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Article

The contagious power of words: Muslim South Africans during the pandemic

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As part of the nationwide lockdown imposed by the South African government in March 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, places of worship were ordered to close their doors. This article looks at the response of the Muslim community to these measures which evoked sharp debates over the closure of mosques, social distancing during prayer, and the wearing of face masks, differences that affected personal relationships and exacerbated theological tensions among Muslims. In examining these divisions, this article also raises the thorny issue of the authority of religion versus science and the prerogative of the state to impose its will, as well as what it means to live as a Muslim minority in a secular state.

Muslims number around two million out of South Africa's estimated total population of 59 million. They have different origins. Muslims in the Western Cape are mostly descendants of slaves who arrived in the Cape from the seventeenth century from South-East Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Most Muslims in the KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng provinces are descendants of indentured and free migrants who arrived from South Asia in the second half of the nineteenth century; while the post-apartheid period has seen an influx of migrants from Africa as well as the Indian subcontinent. A small number of local Africans have also embraced Islam. There are discernable differences of race, class, beliefs, traditions, and practices among Muslims.

The post-apartheid period has been witness to visible changes in the lives of Muslims, such as many women covering their faces, men growing beards, and children attending Islamic schools. The number of Darul Uloom (theological seminaries that train clerics), mosques, Islamic schools and madrassahs have increased dramatically. Ulama (Muslim scholars) are increasingly at the heart of shaping Muslim society (Zaman 2010). Their role has magnified in the lives of

many Muslims, for whom they have become the moral and spiritual guardians against the perceived threats to Islam by ‘secularists’ and global Islamophobia. While Islam has generally been presented as political ideology in the post 9/11 context, in South Africa this reformism is mostly apolitical, with a focus on prayer, self-purification, and concern for the hereafter.

In terms of institutional authority, while there now exist multiple organisations representing Muslims at various levels, two broad groupings contested for hegemony at the start of the shutdown. The United Ulama Council of South Africa (UUCSA), founded in 1994, brought together most of the then existing theological formations from across South Africa, with the exception of the conservative Majlisul Ulema of South Africa, spearheaded by the Indian educated moulana AS Desai of Port Elizabeth and his *Majlis* newspaper. A close ally of moulana Desai is the Pakistan-educated AK Hoosen, who is the mufti (Muslim legal expert) on the radio station Markaz Sahaba. The mufti is an influential figure with a global listenership. During the pandemic, a third grouping was formally constituted on June 24, 2020. Named Wifaqul Ulama, it comprised mainly of conservative ulama from KZN and Gauteng and is ideologically close to *Majlis*/mufti AK Hoosen (see https://wifaq.org.za/?page_id=2). There are individual mosques like the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town which do not align with any of these formations.

The UUCSA and *Majlis* groupings disagree on most issues in the post-apartheid period. *Majlis*, for example, criticised UUCSA for such things as offering prayers at Nelson Mandela’s commemoration in 2013; performing the prayer at struggle icon Ahmed Kathrada’s funeral in 2017; and cooperating with government to implement Muslim Personal Law (MPL). The *Majlis*, in fact, refers sarcastically to moulana Ibrahim Bham of UUCSA as ‘the Reverend Abraham Bham’. UUCSA is a civil society grouping consulted by the government on matters affecting Muslims. It does not, however, enjoy unanimous support. Thus, for example, while UUCSA agreed in principle to the legal implementation of MPL, this has been rejected by *Majlis* and several other groups, with the result that no law has been passed since the democratic transition in 1994. These disagreements underscore a fundamental difference between these groupings and Muslims more generally about living as a religious minority: one accepts the division of the world into nation states and adopts a pragmatic approach to demonstrate loyalty to the state, both out of commitment to the state as well as to seek concessions for Muslims; while the other embraces the concept of a universal ummah that owes allegiance primarily to a higher authority and rejects any accommodation with the state that contradicts their Islamic belief system. While one group is comfortable with a dual identity of belonging to

an ummah and a nation state, the other questions the extent to which Muslims can show allegiance to a nation state.

