Abstract: Cases from both Germany and Austria exemplify how the COVID-19 pandemic is rapidly changing traditionally held ideas of Islamic community, religious congregations, and pastoral care. These cases were collected during Ramadan 2020, as this particular period signifies a time of paramount spirituality, social solidarity, and communal festivity. They reflect the rich and vibrant efforts and responses of Muslim leaders, organizations, and institutions to the challenges posed by the current pandemic. Different initiatives and solutions Muslim communities have developed as a response to COVID-19 are characterized as “caring communities.” Muslim chaplains, despite their highly limited personal access to secluded, lonesome, and distressed individuals in need of support, overcame the restrictions. Muslim leaders have striven to make use of the virtual space to fulfil the ordinary function of mosques as places of worship and communication. They have thus attempted to uphold social solidarity (zakat). Their responses to the pandemic raise questions about the future of religiosity and its manifestation as well as possible forms of religious communities and their ethical values.

Keywords: Pandemic in Islam, muslim Chaplaincy, Covid-19, case study, Islamic Theology, technology
bar machen konnten. Dieser Artikel erörtert in diesem Zusammenhang ein Konzept muslimischer Gemeinden als „caring communities“, deren fürsorglicher Charakter während der Pandemie in besonderer Weise hervortritt.

**Stichwörter:** Pandemie im Islam, Islamische Seelsorge, Covid-19, Fallbeispiele, Islamische Theologie, Technologie

1 Pandemic in Islam – A Brief Overview

Van Ess describes the human experience with pandemics in the following terms: “Those who die of them [epidemics] usually die unnoticed; those who survive them or learn of them talk about them and transcend them to a parable” (van Ess 2001, 5). Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī further illustrates how history possesses an almost unbroken chain of devastating epidemics and pandemics among humankind to which societies and cultures had to react in different ways (Cf. Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī 2015).

While it is undeniable that this circumstance also applies to the Islamic cultural sphere, in Islamic cultures a pandemic is often perceived somewhat differently than in non-Islamic cultures. Since late antiquity, Islamic history has witnessed a long series of plagues, which caused great damage to different regions and had left many casualties and due to which communal prayers and religious rituals, such as pilgrimages, were often suspended. Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 1449) for example lost three of his six children during the bubonic plague and wrote one of the most famous books about the plagues in premodern times. Of the famous historical pandemic and epidemic are the plague of Emmaus (a city close to Palestine) in 638/639, al-jārif (an all-out plague) in Basra in 69/688, the ṭāʿūn al-fatayāt (plague of the girls) in 87/705, and the so-called at-tāʿūn al-aʿzam (the greatest plague) in 833/1147, which claimed the lives of a many people there was not enough manpower available to bring in the harvest during harvest season. Such experiences have yielded a rich and distinctive literary tradition dealing with plagues and their repercussions not only on body but also on soul.

The plague of Emmaus in 638/639 and the Muslims’ responses to it still influences the current discourse about COVID-19. Muslims divided into two groups: one considered the plague a manifestation of God’s divine mercy and a shortcut to paradise, while the other saw in it a manifestation of divine punishment ignited by human sins. Interestingly, both groups backed their interpretations up with prophetic sayings (Cf. van Ess, 2001, 6)

The perception, interpretation, and reaction to pandemics and epidemics vary across cultures and regions, despite shared human experiences. Within Eur-
opean cultures, however, the various epidemics and pandemics – such as the London plague of 1665, the plague of Marseille in 1720/21, and the infamous and recurring bubonic plague – became a topic of literary reflection in the form of novels and plays. (Van Ess 2001, 5–7). In an Islamic context, the reflection was conducted from both a legal and a spiritual perspective and took on the form of short treatises¹, which until now hold special authority for Muslims.² However, the classical European literary works hardly influence the current discussions of COVID-19 in Europe.

