The Covid-19 pandemic in Muslim countries

by Caterina Gagliardi

The Covid-19 approach to the health emergency of Muslim countries may prove to be of considerable interest if one considers their specific social and legal connotations. For this reason, even though without any pretension of exhaustiveness, the following analysis proposes, on the one side, to understand to what extent the governmental dynamics of prevention of contagion - some of which are still in progress - have affected the systems of guarantee of liberties and fundamental rights; on the other side, it is intended to verify what has been the role of the Islamic religion in the process of adoption of the institutional responses to the crisis.

On the subject, it was considered interesting to listen to the point of view of two scholars, of Islamic religion, who live in those realities. In particular, the direct opinions of Dr. Tehseen Nisar, a Muslim woman of Pakistan origin and expert in Sociology of Terrorism at the International Security Observatory of the Luiss Guido Carli in Rome, and of Prof. Mohamed Arafa, of Egyptian origin, even if transplanted to the United States for years, and professor of law at Indiana University and Alexandria University, were collected.

As it emerged, the fight against the pandemic crisis represented a deep concern for all the Muslim Countries which, even if characterized by a considerable heterogeneity from the political and constitutional point of view, aligned themselves, in different times and with different modalities, with the
RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

instructions and measures indicated by the scientific authorities as necessary for the containment of the contagion.

However, the recommendations of isolation and social distancing have ended up affecting, on a substantial level, the individual and collective exercise of the hard-won freedoms in many Arab-Islamic countries. With regard to it, it was inevitable, in the light of the Shari'a, to question the legitimacy or otherwise of the measures of prevention.

The question arose with regard to the restrictions on the celebration of rites shared among the faithful and whose suspension was necessary when the risk of contagion became highly significant.

As reported also by Tehseen Nizar, for example, the Islamic feasts of Eid-ul Fitr, held at the end of Ramadan, and Eid-ul-Azha, celebrated in the last month of the Islamic calendar Zil Hajj, were affected by the adoption of the rigid guidelines which, introduced in almost all the Muslim countries, forced the citizens to remain at home, without being able to share the celebrations. On the occasion of Eid-ul Fitr, in particular, the faithful were forbidden to embrace and shake hands in solidarity. In Pakistan, as elsewhere, there were fewer congregations attending mosques on the occasion of these festivities.

Even the closure of places of worship has ended up affecting the traditional practice of Islamic belief. On the one hand, it was considered that the

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1 In this regard, Tehseen Nisar reports that, although the alarm about the pandemic has been very serious in all Muslim countries, the measures adopted have been characterized by a substantial heterogeneity in terms of content and consequent effects. He adds, for example, that: "In Pakistan, in the first phase of the pandemic, a ban on religious gatherings and prayer in mosques was imposed; a ban that was slowly and gradually removed during the month of Ramadan. In Indonesia and also in Saudi Arabia, the most sacred places of Islam have been closed, as well as the Holy Kaaba (the House of God)."

Mohamed Arafa relates the diversity of approach to the different internal dynamics of state policies.

2 As Tehseen Nisar points out, in most cases both women and men have observed the Eid prayers at home because the greater the sense of protection from danger within their own homes.
impossibility of going to mosques caused general discontent among the faithful; on the other hand, it was highlighted that the period of isolation was experienced as a great opportunity for spiritual growth. Many Muslims were, in fact, encouraged to better understand the teachings of the Koran and prophetic traditions, including those that explicitly refer to the instructions to be observed in cases of pandemic.

In any case, whether one adheres to one or the other of the theses sustained, the role of the Islamic institutions has been and continues to be important in overcoming the serious social-health crisis of Covid-19. Their leaders widely shared the precautionary strategies, legitimising their content in the light of the revealed legal sources, Koran and Sunna. So different were the revised religious prescriptions.

In Egypt, the ban on assembly has suspended not only the Eid, but also the public Iftar, the Itikaf, pilgrimages and all charitable activities, at least in their typical form. Other derogations have been introduced with regard to religious taxes and with regard to the burial procedure for the deceased given the impossibility of observing traditional rituals.

The obligation of community prayer on Fridays also gave way to the need to protect the right to health. In this regard, the Council of the Great Ulema of al-Azhar, in a communiqué of 25 March, pointed out that the health of the body is one of the most important aims of the Shari'a, justifying the possibility of not going to the mosque and allowing the prayer to be performed directly from homes. The provision for a derogation is supported by the Council by referring

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3 Such is the opinion of Mohamed Arafa, who maintains that the Muslim faithful have certainly practised religious rites at home. However, this circumstance has not made them fully happy in view of their actual willingness to pray in the mosque.