The power and authority of mosques, madrassahs, and institutions as centres of (mainly male) religious authority and power amongst Muslims has increased significantly, though some women have been claiming spaces in mosques (see Lehmann 2010). Religious authority amongst Muslims is fiercely contested. While Muslims are wont to say that Islam does not have centralised institutions and leadership, in practice, most Muslims follow specific scholars or hierarchical institutions whom they regard as authoritative, and who are the chief interpreters of Islam for them. (see Vahed 2000). This is not necessarily all negative since many of these institutions are involved in community-building activities that range from substance abuse recovery to alleviating economic hardship.

The advent of new technologies have spawned new centres of power vigorously contesting for hegemony among Muslims. Like print in the nineteenth century the growth of Islamic radio and television stations and digital technology have intensified religious disputation. Most organisations and ulama have websites, Facebook, and Twitter; there are many radio stations (Cii, Radio Islam, Voice of the Cape), and television channels, while many mosques transmit lectures and prayers live, and the podcasts of individual Imams are circulated via chat applications like WhatsApp.¹ As Titus Hjelm has observed, ‘words and symbols have ceased to be the exclusive property of elites... It is therefore not an exaggeration to say that we live in an age of discourse’ (2013:858).

The lockdown in March 2020 spawned deep debates over how Muslims should react to the state’s rules. These issues must be examined sensitively given the global context. At the time of writing (October 2020) a school teacher in France who had shown denigrating cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in class, which had created controversy when originally published, was killed by a Muslim. This led French president Emmanuel Macron to describe Islam as ‘a religion in crisis all over the world today’, and to say that he would be taking measures to tackle ‘radicalism’. This is not the place to critique Macron’s ahistorical and hypocritical analysis, suffice to heed Edward Said’s (1978) warning that we avoid essentialising Islam, emphasising Muslims’ ‘backwardness’, or speak of a ‘Muslim mind’ and ‘Muslim character’.

Religion should be studied as lived and not in the abstract. This article focuses on the extent to which “‘Islam” or “being Muslim” is at stake’ in shaping Muslim responses to the pandemic, and, broadly how religious networks can become important allies or opponents of the state in a time of crisis, especially in alternative knowledge and information sharing about the pandemic. Many

of the tendencies discussed here apply to other religious groupings and even far-right groups, and in examining the broader lessons, it is important to de-exceptionalise Islam.

Mosque closure

Following president Cyril Ramaphosa's declaration of a State of Disaster on March 15, 2020, the Cape-based Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) initially issued guidelines on how to keep mosques open, but on March 18 announced that the Friday midday prayer would be suspended, and on March 22 advised closing mosques altogether. Moulana Ebrahim Bham of the Johannesburg-based Jamiatul Ulama South Africa (JUSA) announced that congregants in mosques should social distance and on March 22 called on mosques to limit the number of worshippers to five per prayer, as Muslims had 'both a religious and civic duty to ensure that we through our actions become part of the solution rather than the problem' (Patel 2020).

These measures provoked a sharp response. *Majlis* responded that the virus had 'truly exposed the *munafiqeen* (hypocrite Ulema), most of whom do not – never have – truly believed in Allah' (March 28, 2020). A senior scholar from a well-known Darul Uloom in Durban, issued a statement on March 23 urging Muslims to continue to pray in mosques in violation of the lockdown: 'After making *mashwarah* (consultation) with various medical experts as well as taking the opinions of senior counsel advocates, we advise [that] salaah in the *masajid* should not be abandoned but rather be performed in its fixed times'. Some mosques in Durban continued to offer communal prayers until the police shut them down during the midday prayer on Friday April 3. On April 4, Zehir Omar Attorneys addressed a letter to the government on behalf of several organisations to allow mosque attendance. The President's Office declined the request on April 9 and informed the applicants that the president had consulted with religious leaders, including moulana Bham, and that 'other Muslim countries had also taken the unprecedented step of stopping congregational prayers as a precaution'.