In some cultures, people who die of plagues are seen as victims to be mourned or commemorated out of sympathy. Muslims, however, consider the deceased as Ṣahīd (martyr). In various places, the Qur’ān speaks of the reward that awaits those who die as martyrs. According to Surah 3: 169–171 and 2:158, martyrs are not dead but remain alive; promised tremendous reward, mercy, forgiveness and (after death) immediate entry into paradise. There are three main groups of martyrs: those who are martyrs in this world and in the hereafter, those who are martyrs only in this world, and those who are martyrs only in the hereafter. This last group includes people who die naturally during the pilgrimage as well as those who die by drowning, disease or pandemic. This understanding entails not only a theological debate about the interpretation of pandemic as a mercy or punishment of God but also an intense discussion about pastoral care and how Muslims react to the pandemic. The idea of martyrdom makes dealing with the crises a complex process as well as a source of consolation for believers.

Current Muslim discussions about COVID-19 are ambivalent and driven by theological interpretation of the pandemic, which can be divided into two positions: for some, the pandemic is a phenomenon subject to samʿīyāt (revealed knowledge), and hence considered as rījz (punishment, inflicted by God) or waḥẓ al-jinn (punishment of demons) for the unbelievers while simultaneously being a mercy for the muʿminūn (believers) (Cf. Abdallah 2020, 333–340). A plague is at time interpreted by some as a kind of manifestation of divine justice not only in the Middle Ages, but also in the time of the Enlightenment and the contemporary


² This does not mean that pandemics in Islamic culture have no impact on literary writings. al-Ayyāmn the novel of the Egyptian “Dean of Arabic Literature” Ṭaḥa Hussein covers the author’s childhood, with themes of the ignorance prevalent in rural Egypt and the customs practiced at that time and reflects upon the suffering of his village and the distress of a family that lost their middle brother because of cholera.
era. So, in the 18th century for example, when the plague spread in the eastern area of the Islamic Empire, the sultan of Morocco, Muḥammad b. Suleiman (1760–1822), rejected the experts’ recommendation to close the borders and to assign Moroccan pilgrims to quarantine. He followed the opinion of some scholars who saw the plague as a test and mercy from God. And COVID-19 was considered at the beginning of its outbreak as “divine” retribution for the oppression of the Uyghurs in China.

For others, the pandemic is a natural phenomenon that ought to be dealt with scientifically, namely by applying social measures and following the regulations of health authorities.

When we look at the Qur’ān, we find that it does not confirm either view. In several verses, the Qur’ān describes people’s hardships because of natural disasters, diseases, and diminution of property and offspring as punishments and trials. Prophetic stories in the Qur’ān often refer to such calamities as punishments for the respective people for their disbelief or for turning away from God’s way, as in the story of Nūḥ, Hūd or Ṣaliḥ (Cf. Q 54:11–12; 7:71–72 & 7:77–78). In other Quranic passages, however, such painful experiences are presented as tests for believers, with the story of Job being one example (Q 38:44, cf. also 21:83). Sura 7, for instance, describes such events as divine signs; exegetes have differing opinions about what exactly is meant by signs. The majority of exegetes understand it to be a test and a punishment for those who did not want to believe in Moses. The word rijz, which occurs in this passage in two consecutive verses (Q 7:134–135) is equated with punishment. Yet the nature of this punishment is disputed. Aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 923) reports various opinions in this regard. According to him, Ibn ‘Abbās and Ibn Jubair, among others, understand rijz to mean ṭāʿūn (the plague), while Mujāhid and Qatāda understand it to mean ‘adāb (a painful punishment), without defining it further, whereby rijz can be understood as a test for believers as a generic term for the signs mentioned above (cf. at-Ṭabarī 1994, vol. 13, 70–71). In the Qur’ān, two terms are used in this context: rijs (uncleanness/filthy) and rijz, with both terms appearing ten times in the Qur’ān.3 While the latter stands for punishment, the former is ambiguous and may refer to impurity, sin, shame or evil (s. e.g. Q 5:90 and 33:33), Satan (Q 6:125), prohibitions (Q 6:145), displeasure (Q 7:71), hypocrisy/doubt/unbelief (Q 9:125), or idols (Q. 22:30). The Quranic discourse thus appears to provide little input for dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic in particular, even though it plays an important role in its interpretation.