4 This is what emerges from the reports of Tehseen Nisar who insists on highlighting the great spiritual opportunity that the pandemic has represented for the individual faithful, as well as for their families.

5 The text of the communiqué can be found at [http://www.azhar.eg/](http://www.azhar.eg/).
to certain Hadith of the Prophet, specifically referring to the possibility of suspending religious customs in the presence of particular conditions, such as fear or illness.

Neither does the Emirate Council of the fatwa deviate from this guideline, which, presided over by the shaykh 'Abdallah bin Bayyah, in fatwa no. 11 of 2020, insists on the need to comply with government directives on the prevention of contagion and considers Friday prayers at home rather than in the mosque to be lawful.

Also with regard to the observance of Ramadan, in the context of the onset and spread of the pandemic, the question has been asked whether and when the safeguarding of individual and collective well-being can be said to prevail over the duty of fasting. In this regard, the different position of the main Islamic religious authorities emerged: the Sunnite ones insisted on the need to comply with this precept as the Pillar of Islam, while the Shiite ones didn’t exclude the possibility of a renunciation in order to preserve the right to health.

It’s possible to see, in view of the foregoing considerations, how the need to combat the Covid-19 pandemic has brought to the attention the relationship between medical ethics and Islamic ethics, fuelling within religious institutions.

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6 The first of the Hadith recalled is taken from the Sahih of al-Bukhārī and Muslim: "On a rainy day 'Abdallah bin 'Abbās said to his muezzin: 'When you say, 'I testify that Muhammad is the Envoy of God' do not say, 'Come and pray', but rather say, 'Pray in your homes'. People were amazed. He said then: 'So did someone better than me. Friday prayer is an obligation, but I am sorry to put you in trouble by making you walk in the slippery mud. The second and third Hadith are taken respectively from the Sunan of Abī Dāwūd and the Sahih of al-Bukhārī and enumerate some conditions in the presence of which it would be possible to exempt the faithful from going to the mosque, such as fear, illness and the fact of having consumed some food with a particularly intense smell: "He who hears the call to prayer and has no justification for not going to the mosque - he was then asked what the justification was and answered that it was fear or illness - the prayer he offers will not be accepted", and "He who ate garlic or onion, stay away from us. Or, he said, stay away from our mosque and stay home."

the debate between those who recognize or don’t recognize in modern science the instrument to rely on to control the evolution of nature. In this regard, Mohamed Arafa, though without going into the discussion of the question posed, believes that «it is good to pray. This doesn’t mean, however, that we should rely only on the religious idea, without considering the scientific results and facts». The religious representatives would also have the task of giving due recognition to the contribution of medical science.

Evident is, therefore, the mediation role assumed by the Islamic religious authorities between citizens and governments; a role that has generated quite a few doubts regarding their effective independence from political power. On the other hand, they are loaded with the burden of ensuring their communities the continuity of faith practices through the use of 'alternative' instruments of guidance and accompaniment. It was thus necessary, in Mohamed Arafa’s opinion, not to dwell on individual questions connected to religion, but to have a broader overview, also in a perspective of rethinking the prescriptions inherent to places of worship, symbols and rituals.

From the Islamic world has emerged, finally, the centrality that the juridical concept of solidarity, recalled in various *Koranic* verses and *Hadith* of the Prophet, can have in contrasting the pandemic emergency. In this sense, for example, the proposal for a universal institution of the Zakat seems to be moving in this direction, with the intention of making solidarity the fundamental

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8 In this sense Mohamed Arafa has expressed himself. Faced with the need to resolve the problems posed by the long suspension of collective religious life, he believes that «the Islamic clergy must act with an open mind, not closed on specific religious issues. They must be open-minded towards others. It is important for them to explain in a very broad way how precise the Islamic vision on freedom of religion and freedom of expression is».

9 Even if not exhaustively with respect to the objectives of the survey set at the basis of the proposed question, Mohamed Arafa highlights the need to fight the global crisis together, with respect for religions, believers and colours. There isn’t a Muslim world and a Western world, but we must all stand together to counter the emergency.
motor of every action and infusing new life into moral and human responsibility.\(^\text{10}\)

Nevertheless, the dialogue with other religions may prove essential if we take into account the social responsibility of their leaders, which has become more evident as a result of the immediate approach with which they too have been called upon to contribute in the fight against the spread of the virus.

