward against diseases.

References

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