However, the reactions of Muslim communities to COVID-19 pose a number of questions of a normative, ethical, and theological nature. COVID-19 has shown that faith communities must cope with new challenges. The professionals’ dilemmas have become everyday topics of discussion, e.g. the issue of triage, skipping spiritual care, or suspending communal prayer. Issues that were marginal a few years have become relevant. How will a faith community look in the post-pandemic era? Can we draw theological principles for this “new” era from the Qur’ān? The topic is complex, cannot be treated comprehensively, and needs several interdisciplinary studies. In order to address some of these questions, this article aims to describe and analyze how some Muslim communities have responded to the pandemic.

2 COVID-19 and the Reactions of Muslims: Practical Examples

COVID-19 is a huge challenge not only for the health care system but for the economy and the educational system as well. Amid the long-winding struggle between the state and the pandemic, the role of faith communities, especially those of Muslims, is almost neglected, although believers are not spared from the pandemic. Muslim communities found solutions to compensate the temporary cancellation of fundamental parts of their collective religious practice during the “hard lockdown” in Austria and Germany. Muslims communities connected both among themselves and with the wider society. They faced the problems and communicated with the isolated and secluded members. The three case studies that follow should contribute to the assessment of how religious minorities managed to overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic and how, they at times used the very dramatic circumstances to create new bonds both internally and externally.

In the following section, I examine how Muslim communities reacted to the pandemic, using three topics as examples: communal prayer, almsgiving, and pastoral care. In this section, I identify the emergence of what I call “caring communities”, a concept that reflects the initiatives and types of solutions Muslim communities have developed as a response to the challenges of COVID-19. The cases from Austria focus on the model of “virtual mosques” which has been developed by some Muslim organizations. The case from Germany presents the challenges of “pastoral care.”

4 Finally, I will examine the effects of the current pan-

4 Pastoral care in Austria took many forms during the pandemic, including one-on-one conversations, emails, and phone calls. Chaplains were overwhelmed; the talks were often about repen-
demic on the social solidarity within Muslim communities and the solutions proposed both in Germany and Austria (online zakat).

In order to offer a realistic picture, I present and discuss voices and examples from different organizations: small communities, individual mosques, and umbrella organizations. The examples from the field of pastoral care mainly come from Germany. I was personally involved in this case, which enables me to reflect on my own experiences. In this case the institute represents the pastoral care in the federal state of Baden-Württemberg (BW), which is home to the second largest Muslim community in Germany.

I chose the month of Ramadan 2020 for several reasons. For Muslims, it is not only a time of fasting, but also a time of spiritual devotions, family reunions, and community gatherings. The decision to close the doors of communal worship was an extremely difficult one during this month.

2.1 The Communal Prayer (Virtual Mosque): Cases from Austria

The first example comes from the Muslim organization of the state of Upper Austria. As a member of the Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich (IGGÖ) with about 105,000 Muslims and 65 mosques, the Muslim organization of Upper Austria quickly reacted and offered various solutions. The IGGÖ represents Muslims in political and religious matters such as pastoral care, religious education, etc., and has representatives for these areas. Under the IGGÖ there is a so-called “Kultusgemeinde” or “Dachgemeinde”. This means a coalition of at least 10 mosques. In the federal provinces, IGGÖ is represented by religious communities. One of the important responses of the Muslim organization in the state of Upper Austria was the planning of a series of online lectures, mainly taking place during Ramadan. The main goals behind this series were to accompany Muslims throughout the crisis; to offer the necessary social and psychological help to people with such needs; to preserve the communicative and lively atmosphere of Ramadan; to offer alternative services to the members during the lockdown; and to promote an image of Muslims as active partners as well as independent and reliable social supporters.