Taking up what ayatollah Alireza Arafi - rector of the International University at Mustafa in Qom - said, religious leaders have the task of cooperating to face together not only the current health crisis, but also other contemporary emergencies afflicting global society: injustice, discrimination, inhuman sanctions, environmental crisis, war, terrorism. The 'physical' and 'spiritual' test to which the epidemic has submitted and continues to submit the whole of humanity - without distinction of race, faith, language, culture - could probably generate the conditions for the concrete construction of a community of religions at the service of humanity.

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\(^{10}\) The news can be found at https://www.agensir.it/quotidiano/2020/5/23/fim-ramadan.
a) With regard to the Islamic States, most of them - even if at different times and in different ways - have adopted the measures indicated by the scientific authorities as necessary to fight the pandemic. In spite of this more or less convergent orientation, however, there has been no lack of the position of some countries that have remained firm in denying the very existence of the problem within their borders. What is your opinion on this?

I think it’s one of the main concerns now how countries will be acting within their borders in order to try to contain the pandemic and the spread of the infection. I think that it will be subject to each country policies and how the number of cases will raise, ups and down. For example, we can see in Latin America, like in Brazil, they are reaching their peak at the current moment, which means it’s very high. So, I assume that a lot of countries, like United States, ban the travel from Brazil for a while now. It’s very tricky at the current moment because of the virus, the wide spread of the cases. For example, here, in Egypt, we are still closing the borders and the flying. I assume from July 1st probably because I assume that Egypt will be in the peak in two weeks, something like that. I am not sure, but I assume that because we see now raising the cases.

b) The socio-sanitary crisis has required an immediate approach also from religions, which are also called upon to contribute to the fight against the spread of the virus. Their leaders agree on the isolation strategies indicated by science in order to oppose Covid-19 and call on their communities to strictly observe all the provisions and guidelines
Religion, Law and Covid-19 Emergency

Issued by government and medical authorities. In this regard, religions have used 'alternative' tools to guide and accompany the faithful, and digital communication has proved to be of great support. How are the Islamic religious authorities close to the faithful to ensure the continuity of their faith practices?

I think it’s interesting because here, as you know, in the Middle East, it is a bit different because people are very sensitive to religion so they are very sad that they are not going to the mosques or to the churches, even here there are Catholic people, also in Egypt because we have 18-20% of population is Catholic Christian. Churches are closed, all services are suspended for now so I think that the idea is that they are trying to practice the rituals at home of course and they do the prayers, but they are not feeling happy to do just at home because they want to do this at mosques or at churches. Here, people are very connected to the religion and now, since I have been living in United States for 12 years, people even feel that when you are outside, you get a little bit far from religion. Now you (Mohamed) are not religious as much as you have been before I moved to the United States. So, it’s different, but when I came back in Egypt, I still can see how people are connected to religion and even they connect to the pandemic issue, at some point, to some religious. And I can tell you, like divine authorities, so it’s most like a test from God and we have to wait, something like that.

c) As a result of the closure of the places of worship, the majority of religious services are therefore conducted at family level: each house becomes a small mosque. Given the position of those who remain anchored in the patriarchal tradition, do you believe that this circumstance could have repercussions on women’s religious freedom?

I think that some restrictions, at some point, are imposed on women, but you can see that in much more conservative countries, like in South Arabia and
United Emirates. But I can tell you that in Egypt, here, we cannot see that kind of restrictions because Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia or Morocco or even Geordan are much more liberal within the application of the religion than the other countries. So, sometimes, we do have restrictions on women for sure, but there is no restriction like women have to wear the scarf as in South Arabia. So, here in Egypt, if woman wants to wear the scarf it’s fine; if she doesn’t like to wear this scarf it’s ok too. So, there’s no problem with that. This is of course different than the other area where women are forced to wear the scarf.

d) Islam, unlike other religions, has not found itself completely unprepared in the process of adapting to the civil rules of the emergency because there are several Prophet's Hadith who explicitly refer to the instructions to be observed in cases of epidemic. However, the long suspension of collective religious life seems to lead to the impossibility of celebrating certain rites which, connoted by the sharing among the faithful, are traditionally practiced at specific times of the year. What, in your opinion, are the main new problems that may arise from this point of view? Could the need to find a solution to them induce Islamic institutions to analyse religious practices, rethinking the prescriptions inherent places of worship, symbols, rituals?

When we talk about Middle East, specifically we see that the idea of collective religion is contained in three main religions, mostly, Christianity, Jihadism, and Islam. Specifically, I can say that the most important two religions here, in Middle East, are Christianity and Islam. I think that the tricky part here is what about the atheistic or the agnostic or the people that are not believing in any kind of religion or in any kind of Hebraic religion. I can tell you that the freedom of religion on that point is not in a good shape. If people say that “I'm agnostic or I don’t believe in God, something like that”, it's not welcomed here, in the
RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

Middle East. So, you can see that countries are putting some restrictions on that, so people have to follow a religion because of the government.