The As-Saadiqeen Islamic Centre in Gauteng, represented by Zehir Omar and allied to *Majlis*, applied to the Pretoria High Court to get the Covid-19 regulations amended to allow mosques to remain open during the lockdown. A supporting affidavit by mufti AK Hoosen stated that mosques had not been closed 'in the entire 1400-year history of Islam, throughout its numerous plagues, epidemics, and pandemics' and that 'if the community closes the *Masjid* under any circumstances where congregational prayer can take place, the community

as a whole is sinful and accountable to God. In the present Covid epidemic crisis, Islamic law does not allow for the closure the *Masaajid* (Mosques)'.

The case was heard before judge Brenda Neukircher on April 23, 2020. UUCSA participated as *amicus curiae* ('friend of the court'), arguing it was not compulsory for Muslims to worship in mosques and that the preservation of life was a central tenet of Islamic belief. In an hour-long radio broadcast on April 19, 2020, 'Keep our Masajids open', mufti AK Hoosen stated that UUCSA's opposition to the application to open mosques showed that it was 'out of the fold of Islam' and that only 'one party in South Africa was determined to defend Islam'. Judge Neukircher dismissed the application on April 23, 2020 on the grounds that the state had shown that its measures were 'rational' in order to help 'achieve their objectives of stemming or eradicating the Covid-19 pandemic'. The judgement further stated that all religious groups were affected equally and had been called upon to make sacrifices 'in the name of "the greater good", the spirit of "*ubuntu*" ... in ways that impact on their livelihoods, their way of life and their economic security and freedom'.

Many Muslims regard congregational prayer as a source of meaning in their lives and an act that is especially critical at a time of psychological despair and economic ruin. They saw it as an 'essential service' and from following WhatsApp communications it was apparent that many worshippers could not reconcile people being allowed to exercise while they were denied the right to pray in mosques. Their position was supported by their interpretation of Islam.

Contagion of disease

Many ulama argued that from an Islamic perspective, disease is not contagious. On March 23, 2020, *Majlis* reproduced the ruling of a well-known religious scholar in Johannesburg, the late mufti Afzal Hoosen Elias, who stated that Islam 'does not hold the belief of contagiousness. Everything happens by the will of Allah. It is therefore not permissible to think that one will be infected by another person's disease ...'.² Zehir Omar's application was also supported by an affidavit dated March 29, 2020 from a Bangladeshi mufti Mohammad Chatgari, which stated that mosques should remain open and worshippers stand shoulder to shoulder (no social distancing) as the revealed Islamic texts were explicit that there was no contagion of disease. According to the affidavit, medical and human research must not be given 'consideration when it conflicts with the Noble Qur'an and *hadith*. Their research is limited to their intellect, which is of the level of doubt. The information in the Noble Qur'an and *hadith* is based on divine revelation'.

The virus as influenza

Muslim sceptics also had ‘scientific’ backing as one thread in the discussion was that Covid-19 was merely a harsher version of the seasonal influenza. A voice recorded message from a medical doctor, Ismail Mangera, who is well respected in religious circles as a *khalifa* (spiritual successor) of one of the great ulama of India, gained wide currency when it was circulated via WhatsApp on April 21, 2020. In an hour-long talk, dr Mangera said that much of the knowledge about the coronavirus was neither ‘correct nor relevant’. In the mosque, he explained, ‘if someone coughs, it will go behind you, so there is no problem. People cough on doctors all the time, nothing happens’. Dr Mangera urged Muslims not to be ‘be duped by false information. Whatever happens it is with the will of Allah, if you are sick, it is a means of *kaffarah* (penance) for your sins, if you die you are a *shahid* (martyr). Every virus is under the will of Allah. He directs it, He makes ill those He wants to. No measure we take will change the situation’.