When we look at the online program of the organization, we notice that it is thematically diverse and rich in terms of content and participants (speakers and moderators). Moreover, the organization does well in advertising their activities,
expanding their networks, and supporting their imams. The topics these virtual events dealt with can be divided into three categories: crisis management (regarding the pandemic, psychological and commercial skills, and accounting); political education (democracy, presentation of the religious communities, conversation with the mayor about the challenges and demands of Muslims); and religious and theological spirituality (Ramadan in the time of the pandemic, theology of coexistence and pastoral care).

The second example comes from a mosque in Innsbruck, the provincial capital of Tyrol, Austria. There, the community reacted independently and quickly, suspending Friday prayers and all communal activities. The Islamic center organized a series of online events to keep its members connected. Nonetheless, the topics of the program were very limited and irrelevant to the current situation. They included, to give just some examples, topics about fasting and its rewards, being kind to parents, birr (piety), and the recitation of the Qur’an in Ramadan, tahajjud (praying at night), adāb al-ṭaʿām (ethics of eating), the ṭaqwā (fear of God). One of the recurrent topics was zakat or sadaqa (charity), which was crucial for the survival of the mosques. With the closure of the mosques, the members’ donations during Ramadan were cut off and mosques struggled to cover their costs, especially the salary of imams who were invited from Arab countries.

Comments and Reflection

The response of Muslim communities to the pandemic can be divided into two categories: optional and mandatory. The second category includes the closure of mosques, the suspension of Friday and festival prayers in mosques, and the reduction or even discontinuation of social services such as the tutoring of children. In the above-mentioned cases, Muslim organizations and centers managed to offer solutions aimed at virtually cloning the function of the mosques as partners in welfare, pastoral care, social integration, and as places of encounters and meetings. They succeeded in developing what might be called “the virtual mosque”.

The Austrian cases mentioned above developed different methods and approaches in terms of layout and content. Regarding the layout, it is evident that the composition of the online lecture series from Innsbruck was professionally designed. At the top left of the screen, there is a sign for live streaming. In the background, pictures of the holy places in Mecca and Medina are displayed. The Quranic passages referred to during the lectures were interspersed synchronously with the voice of the reciter of the Qur’an. The recordings do not show any acoustic disturbances. This design suggests that the people behind it are well-versed in technology and are IT experts. When we look at the lecture series from Upper
Austria, we get a different impression. The series was organized like academic seminars. For each lecture, there was a moderator; the audience had the opportunity to ask questions and to participate in the discussion; at the beginning, there always was a short introduction about the respective speaker and the topic. The background was simple and contained the logo of the organization. Sometimes, technical glitches were apparent, giving the impression that IT expertise was lacking.

In terms of content, the two examples are completely different. The community in Innsbruck presented typical topics about Ramadan. The events were of a monotonous type, where the imam took all the responsibility. Whether the topics were determined in advance or with the board remains unclear. What is clear, however, is that the current crises, the worries and fears of the Muslims, the social restrictions, the family challenges, and the economic difficulties were not addressed. This poor content explains why the talks on social media have not enjoyed a large popularity.

Conversely, the program of the community of Upper Austria was very successful and gained considerable popularity, not the least because of its responding to the immediate needs and questions of the Muslim community. The program of Upper Austria considered the thematic areas that, according to the classical model by sociologist Charles Y. Glock, constitute the religiosity of a person. This model is concerned “primarily [with] those areas that are of importance across institutions” (Karakaşoğlu-Aydin, 2000, 124) and is thus also suitable for activities of the communities. If one draws on the model of Glock here, the overlap with his five-dimensions model becomes conspicuous. According to this model, religiosity is divided into different components, namely: religious experience, rituals, religious belief, intellect and consequences (Cf. Glock 1969, 150–155).

