

Menschenwürde und ihre Beziehung zu Krankheit, Leiden und Heilung: Eine islamische Perspektive.

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The present two-day international symposium, as its title, *Towards Holistic Care for the People with Hansen's Disease*, and almost all its paper presentations and other programs, in my opinion, clearly underlie the importance of humanism or the centrality that man occupies in our contemporary religious discourses.

In other words, as I understand the question, religion is for man, that is, for his material and spiritual well-being. And it cannot be otherwise, as it is through the continued existence of human race that religion, whatever its form, is actualized, God is gloried and His mysteries contemplated, through a living God consciousness.

Looking back at the history, slightly over 50 years ago, as part of the Second Vatican Council declarations, on October 28, 1965, the Catholic Church issued a document called *Nostra Aetate* (Our Time), a special document that talks about the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions.

The message of the *Nostra Aetate* declaration is extremely important due to its emphatic declaration that humanity is one, "Humanity forms but one community. This is so because all stem from the one stock which God created to people earth (Acts 17: 26), and also because all share a common destiny, namely God. "

And the paragraph 3 of the *Nostra Aetate* declaration talks about the Muslims. "The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems," it states. "They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men."

And paragraph 4 of the document unequivocally denounces all forms of anti-Semitism, while simultaneously stressing the unique relationship between Jews and Christians. And elsewhere in the beginning, the document (paragraph 2) appreciates and acknowledges religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism.

What we can see, if we examine the *Nostra Aetate* declaration closely, is a spirit of religious humanism underpinning the whole document, respecting human beings and the choices they make in terms of the pursuit of happiness. I may even go further and say that *Nostra Aetate* is a reflection of Catholic humanism, respecting human dignity and freedom.

And I see the present conference and the admirable efforts to make it happen, by bringing scholars, thinkers and health workers from almost all parts of the globe, as extremely positive steps, expanding the humanistic theme of the *Nostra Aetate*. I sincerely thank the organizers of the conference, especially H.E Msgr. Zygmunt Zimoswski and H.E. Maser Jean Marie Mupendawatu for the kind invitation and hospitality. And also, I am very happy to meet the respected Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist scholars and others who speak and participate in this august conference.

I am not a physician, neither someone who can talk about the **Hansen's Disease** and various issues related to it authentically, nor am I a health worker; moreover, many fine papers on the Hansen's disease and issues closely related to it have already been presented yesterday and I think more of the similar nature of papers, etc., are going to be presented today too, so I will take a bit different, however, closely related approach in my paper, thus fulfilling and complementing the main theme of the conference : respecting the human dignity and lessening human sufferings.

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I am deeply interested in understanding the human sufferings, whatever their nature, and working to lessen them through my humble efforts; so, as a humble contribution to this conference, I shall examine in this presentation, **Human Dignity in Relation to Sickness, Suffering and Healing : An Islamic Perspective**, how Islam, an Abrahamic religion, ensures human dignity through its theological and philosophical tenets, the way Islam sees the question of sickness, suffering and healing, how sickness and suffering cannot take away from human being the fundamental dignity that God has given him, the meaning of healing in Islam, and certain issues in Islam related to the Hansen's disease, etc.

Human Dignity in Relation to Sickness and Suffering

Human being, almost like in the philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas, is a unitary being in Islam, harmonious existence of the body and the soul is what inheres that we call the humanness of human being. Both the body and the soul are important, as both of them play their crucial roles in the shaping of the human destiny.

And it is complete equilibrium of these two components of human being is what ensures the health of human being in its completeness. Soul of the human being, unlike in Platonic teachings, is not the captain on the ship that controls the entire ship, but the element that should work in harmony with the body to achieve equilibrium and perfect health. So Islam teaches man to take care of both the body and the soul in their own special ways.

The Prophet (peace be upon him), in many of his sayings, warns people not to punish either the body or the soul in the name of any worldly or religious pursuits, by neglecting any of their genuine needs and longings. No religious practice or worldly pursuit can be an excuse to dishonor the human health or well-being, as God honoured human being, and the special status of honour, accorded by God, must be respected.

The Question of Sufferings

However, what about the question of sufferings in Islam? Like all other religions, Islam too has to balance between the suffering that comes with certain religious beliefs or practices on the one hand, and the human dignity, on the other.

In spite of the ontological glory that God has given him (crystallised in the Arabic term Khalifa or the representative of God), along with the will power, man is also created as a weak creature, prone to sufferings, diseases, both psychological and bodily, the Quran says.

And above all, man has to maneuver within the space that God has given him, as man is not an all powerful being, besides, there are religious practices that demand of man to give up some of his comforts.