I agree with you on that. The Islamic institutions do have an important role to play in that problem. One of the main examples is that the Islamic clergies or the Islamic professors should act open-minded, not only just closed on specific issues, or focused on issues related just to women rights or any other just religious things. They have to be open-minded to others. It’s important for them to explain in a very broad way how accurate is the Islamic view on freedom of religion and freedom of expression. The human rights, in general, is very broad and not just ambiguous or vague in a way that they wanted to say or force people to do this or do that.

e) It is clear that this epidemic calls into question the protection of equally fundamental rights. In your opinion, can the safeguarding of individual and collective wellbeing - to which, moreover, Islamic doctrine confers significant importance - prevail over the religious duty of fasting? The need to combat the spread of the virus has fuelled debate among those who recognise or do not recognise modern science as the instrument they can rely on to control the evolution of nature. What impact can the Covid-19 emergency have on the relationship between medical ethics and Islamic ethics?

Now, I see from the Islamic institutions, which is a good thing, that they are always advising people to rely on modern science and to make sure that we have to set up the facts and the scientific facts, specifically in order to combat the Covid-19 or any other viruses if it comes, like Coronavirus or other viruses. It’s important to make sure that we rely on science and scientific facts. Not only the religious idea, which is fine, it is good to rely on religious ideas, but it’s also important to give the medical experts and the scientists, their speciality to make sure that we are able to fight, to combat a pandemic or to combat the viruses
not only in Egypt, but all over the world. This is why, for example, every country has to do a lot of work on the research and to make sure that we may get a vaccine soon in order to fight that. That it’s in addition to the religious practices. If you want to pray, it’s a good thing, but this does not mean that you have just to rely on that and to leave the scientific facts.

f) What contribution can the Islamic concept of 'solidarity' - recalled in various Koranic verses and Hadith of the Prophet - give to the overcoming of this universal crisis? In this sense, for example, the proposal of a universal institution of the Zakat seems to be moving in this direction, with the intention of making solidarity the fundamental motor of every action and to infuse new life into moral and human responsibility.

I think it’s important for the Western approaches. Since, I have been living for 12 years in the United States or in the Western early, I can see that there is a kind of misunderstanding of Muslim people or Muslim population. Mostly, a lot of people thinks that Muslims are terrorists, Muslims are close-minded, Muslims are whatever. This is a kind of bias and untrue and inaccurate. Of course, religion is totally different on that. So, the important thing now is that the Muslim people or the Islamic world have to play, to send up a message to all the Western, to the universal land: everybody is united in this, we are totally unified in this, east and west. There is no Muslim world and Western world. We are all united because this is a kind of global crisis. The world has to be united in respect of the religions, in respect of the believes, in respect of the colours. Now it’s the time that we have to stand all together, to fight that thing. That’s one of the main things that I really like here in Egypt when I came for this vacation that was unexpected (too long vacation for me now, for almost two months) is that the Islamic institutions are encouraging people to send a message to the Western people, to friends and colleagues in the West or even
here to just make sure that we are totally united. That’s the message that any religion, either Hebraic or non-Hebraic.
RELI GION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

Interview to Dr. Tehseen Nisar of the LUISS Guido Carli University - 03 June 2020

a) With regard to the Islamic States, most of them - even if at different times and in different ways - have adopted the measures indicated by the scientific authorities as necessary to fight the pandemic. In spite of this more or less convergent orientation, however, there has been no lack of the position of some countries that have remained firm in denying the very existence of the problem within their borders. What is your opinion on this?

First of all, I would like to bring to notice that it will be better to use the word Muslim countries or countries in the Muslim world rather than Islamic states. Second, while it is true that in many Muslim countries there have been very serious alarm concerning the pandemic, the measures taken are quite different from each other. In Pakistan for example, in the first phase of the pandemic, there was a ban on religious gatherings and prayer in mosques but slowly and gradually this ban was removed during the month of Ramadan. However, there were strict ban on religious congregations in Indonesia and even in Saudi Arabia, where Islam’s holiest places were closed and there was a complete lockdown of the Holy Kaaba (The House of God).

b) The socio-sanitary crisis has required an immediate approach also from religions, which are also called upon to contribute to the fight against the spread of the virus. Their leaders agree on the isolation strategies indicated by science in order to oppose Covid-19 and call on their communities to strictly observe all the provisions and guidelines issued by government and medical authorities. In this regard, religions have used 'alternative' tools to guide and accompany the faithful, and digital communication has proved to be of great support. How are the
Islamic religious authorities close to the faithful to ensure the continuity of their faith practices?