Even though Glock’s model was not developed for Muslim communities, Yasemin Karakaşoğlu-Aydin adopted this model for Muslim religiosity (Karakaşoğlu-Aydin, 2000). Her model guides the following analysis. Under the dimension of religious experience, Karakaşoğlu-Aydin includes personal experience and Gemütsbewegung (religious subliminal reactions) such as fear, rapture, humility, happiness, peace of mind, confidence, trust, Gemeinschaftserlebnis (communal experience), leidenschaftliche Vereinigung mit dem Göttlichen (sincere adoration to commune with the divine) etc.” (Karakaşoğlu-Aydin, 2000, 125). The ritual level encompasses a variety of religious practices that Muslims should adhere to, such

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5 Glock uses the term “ideology”. Since this term tends to be used with a negative connotation in today’s media discourse, I use Karakaşoğlu-Aydin’s alternative suggestion “dimension of religious belief” here; I also agree with Karakaşoğlu-Aydin in the category of rituals, since Glock speaks of “ritualistic dimension” at this point. Cf. Karakaşoğlu-Aydin 2000, 125.
as the five pillars of Islam, or the halal commandments, and thus plays a central role in the visibility of Muslim religiosity. Under the dimension of religious belief, Karakaşoğlu-Aydin understands religious convictions and attitudes towards specific beliefs and doctrines such as the belief in the Judgment Day, predestination, the unity of God, etc. The fourth dimension stands for an individual’s religious education, i.e., familiarity with religious sources and scriptures and knowledge of religious precepts and norms, for example, knowledge of the five pillars of Islam, the principles of Sharia, and Quranic statements as well as a critical or uncritical approach to the ‘sacred texts’ and the types of texts through which knowledge is obtained” (Ibid.). Consequences are defined as “all effects of religious belief, religious experience and religious knowledge on the shaping of everyday life” (ibid., 126) of the individual, i.e., everyday practical consequences, and all those aspects that concern the visible handling of religion in everyday life and shape the interpersonal interactions of the participants.

The Tyrolean example covers mostly one dimension, that is, the dimension of rituals. It addresses practices and commandments that Muslims should consider and adhere to, especially in Ramadan, such as breaking the fast on time and postponing the nightly suḥūr (meal until before the morning prayer). The reasons behind the absence of critical examination of the new context and the social or financial challenges might be that first, the imam is unfamiliar with the European context; second, the consequences of COVID-19 were underestimated; and third, the community was overwhelmed by the situation and therefore did not take its effects seriously.

In the Upper Austrian example, the seminars cover various issues such as religious practice (Ramadan in times of COVID-19), religious beliefs, as well as religious subliminal reactions (fear and peace of mind), areas of religious practical and theological knowledge and the everyday practical consequences.⁶

2.2 Pastoral Care during the Pandemic: A Case Study from Germany

The third example comes from Germany and deals with an educational association for training Muslim pastors. The Mannheim Institute carries out various pro-

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⁶ It must be reiterated that this series of lectures was preceded by a discussion about further training for imams in order to communicate with them about topics of the pandemic, about crisis management and theological implications. This, as indicated, had to be postponed to a later date for given reasons.
jects on interreligious dialogue and Islamic chaplaincy and works in the field of chaplaincy together with many hospitals, ministries, and organizations.\(^7\)

The Mannheim Institute cares about the continuation of pastoral care for Muslims even during the COVID-19 period. The efforts show how, despite the ban on visits to prisons and hospitals, the Mannheim Institute managed to find ways to combine medical hygiene and quarantine requirements with the possibility of pastoral presence. The Institute was successful at convincing the local government to offer Muslim prison-pastors official positions (even half-time positions) in order to tackle the difficulties of the COVID-19 regulations. It also developed an in-depth online training during the summer months of 2020.\(^8\) The training program included theological topics relevant to the pandemic, such as the image of God and the image of humanity, existence of God, freedom of will, predestination, patience and lamentation, sin and forgiveness in Islam.

Moreover, the Mannheim Institute developed the following procedures during the pandemic\(^9\):
- Telephone pastoral care because staff in hospitals must ask patients if they need pastoral care.
- One-on-one counseling in prison because group talks are prohibited. Topics often include the pandemic, repentance, and patience.
- Permanent positions for chaplains so that they could be present even during the pandemic.
- Restructuring and reorganization of the chaplaincy programs.
- A plan to introduce pastoral care in schools.

