

Rulings on Daily and Weekly Congregational Prayers during Coronavirus Pandemic

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The World Health Organization on Wednesday declared the novel coronavirus outbreak a pandemic. The NBA has suspended its season. President Trump has suspended travel from 26 European countries to US. Quite a few US states such as New York, California, Massachusetts, Florida and others have declared state of emergency. Here in Wisconsin, Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett is encouraging Gov. Tony Ever to declare state of emergency.

World-wide, human beings are facing an existentialist threat posed by the fast spreading Corona virus (COVID -19). Doctors are struggling to find medications to treat those who get afflicted, or to vaccinate others to protect them. The best we can do, at this time, is to take a few simple steps to slow down its spreading. We Muslims need special attention because of our practice of congregational prayers, shaking hands, embracing each other, and kissing to show our affection. These practices can easily enable transmission of common cold, influenza, virus and infection.

It is our moral duty as Muslims that we take all steps necessary to safeguard ourselves and others around us from this terrible disease. One's personal desire to do obligatory prayers at the masjid or fulfill other religious duties comes second to ensuring the common health of the larger community. Masjids should be protected from bacterial or viral transmissions.

As Muslims we do believe that nothing happens without Allah's permission. The Qur'an states, "Say, "Nothing will happen to us except what God has ordained for us; He is our Protector." In God let the faithful put their trust." (9:51) Total reliance upon Allah SWT does not exclude precautionary measures such as social isolation, surveillance, prevention, treatment, quarantine and other CDC approved measures. The Second Caliph Umar (RA) refused to enter Syria which was afflicted by an epidemic. Abu Ubaidah bin al Jarrah's (RA) contention was mitigated by Umar's

theological response that “we escape from the command of Allah SWT to the command of Allah.” Reliance upon Allah SWT and tying the camel are two sides of the same coin.

Epidemics, as trials and tribulations, have been and will remain part of human life. “We will certainly test you with some fear and hunger, and some loss of possessions and lives and crops. But give good news to the steadfast. Those who, when a calamity afflicts them, say, “To God we belong, and to Him we will return.” (2:156-157) viral catastrophes remind us of our creatureliness and sheer dependence upon Allah SWT, the True Master and Controller of the cosmos. They are stark reminders of Allah’s omnipotence, providence and total control over our destinies.

The Prophet (SAW) gave us specific guidelines to navigate the epidemics. Quarantine, social isolation, travel bans, restricted movement, visitations, congregation and socialization are among the precautionary and preventive measures specified in the Ahadith. The Prophet (SAW) commanded us to escape epidemics such as leprosy as we run away from the lion. **وَفِرَّ مِنَ الْمَجْدُومِ كَمَا تَفِرُّ مِنَ الْأَسَدِ** (Bukhari). Fear for one’s safety is a genuine Islamic reason to forgo some of the fundamental Islamic actions and rituals. The Prophet (SAW) relinquished oath of Islam from a member of Banu Thaqi’f tribe who suffered from Hansen disease. Therefore devotional acts such as daily and weekly congregational prayers, funeral prayers, Taraweeh prayers and Eid prayers can be stopped temporarily to avoid the real, life threatening, widespread dangers of endemics.

Daily congregational prayers in a mosque are mandatory (Wajib) according to some Fiqhi schools while Sunnah according to others. Jama’ah or congregational prayer at any place such as home or office is accepted as Sharai’ congregation. Even those who consider it mandatory accept fear and sickness as genuine Islamic reason to miss the congregational prayer at the masjid, as the Hadith categorically states. Therefore, fear of viral, life threatening sickness such as Novel Coronavirus or actual symptoms of such an alarming disease are sufficient enough Sharai’ reasons to temporarily stop coming to the masjid for daily prayers and perform the Jama’ah at home or in a more controlled, less congested environment. Therefore, all community members who are suffering from known symptoms of Coronavirus such as dry coughing, sneezing, wheezing, upper respiratory problems or fever must stop coming to the masjid until fully cured. The Prophet (SAW) commanded us not to harm others and not

to be harmed by others. It is an established Islamic axiom that “Prevention is more significant than treatment”.

The Friday prayer is far more important than any other congregational prayer as it is established by a pinpointed Qura'nic text. To overturn a categorical Qur'anic text, precise Ahadith and Ijma'a of Ummah (Consensus) requires different sorts of compelling evidences both religious and medical such as *umum al-balwa* (widespread hardship, credible life threatening risks and proven local pandemic). Credible local risk of high morbidity and mortality are essential to forfeiting the Friday prayers on communal level. Individuals can miss the Juma' prayers due to far lesser reasons such as travel, sickness, fear of personal safety, physical torture, property damage or familial urgencies. Therefore, real fear of personal safety, viral transmission, health scares etc. are sufficient enough Sharai' reasons to take the individual concession of turning Juma' into Dhuhur prayer. It is a permission given by the authentic Hadith to individual Muslims stricken by fear or sickness. Therefore, small children, elderly, women and those with symptoms of cold, flu, influenza or infection are requested to stop coming to the masjid both for daily prayers and Juma'. This is their Islamic duty to protect themselves and others from transmission of disease especially in these trying times. The healthy Muslims can populate the masjid in reduced numbers and for limited periods of time. The masjid can be completely closed to all in case of state emergency when the schools, offices and shopping malls are closed. Protecting human life is one of the fundamental objectives of Islamic Shari'ah. It takes precedent over all other objectives of Islamic faith as life is the foundation of everything else. Therefore, preservation of human life and human rights at times is far more significant than continuity of even essential acts of devotions.