Dr Mangera also advocated ‘herd immunity’, warning that this option was not ‘part of the agenda, because the scientists are part of government. This is the politics in medicine’. However, as Valodia et al (2020) point out, for 60 per cent of South Africans to achieve immunity over a two-year period, the country would need ‘roughly 51,000 new infections per day ... more than 2,500 people will require hospitalisation each day and approximately 500 will require intensive care, most of whom would die’. The science of the coronavirus and what it does in immunological terms or how long immunity will last among those infected has not been established, almost ten months after the virus was detected. The South African government’s lockdown measures must be seen in the context of the high rates of TB and HIV in South Africa, which has resulted in the majority African population being immune-compromised.

Social distancing

The mosque challenge failed but acted as a loudhailer to Muslims that the closing of mosques was untenable. Once it became clear that the lockdown would be long term, moulana Bham was amongst a group of religious leaders who met with president Ramaphosa in the third week of May, to argue the importance of opening places of worship. On May 25, 2020, Ramaphosa announced that when the country moved to Level 3 of the Covid-19 lockdown on June 1, recognised places of worship could resume public services with a maximum of 50 people in attendance and subject to the strict norms and standards set out in the regulations, such as social distancing and the wearing of masks (Nicolson 2020).

While this measure came under attack from certain groups, such as those in the leisure industry who were upset that religious gatherings were permitted while they could not work, adherence to regulations varied from mosque to mosque. Most mosques belonging to the UUCSA grouping adhered to the regulations while most of those who broadly fell into the *Majlis/Wifaq* grouping ignored them but did not prevent anyone from wearing masks or socially distancing in restricted areas of the mosque. The different responses of Muslims led to tensions and even altercations at some mosques. A message from Wifaq on October 21, 2020, made clear its attitude to social distancing:

Two Muslims meet after two or three long months of Lockdown. Emotions are bubbling. The urge to shake hands in the warm *Sunnah* manner like the *Sahaba* did is irresistible. . . . This is the moment which defines a true believer. Nothing will compel him to abandon the way of his *Nabi* (Prophet). A hollow nudge of the elbow or a pointless collision of the fists will not replace his *mubarak* (blessed) *Sunnah* handshake. It is not becoming of a lover of *Nabi* (Prophet) to emulate the way of the disbelievers. . . . Our choice today may determine what we pass on to the next generation. Will we introduce an alien practice into our lives? Or will we leave a legacy of *Sunnah* for the generations to come? (<https://wifaq.org.za/?cat=164>)

Lockdown measures were thus seen as threatening the foundations of their belief.

The pandemic as hoax

As Grayson and Little (2017:61) point out, while conspiracy theories are not new, ‘what is new is their extent and the depth of their penetration into our cultural and political lives’. Ideas of the pandemic as a hoax were popular, on social media, by Islamic scholars, and on the *Majlis* website. These ranged from seeing Bill Gates as the creator of the virus to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) being behind the lockdowns to take control of economies, to face masks causing brain damage. Once embedded, these fake discourses, usually created by well-funded right-wing think tanks in the US, are hard to dislodge. Mufti AK Hoosen, was adamant in his programme on the Markaz Sahaba radio that there was no pandemic:

Pandemic means you will have millions of people dead. This is going on for months already and you are sitting at 300 000, 350 000, not even half a million people dead worldwide. And some people are just writing there Covid-19, Covid-19, when they died of a heart attack, they died of TB. There’s a hidden agenda by the media, there’s a hidden agenda by the politicians, and that is that Africa will become the scapegoat. (Recording received by author on May 16, 2020)

The pandemic as hoax reinforced the idea that the lockdown was, in fact, targeting Islam. Mufti AK Hoosen, responding to a question as to whether there was a hidden agenda behind the pandemic, warned on the Markaz Sahaba radio:

The whole thing is one big hoax for a greater plan. We call it in Islam the *Dajjali fitnah* (anti-Christ), which has started on a grand scale across the whole world. *Dajjal* means ‘the biggest deceiver’, so all his agents are working. What is really happening is the New World Order The masses are asses they say in Arabic. They fall for anything. (Recording received by author on May 16, 2020).