Here no reasonable or logical answer can be given to such questions from the point of view of a purely secular, non-religious humanism that does not see any space for human beings other than that they have in this world, however, like all other divinely revealed religions, Islam too offers a worldview rooted in the ceaseless divine plan for man, his eternal life and discourses that only make sense in the light of the belief in the ultimate of truth of God and the belief in the ever-lasting life to come after this worldly life.

However, even here, Islam makes it sure that man or his health is not put in danger due to excessive fasting, praying or any sort of obedience to God beyond the scope of the moderate course of action. And when man is sick, mentally and physically challenged, and even when traveling, he is exempted from fasting and

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he is allowed to lessen the degree of religious duties, like prayers, that he has to observe in the normal state. The Prophet (peace be upon him), teaches that the true spirit of religion is easiness and flexibility.

And the Prophet warned his followers from over-burdening them with any excessive worship that causes sufferings. And the Quran is unambiguous about it as it says: "God does not burden any human being with more than he is well able to bear" (2: 286)

The Question of Sickness or Disease in Islam

Disease or the state of sickness (I use both terms interchangeably here, though I am aware of the differences) in Islam must be examined within the human dignity that God has given him.

The state of sickness can be at two levels, the first, related to the lowering of the spiritual dignity and the second, the disease that affects the body, as we generally understand it.

The state of sickness in relation to the diminishing of man's existential or spiritual honour happens as he starts committing acts that are morally reprehensible, by temporarily breaking the covenant of obedience that he willingly made with God. And these moral failings, apart from tarnishing the soul of man, cause the disease within his soul (Quran calls it disease within the soul of man, 10: 57), and they might open the door to bodily sickness too.

However, whatever the nature of such moral failures and the accompanying diseases of the soul, man never totally loses his human dignity, and no other man has any arbitrary right to judge another person for his or her moral failings, as God is the only true judge, as the Quran rhetorically asks, "Is not God the most just of judges?" (95:8), moreover, God's all embracing mercy can cleanse man from all sins.

The Quran says "O you servants of mine who have transgressed against your own selves, despair not of God's mercy: behold, God forgives all sins..." (39:53)

Here God heals the sinner in ways that He only knows, and sincere repentance, with the resolve not to get involved in morally reprehensible acts, is one of the ways to be worthy of the mercy of God, however, it is the boundless mercy of God that ultimately heals people afflicted with such diseases.

When it comes to diseases that affect the body, Islam repudiates the idea that such diseases are due to the curse of God or they are a form of punishment for the sins of one's past life or the sins of one's family or ancestors. The pre-Islamic Arabs believed that diseases were caused by bad omen, due to bad luck or due to the adverse movements of celestial bodies such as moon, stars, planets, etc. Islam totally rejects these ideas too. Diseases, like all other things in the universe, happen or appear within the knowledge and control of God.

And another aspect related to the state of sickness is the Islamic guidelines for the community and the relatives of the sick. Here, first people who are duty bound to be compassionate to the people affected by the sickness are their relatives. The nature of the ties of both family and marital, in Islam, places an unconditional duty on the shoulders of the family and close relatives to take care them. No form of disease is an excuse for ending the family or marital ties, leaving the patients abandoned. And indeed, it is great sin in Islam to do so.

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The Quran, in Chapter 2, Verses 27, and talks, among other things, about those who cut asunder what God has bidden to be joined..." And many classical scholars view this as a warning against cutting the family ties, whatever the reason for it.

Though, unfortunately, due to cultural, family pressure and even due to the selective reading of the texts of the Quran and the Hadith (the sayings of the Prophet), we often come across families abandoning patients afflicted with disease like Hansen's disease.

A 1993 study conducted in a prominent Arab country showed that the average divorce rate of females, mainly due to the Hansen's disease, was 14.4 percent (Eldaron AH, Kamal Z, Ahmad F. A Study on Divorce Among Saudi Female Leprotic Patients : An Experience at Ibn Sina Hospital, 1993, Quoted by Dr Gurvinder Pal Singh in his article : Psychosocial Aspects of Hansen's Disease, Indian Dermatology Online Journal, Sept-Dec 2012).

There seem to be still existing interpretations of the Sharia (the Muslim law) to sanction such practices of unilateral divorce of women afflicted with the Hansen's disease; though such act can be considered as an outright cruelty totally, against the overall worldview of the Sharia, rooted in the human dignity, especially in the light of the Maqasid Philosophy of the Sharia that goes beyond the literal interpretation of the specific ruling or the interpretation of the Sharia, without taking into consideration of the question of justice, human rights and human dignity.