Islamic pastoral care is offered on a voluntary basis, i.e., the pastors do not have the right to look after the people without their respective consent. The advocacy of the Mannheim Institute during the pandemic tries to ensure that the Muslim pastors continue to communicate with each other as well as with their clients and the wider society. Pastors should participate in overcoming the problems caused by the pandemic. The measures undertaken aim at establishing a relationship that connects the isolated people with one another and at enabling pastoral care to continue. If one analyzes the examples according to the above-mentioned model, it becomes evident that they can mainly be assigned to Glock’s fourth and fifth dimensions. In its program, the Mannheim Institute focused not only on religious knowledge but also on critical reflection about the acquired skills and their appli-

\(^{7}\) Cf. www.mannheimer-institut.de (accessed: 17.11.2020)
\(^{8}\) The author of this article was allowed to lead the training.
\(^{9}\) Personal conversation with the consultant for pastoral care at the Institute from 23.9.2020.
cation in the current circumstances. Recurrent theological topics raised in this context include the image of God and doubts about the existence of God in times of distress (theodicy). The chaplains discussed two topics in this context: the existence of God and divine justice. Some Muslim attendees who engaged with chaplains constantly raised the theodicy question; others even doubted God’s existence and withdrew from participating in rituals like prayer. The discussion became heated due to the pandemic, so one participant cancelled the training, because the current challenges became too complex.

Prisoners especially are at risk of the virus because of the confined spaces they live in and they expect chaplains to be more involved with and committed to them. Chaplains understand this but do not know how to respond. In addition, as volunteers, they have limited leeway and authority. Simple or classical answers like “God is near” (Q 2:186) or “God is merciful” seem too superficial for those seeking help and inadequate in this serious situation. Complex answers that address the image of God and humanity in Islam require prior theological knowledge, become difficult to comprehend, and could give the impression of a perceived superiority of the chaplains. This situation leads to rethinking the chaplaincy’s communication style and to developing the appropriate methods in times of the pandemic.

In addition to theological reflection, the discussions dealt with Islamic juristic issues, such as the new legal obstacles of communicating with the clients in hospitals and prisons by pastors who are work on a voluntary basis.

While the virtual model of congregations found support in many Muslim communities, a similar solution for the pastoral care seems complicated and underdeveloped. There are doubts that a telephone call or contact via WhatsApp, Skype, FaceTime, Messenger or similar technical possibilities can replace a personal visit to the client. The answer to these challenges might be developed over time and with further practical experience.

2.3 Social Solidarity of Muslim Communities during the Pandemic: online zakat

The current pandemic not only gives lessons in the field of medicine, but triggers a change of social structure, community life, personal development and family relationships. In his recently co-edited book, Wolfgang Kröll points out the ambivalence of the pandemic: “The COVID-19 crisis can be described as a collective traumatic experience which, like all crises, is ambivalent because it dramatically interferes with familiar things and leads to a standstill, and at the same time opens up new opportunities” (Kröll 2020, 8).
The pandemic has shown that religion, personal beliefs, and social-ethical values play an important role in times of crises. At the same time, the pandemic raises several challenges Muslim organizations need to consider and rethink, such as that of the virtual mosque, the meaning of community, and methods of communication with the new generation.10 Indeed, under the title “Moscheen bauen ihre Online-Angebote aus” (Mosques are expanding their online offers) a newspaper reports on how since the Coronavirus pandemic, mosques have increasingly turned to digital offers such as video sermons, digital religious instruction, or online pastoral care (Tomma Neveling, 2020, mediendienst-integration.de).

Another crucial issue in this context is social solidarity, especially with those who have lost their jobs. Unemployment and COVID caused a decrease in terms of financial support of the mosques and Muslim organizations. There was a heated discussion in Muslim organizations during Ramadan about how to raise funding despite the mosques being closed. Some of them, for instance, started fundraising campaigns on social media (spendenaufruf-moscheen-unterstuetzen, 2020, islamiq.de).