The isolation period is marked as a great opportunity by many religious scholars in the Muslim world to focus within. There has been emphasis on following the footsteps of Prophet Mohammad (PEACE BE UPON HIM) and his injunctions that call on communities to stay in the place of their station and not to leave the place to any other place. The lockdown has encouraged thousands even millions of Muslims to better understand the teachings of the Qur’an (The Holy Book) as well as the teachings of the prophetic traditions. Emphasis is put on the power of prayer and its continuity and since Muslims pray five times a day, there is surely a lot that has been emphasised as the power of prayer to keep away from epidemics and diseases in spiritual way.

c) As a result of the closure of the places of worship, the majority of religious services are therefore conducted at family level: each house becomes a small mosque. Given the position of those who remain anchored in the patriarchal tradition, do you believe that this circumstance could have repercussions on the women’s social and legal condition? In Pakistan, however, the protection of women within the domestic borders is guaranteed by the law “Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act”, passed in 2015.

I think in many Muslim countries, like many others in the West, the pandemic has been a great opportunity and blessing in disguise, a time most needed for family reunion and gathering which otherwise was not possible as children who worked stayed at work and apparently having provided a chance for families to be with all and each other, coming together to talk, to share, to discuss, to agree and to make the most out of this time.
I think there seems to be a misconception about Muslim women not being free to do whatever they want in the West; this seems to be a complete fallacy and a colonial percept. However, one fact that I must mention here is that the pandemic has certainly exacerbated the cases of domestic violence in both Western and non-western societies, a trend which should be analysed in great detail and length in anthropological and sociological dimension.

d) With regard to the observance of the Ramadan, the Sunnite authorities insisted on the need to comply with this religious precept as the Pillar of Islam; the Shiite authorities didn’t exclude the possibility of a renunciation in order to preserve the right to health. This epidemic call into question the protection of equally fundamental rights. In your opinion, can the safeguarding of individual and collective wellbeing - to which, moreover, Islamic doctrine confers significant importance - prevail over the religious duty of fasting?

I will answer the second part of the question before the first. Observance of faith in Islam though relies on following the doctrines, including fasting, yet the Qur’an specifically mentions the conditions of fasting, its rules and obligations and even permits to unfollow fasting while being sick, in travel and in difficult situations. In Chapter 2 of the Qur’an, Surah Baqarah, God Almighty mentions that Saum or fasting can be delayed in the following months after Ramadan. The point is that whoever wants to follow the Qur’an will follow as it is explicitly mentioned in the Quran’ (LA IQRAHA FID DIN) which means there is no compulsion in religion. Now, to the first question, I think there is a lot of damage caused to understanding Islam by dividing it into binaries: i.e. The Sunni rites and the Shiites. Policies relating to the pandemic could be differently conceived and envisaged by many countries. It will be better and sensical not to really split the essence of Islam.
Islam, unlike other religions, has not found itself completely unprepared in the process of adapting to the civil rules of the emergency because there are several Prophet’s Hadith who explicitly refer to the instructions to be observed in cases of epidemic. However, the long suspension of collective religious life seems to lead to the impossibility of celebrating certain rites which, connoted by the sharing among the faithful, are traditionally practiced at specific times of the year. What, in your opinion, are the main new problems that may arise from this point of view? Could the need to find a solution to them induce Islamic institutions to analyse religious practices, rethinking the prescriptions inherent places of worship, symbols, rituals?

The practice of two festivals in Islam called Eid- ul Fitr which is celebrated at the end of Ramadan and Eid-ul-Azha which is also called the festival of sacrifice based on Abrahamic sacrifice is celebrated in the last month of the Islamic calendar Zil Hajj-are very special to the Muslims all across the globe. The two festivals are celebrated with friends and family. The tradition is practiced by hundreds of years like Christmas and Easter in Christianity. The charm of celebrating the two festivals thus remain elusive among Muslims just like Christians celebrate their two main festivals. In the times of COVID 19 however, the general guidelines to stay home without going out and celebrating with larger and extended families have been observed fervently by many Muslim countries. Eid Ul Fitr was celebrated recently under strict conditions where people were obligated not to embrace each other and not to even shake hands in solidarity. Many countries like Pakistan saw a smaller number of attendances at the Eid congregations in Mosques. Many Muslims across Europe also performed Eid prayers at home. People in general preferred to be safe and
protected within their homes and did the Muslim prayer domestically. In most cases both women and men observed Eid prayers at home.