Visiting the sick and other physically challenged people, Prophet (peace be upon him) clearly says, is a duty. In a moving, perhaps metaphorical, conversation that happens between God and man on the Day of Judgment, as the Prophet (peace be upon him) illustrates it, God tells man , " I was sick, but you did not visit me." And upon his asking how the Almighty God could fall sick, God responds, "Did you not know that such and such servant of mine was sick? But you did not visit him, and if you had visited him you would have found me by him." (reported by Sahih Muslim, the Chapter: Merit of Visiting the Sick, on the authority of Abu Hurairah. (also, Mathew 25: 43)

This moving conversation between God and man - I have only quoted what is relevant to our discussion here from a long conversation between God and man, and I also know that similar episodes have been quoted in other Abrahamic religious traditions too- proves beyond any doubt how important is the care of the sick people in the eyes of God that He, the Almighty God, humbles Himself to describe himself as sick. With such statements, we can never overstate the care with which we need to approach the sick.

Moving from family to the other structures of societal relationship, it is the duty of both the community and the government to make the proper arrangements for the care for the sick. Prophet (peace upon him) often visited the sick, both Muslims and non-Muslims, both men and women. He consoled them, prayed for them, and whenever it was necessary, he made arrangements for their support and treatment.

Indeed, in the light of the many statements of the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet (peace be upon him), the Right to Health can be considered as part of fundamental rights of man that various human agencies like family, the community and the state have the solemn duty to protect it. This right to health as a fundamental right can be seen echoed in the different articles of the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by Islamic Council of Europe on 19 September 1981.

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However, though health care is an area that certain modern Western governments seem to have invested heavily, with free or nearly free national health care available to citizens and others, completely free or even affordable health care or health insurance is still something that people can only wish for in many Muslim countries. And not just in many Muslim countries, even in certain developed countries free health care, as we know, is not easily available, and private health care that often comes with heavy financial burden seems to be the only option for many people. This is a sad truth that tells us how human greed for more wealth prevails, totally disregarding many of our human and moral considerations and ethics.

Another important point that operates as a caring situation for the sick, as Islam sees it, is that disease or the state of sickness is not a punishment but a test from God, and this test prepares man to face it, relying upon his or her personal strength and resources to overcome such situations, thus enhancing the status of his humanness. And for the family and the community, this test from God comes across as an opportunity to prove their human and social commitments. In others words, the test from God comes to them to prove that their actions are in line with what they preach.

And for the people who are afflicted with sickness, even for the minor discomfort they experience due to any form of sickness, God, according various sayings of the Prophet (peace be upon him), has promised forgiveness, as the Prophet puts it, in a beautiful way, sins leave such people as certain trees shed their leafs in the winter. Of course, we can never overstate the psychological security and re-assurance that such an approach to sickness and sufferings can give to anyone who sincerely believes in such philosophy.

The Healing (Al-Shifa)

Healing (Shifa in Arabic) plays an important role in the theology of Islam. And God is called Al-Shafi or the true healer in Islam. And the Quran, in the words of Abraham, the Patriarch, introduces God as the one who heals the sick. Abraham's statement, as the Quran quotes it, "And when I am sick, then He heals me." (Quran 26:80), is very important as it stresses that God is compassionate and He is directly taking care of the sick.

Healing, as seen in Islam, is a holistic process, involving both the body and the soul. And the healing that directly comes from God, according to Islam, comes through the direct intervention of God, out of His mercy or as the merciful response to the sincere prayers of the patients themselves or through the prayers of the pious people.

And also, Quran testifies, healing of mortal disease happening as miracles that God has given to his chosen Prophets, and those who are closer to Him, as they become the living reflection of all that good taught by the divine revelations.

So there is the divine blessings (the Baraka in Arabic) that God reveals through the hands of holy persons. And the great example given by the Quran in this regard is how Jesus healed those with leprosy, other mortal diseases and crippling conditions like blindness through his prayers and touch. The Quran says, as Jesus presenting himself to the Children of Israel, "... and I shall heal the blind and the leper, and bring the dead back to life by God's Will. (the Quran 3:49)

Some of the authentically reported traditions about the Prophet (peace be upon him) also testify healing of the sick in a different degree. And Islam teaches that this healing of the Baraka tradition through prayers

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and through persons who lead truly saintly life continues to exist today, though in an entirely different degree or status in comparison to the healing done by the Prophets in the past.

Healing through Human Agency

However, healing through human agency, involving physicians and medicines, is the law in Islam and the most manifest way of confronting the diseases, as man has to play his own role in the different sectors of life, as he has been created and given the space in earth to live, and subjected to the natural laws that God himself has created. And in this regard, Islam firmly teaches that remedy for every disease is out there, and even for those disease that have not found any complete cure, it is the human duty to find the remedy, through study, experiment and research.