In Islam, every human being is called upon to assume social and spiritual responsibility towards fellow human beings. In addition to the family, which is the first place of social responsibility for the individual (cf. Q 2:83; 7:189 and Q 30:2), the Muslim ummah (community) is also addressed as an object of fraternal and religious solidarity and mutual cohesion (cf. Q 3:103 and 49:10). Accordingly, the Qur’ān addresses humanity not only as a subject who stands individually before God, but also as one who is integrated into small and large social contexts. Consequently, zakāt is supposed to strengthen the dignity of humanity as an inviolable good. This social tax – and this is what is special about it – presupposes an active role on the part of the individual. During the pandemic, it has become clear how the state, despite its enormous technical and financial resources and despite its strength as a political and social system, was dependent on the participation of its citizens.

The pandemic has shown that rethinking the meaning and effect of zakāt is necessary. The core point of zakāt, namely personal responsibility and solidarity

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10 This issue was discussed in the 1950’s with the spread of the radio. The head of the fatwa council of al-Azhar, shaykh Hasanayn Muhammad Makhluf (d. 1990) was against praying jum’a following the Imam over live-radio. This was opposed by the Moroccan Hadith scholar Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Siddiq (d. 1960) in the booklet al-Iqnā‘ bi-sīḥḥat šalāt al-jum’ā fi al-manzil khalfa al-midhyā‘. He mentions two conditions for this prayer: the imam and those who are praying act synchronically and that at least two individuals are praying behind the radio. Cf. ibid, (Tétouan: Maṭba‘at Dār at-T’ilīf, 1375 to hijrah).
for the community, for friends, acquaintances, and family is indispensable during the pandemic. Ideally, zakāt presupposes that a person cares about people in his or her social context, keeps in touch with them, and maintains personal contact. Otherwise, he or she cannot find out who the needy are. Thus, a person should be familiar with their surroundings in order to contribute to social welfare. This situation is precisely the desired behavior in the pandemic: healthy, young people should help their old, sick and vulnerable neighbors and acquaintances; this might include bringing them groceries or disposing of their garbage. Such desirable interpersonal relationships may seem difficult or even utopian in a pluralistic society, but that is precisely why the task is enormously important. Schmidhuber, following the American philosophers Wendy Rogers and Susan Dodds, speaks of three forms of vulnerability:

1. Human beings are inherently vulnerable because of their human condition. Hunger, thirst, sleep deprivation, social isolation – all these basal human needs point to the inherent vulnerability of being human.
2. Situational vulnerability can affect people in specific contexts, for personal, social, or political reasons. Both a natural disaster that can leave people homeless overnight and illnesses that turn the seemingly strong subject into a needy caregiver or sudden unemployment are forms of situational vulnerability.
3. Pathogenic vulnerability arises from asymmetric interpersonal relationships and institutional structures. These include, for example, the mistreatment or abuse of a child by an adult” (Schmidhuber 2020, 273).

Zakāt represents a religious and ethical responsibility and offers help that can cover all these three areas. Accordingly, zakat does not only come in the form of financial help, but for every gift and grace of God, there is a kind of zakat so that rich and poor alike can participate in it: There is zakāt for health, such as helping impaired people, e.g. with their shopping; zakāt for knowledge, such as passing on knowledge or offering tutoring to students; zakāt for leisure, such as visiting relatives or going to a retirement home, etc. By paying zakāt without making a real effort to find out how the people around are doing, the religious duty is fulfilled, but the ethical responsibility remains unfulfilled.

In other words, the pandemic entails a structural change in the concept of zakāt in the direction of universal social solidarity towards all people, regardless of their ethnicity, location, or religion. The pandemic experience triggers further questions about zakāt. It seems obvious to look for alternatives for the long run, such as setting up a kind of “savings account” to support those in need who no longer have an income because of the pandemic. This may entail a change of course away from global cooperation on the level of cognitive ummah to a concept of regional cooperation and national projects initiated by local Muslim communities. This step not only challenges Islamic theology to rethink the philosophy of zakāt, but also challenges Muslims to cooperate and coordinate, to synergize, and
to place more responsibility on local Muslim communities as reliable partners in social matters. Such a development can be linked to the responses of the faith communities in the pandemic and could be considered a milestone on the path to professionalization.