The longer the lockdown dragged on, the more the conspiracy theories and government’s anti-Muslim agenda found support.

Between the road to heaven and hell

Many Muslims found it difficult to reconcile the rules of the lockdown with their deeply held religious beliefs. Coming together is essential to their way of life, signifying *ummah*, an Arabic word meaning community. As one interviewee asked, ‘What is religion without community?’ Islam is at the core of many Muslims’ identity and ignoring a command from God is viewed as more dangerous than the virus. Wifaq, for example, warned in an article titled ‘Masaajid: the Houses of Allah Ta’ala, should we attend or not?’, dated July 10, 2020, that ‘when people discard any matter of *deen* (faith), seeking thereby to rectify their worldly matters, Allah ta’ala (God) will bring such conditions upon them that will be more harmful and destructive for them’ (<https://wifaq.org.za/?p=16149>).

What is striking about this debate is that despite the idea of a global *ummah*, the dispute has been incredibly internal and local, with global Islamic scholars not called upon to validate different positions. The fact that the Haj pilgrimage was restricted by Saudi Arabia, Qatar imposed a jail term for those not wearing face masks, or that mosques in many parts of the Muslim world practised social distancing, did not enter the discussion on the lockdown.

The pandemic exposed the deep divide amongst Muslims, leading to unpleasant verbal brawls on social media which, together with the internet and radio have transformed Islamic authority (Blunt 2018) and exacerbated divisions as most Muslims tend to follow a particular scholar, organisation, or school of interpretation. The local ulama terrain is highly fragmented and this debate has become severely polarised with little nuance: one was either mask/anti-mask, social distancing/anti-social distancing. Many of the attacks are filled with threats and invective, leaving little room for a measured discussion

on how to live an Islamic life in a predominantly Christian, secular country. Should Muslims be attempting to create a parallel internal state? How should this be done and what are the dangers? Though worthy of further consideration, such questions do not feature; instead, the focus is on demonising those who hold views contrary to one's own.

On one side of the pandemic divide is a view that government policies are irrational, buttressed by the belief that disease and death are the sole prerogative of God and that those who die from Covid-19 are guaranteed to go to heaven. The pandemic thus offers a win-win situation. Ulama who believe that they should abide by government measures as a way of lowering infection rates, are castigated as lacking belief in God and being anti-Islam. Both sets of ulama have demonstrated that religious authorities can influence ordinary Muslims to either abide by or reject the state's regulatory framework. Ordinary Muslims are more likely to adhere to ulama than advice proffered by professor Salim Abdool Karrim, chief advisor to the government on Covid-19, who is a Muslim and a scientist.

The existence of an ulama authority shaping some aspects of the behaviour of Muslims, often overriding the secular state, has short-term implications for public health measures pertaining to Covid-19, but also carries potentially longer term consequences. The government cannot speak to a segment of the Muslim community, UUCSA in this case, and expect a buy-in from all Muslims. It needs to acknowledge the existence of diverse opinions and should attempt pre-emptively to reach a wider consensus. Rather than a heavy-handed approach and painting opponents of lockdown as backward and anti-science, government could have sought out influential ulama not aligned to UUCSA who may have been fence sitters, and work out a compromise. The ultimate aim of effecting long-term behavioural changes cannot be achieved through punitive measures alone.

Political philosophers have long debated when political authority is legitimate and when state coercion is justified. While many would argue that non-compliance with the regulatory framework during a pandemic justifies coercion, there is a danger that those who feel that their views are not taken seriously will retreat more and more into a spiritual Islam that lives and prays at a distance from the administration. The challenge for the government is to try and narrow this distance by remaining open to diverse opinions amongst Muslims. The increasingly strident nature of the current discourse amongst opponents of state policy raises concerns that an Islam that seeks at once to confront the state and to live beyond its rules, will find increased traction. This

dilemma is not confined to Muslims, but finds resonance with the Christian Right in America and ultra-orthodox Hasidic Jews in New York and Israel, to name two examples.