There are several traditions of the Prophet (peace be upon him), reported by sources, considered authentic by Muslims, like the Hadith collections of Al-Bukhari and Muslim, in which the Prophet was reported to have said it on many occasions.

On the authority of one of his disciples Jabir, The Prophet was reported to have said, “ For every disease there is a remedy, and when the remedy is made apparent, the disease is cured by the permission of God, the Almighty.”

In another well-known Hadith, reported by one of the famous companions of the Prophet, Abu Hurairah, the Prophet was reported to have said, “ God has not created any disease without also creating a medicine or remedy for it.” (reported by the Hadith collections of both Bukhari and Muslim).

God’s powers and man’s knowledge and the ability that God has given him thus meet here, not as competing forces but as the forces that strengthen and complement each other for the benefit of human beings.

It is in the light of this mutually inclusive philosophy that medical science was born and developed during the early centuries in the Muslim world, leading to the establishment of hospitals, health centers in almost all classical Muslim cities, and producing some of the finest Muslim physicians like Muhammad ibn Zakariya al-Razi (Rhazes), Ali ibn Sina (Avicenna) , etc., who also wrote copiously about medicine, studying various diseases, classifying them and succeeding in finding cure for different diseases.

However, the core of science of medicine in Islam lies in the relationship between God and man. Physicians, as they treat patients or do experiments to find cures for the diseases, actually carry an Amanah or trust from God. And they are not permitted to abuse the trust that God has assigned them. They must respect their patients, with a deep awareness that they are dealing with human beings, with living bodies and souls, not commodities for profit making, and their primary motivation should be the lessening of the sufferings of their patients, and in other words, medical science and the medical profession should not be solely profit motivated, though wages for medical services done are the genuine rights of the physicians.

Conclusion : The Problems, Solutions and the future of Islamic world.

Islamic world, as we can see it today, is in a profound crisis, and this crisis seems to have gripped almost all sectors of human life there, including the health care system, there is a terrible lack of universal health care, prejudice towards patents, especially those with the Hansen’s disease, etc., exist in the Muslim world.

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And the sufferings of the patients with the Hansen's disease increase if they happen to be women or people belonging to religions other than Islam due to the extra social pressure and exclusion. By selectively quoting and interpreting certain sayings of the Prophet, patients, especially those afflicted with the Hansen's disease are mistreated, isolated, social ties cut with such people, and even divorces are permitted through certain selective readings of the certain rulings of the Sharia, in spite of the fact, according to certain well authenticated traditions, the Prophet came into close physical contacts with person or persons afflicted with the Hansen's disease, held their hands, ate with them, saying that no disease was communicable without the will of God.

And in many of his sayings Prophet (peace be upon him) clearly warned against any form of oppression of any body, and he especially urged to visit sick people, take care of them and make them feel that they are not unwanted people and they are very much part of the society, and they cannot be prevented from having access to the mosques or any other public spaces because of any disease that they might be suffering from.

When we try to understand the reasons for the all encompassing crisis through which the Muslim community is going through today, affecting all segments of its societal structures, we can see that there are so many internal and external factors acting as negative forces that precipitate such crisis in the Muslim world, however, an analysis of such forces and their policies are beyond the scope of this paper, and secondly, as a Muslim public intellectual, I am deeply interested in self-criticism. It seems to me that the time has come for the Muslim community to take a good look at the state of their affairs today, following the Quranic dictum that God does not change a community until and unless it brings forth changes from within. (the Quran 13:11).

So the change in terms of reading religious text and cultural practices that have nothing to do with Islam must be initiated by the Muslims from within. Also, there is a deep crisis of religious knowledge amongst Muslims today, affecting the society as a whole, so perhaps what we need today in the Muslim world is a reconstruction of the contemporary Muslim mind in the light of the universal principles of the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet (peace be upon him), however, such reconstruction of the Muslim mind must be done, also, in the light of the contemporary human situation.

And such project can, perhaps, address, in a better way, many of the contemporary questions, including adopting a more humane approach towards people afflicted with the Hansen's disease, as the theme of this conference eloquently highlights through its various sessions.

As I noted in the beginning, religion is for the benefit of human beings. And human dignity is above everything, as God is his creator. And human being, as Islam time and again stresses, is the most honoured creation of God, and any religion, if it is to be a true and genuine must protect human life, as such act, in fact, amounts to honouring the God, the creator of man.

And, as we know, honouring God and loving him lie at the core of every true religious experience. Thank you for your attention.