3 Conclusion

COVID-19 has made people aware of their vulnerability and weaknesses: social isolation, economic loss or unfulfilled spiritual needs are just some of its manifestations. The loss of a job and the associated problems, such as not being able to pay for rent or other necessities; the prohibition of meeting dear people, work colleagues, one’s own children and grandchildren and the associated loneliness and social isolation; the closure of synagogues, churches and mosques and the resulting loss of important spiritual rituals; or simply being of an older age or suffering from a chronic illness and therefore being at risk of becoming a “guest” in the intensive care unit have become everyday experiences.

The pandemic has initiated a series of debates on theological issues and their place in modern society. The COVID-19 crisis highlights that it is time to start thinking and rethinking the new context and the challenges and what they reveal about our religiosity, the resilience of our values, theological education, and theological-legal norms.

It was not surprising how many and multifaceted – and sometimes even contradictory – opinions circulate on social media. For Muslim imams and spiritual leaders, however, this meant a new way of working and a new terrain they had to tread. They had to accept new routes in order to be pastorally available to their members. Just as the composition of Muslim communities is diverse, so were the reactions. The idea of the “Virtual Mosque” is becoming a reality after once having even been considered a betrayal of the religion. Once established, it might not only make the classical mosques appear superfluous or, at best, transform them into social leisure clubs, but it will also rekindle the European debate about “imported” imams – and pose challenges to the role of Islamic theology in Europe altogether.

Imams and other religious leaders will have to familiarize themselves with the Internet and virtual communication in the future; it is highly likely that the classical form of communication will not remain the same. This is crucial in order not only to reach the younger generation, as has been identified long ago, but more generally, to be noticed at all.

The pandemic has engaged the public in topics and dilemmas usually reserved for professionals. Topics such as ethics within the pandemic, entitlement
to treatment, rejection of the elderly and sick, or triage, to only name a few are no longer areas exclusively debated by scholars but have become everyday topics. Muslim communities can and should get involved and design educational programs for adults in the form of “adult education.”

There is still a lack of empirical studies about the offers of Muslim organizations, their content, methodological-pedagogical, and theological background. For example, what role does the Holy Scripture, the Qur’an, play? Which topics dominate the discourse? How does the offer relate to the real world in this time marked by the pandemic? How are the listeners addressed? How do the preachers present themselves?

The pandemic has highlighted the role, influence, and responsibility of Muslim organizations in caring about the well-being of their members in times of hardship. Thus, reducing mosques to their superficial function as prayer rooms is inappropriate and runs counter to their perception as social partners.

Lastly, we need more studies to learn about and discuss the effect of the pandemic on religious communities and examine the efficiency of the offered programs to keep our communities dynamic during COVID-19. In what way will the “Virtual Mosque” affect our understanding of spiritual health? How do we approach the religious rulings regarding mosques? These should not be considered short-time questions but profound and far-reaching issues to stay even after the end of the pandemic as an ongoing debate for new possibilities of re-structuring communities.

In all cases presented here, it becomes evident that the pandemic brought about new challenges for the religious personnel who were not prepared to deal with a crisis of such magnitude and with impact on all areas of life and its repercussions on their communities. Many Muslim organizations are attempting to fulfill their responsibilities in the crisis as partners in society and to continue – despite frequent closures of mosques – to serve as conversation partners and providers of pastoral care for their members. The discussion of the pandemic has shown that Islamic (and religious in general) traditional literatures are by no means obsolete or useless. They offer points of guidance and provide impetus for the further development of Islamic theology in the contemporary era. In this regard, we should strive towards developing a theology and theory that is rooted in praxis and that moves from praxis into theory and back into praxis. As for the future, it is our mission and duty to translate our experiences with the present pandemic and develop a new interpretation of our perception of religiosity and ethics, and for that it is essential that we pose more critical questions.
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