In the South African context, until recent times, most Muslims expressed satisfaction at living in a country where they could practise their religion with minimum state intervention and were not subject to Islamophobia. There has been an overt assertion by increasing numbers of Muslims over the past few decades that Islam should cover all aspects of their lives, and this sometimes comes into conflict with the law of the land (many are increasingly anti-vaccine, anti-secular education even to the minimum age, anti-MPL, etc). The pandemic has seen the formation of new Islamic organisations and more assertive messaging. As we move into a post-Covid world, the sense one gets from the discourses is a fear that the state may not easily relinquish the powers it has acquired during the pandemic, including that of surveillance through intrusive technologies. The mistrust of government that has manifested and magnified during the pandemic may possibly threaten the, until now, relatively trouble-free relationship between Muslims and the post-apartheid state.

Is the bombing of a Shia mosque in Verulam on the north coast of KwaZulu-Natal in May 2018, which followed several years of the demonising of Shias by local imams, a sign of things to come? Or will the post-lockdown period see a cooling of tensions on all sides?

The virus has brought home the reality that an interventionist state is crucial to controlling pandemics. Even though the virus acts in a way that individual behaviour impacts on others, given that many people are suspicious of intrusive states, and that the lockdown seriously affects civil liberties and deeply held beliefs, the nature of state interventions needs to be seriously thought through, as some see state control as the road to heaven while others see it as the path to hell. Finding a middle ground will be difficult as religions of all hues often see the world and the hereafter in dichotomous terms.

Notes

1. The documents and recording cited in this article were received via social media and are in the author's possession.
2. A contrary interpretation of this hadith is that disease is contagious but that who it spreads to is left to the will of God, and that Muslims should therefore take precautions.

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Addendum:

Reviewer comment

I found intriguing ... [but] I didn’t quite understand the underlying dynamics. The article ... doesn’t, ..., relate the forces in the Muslim community to ideological bases from which they are drawn. It is somewhat ahistorical. None of these organisations are new. More importantly, perhaps, the paper would

have been much richer had it also engaged some level of comparison relating to how the pandemic was taken up by Muslim organisations in other societies. But also it does not deal with what it identifies as concerns of Islamophobia raised by certain groups. There were reactions from all religions – and across the world.

Author response

The reviewer's arrowed and perceptive feedback is highly appreciated. Covid-19 presented a singular moment in which the different tendencies that permeate South African Islam were in many senses visited on the individual, everyday worshipper; to wear or not to wear a mask; to open or close mosques; what is the boundary of authority between the democratic state and religious figures. This was brought home to me by my own conundrum of where to pray, how to social distance and the scorn that some heap on those choosing to wear a mask and vice-versa. It is against this background that I sought to bring a conjunctural analysis to bear. In this context while alluding to the global in the conclusion the reviewer is right to call me up on too much attention to the local to the neglect of broader forces at play. While the questions raised in relation to Muslim South Africans undoubtedly find resonance in other religions in South Africa and abroad, this study specifically attempts to trace the ways in which Muslim South Africans' beliefs and practices are transforming, creating new divisions, the emergence of new Muslim publics which includes digital citizens where this discourse plays out, and what this means in terms of their relationship with fellow South Africans and with the state. While the organisations may be old, what is missed is that beneath that old shell are new leaders (trained mainly in South Africa unlike their predecessors), new ideological discourses, new ways of engaging those they disagree with, and new attitudes towards the secular state. The present pandemic has also spawned a new organisation, Wifaq, which has a strong professional arm and will contest the hegemony enjoyed by MYM aligned professionals from the 1970s. My contribution hints at some of these developments but like the virus it needs to fly between the local and global and to remain wary of too quickly reaching for the catch-all Islamophobia, which becomes the explanation rather than something requiring explanation.