

Dualistic Interpretation Toward Plague in Islam: Indonesian Muslim Responses and The Shifting of Worship Practices during Pandemic

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Abstract: The Covid-19 pandemic that hit the world some time ago has affected a number of aspects in the life of mankind, including in the social interaction of the community. In Indonesia, Covid-19 has even led to policies on restrictions in worship practices. This article examines and critically evaluates the various interpretations and responses of religious organizations and Indonesian Muslims to the provisions of worship restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic. Using a literature-based qualitative research method and a sociological approach, this article concludes that the different interpretations of Covid-19 among Muslim communities have played an important role in shaping responses and worship behavior during the pandemic. Some Muslims think rationally and interpret Covid-19 as a disaster and test of humanity. Based on this, they are more adaptive to government policies and regulations in carrying out worship. While some other Muslims who think fatalistically interpret Covid-19 as God's punishment and destiny so they oppose health protocols. The different interpretations and responses of Muslims to the regulations on restrictions on worship during the Covid-19 pandemic are actually a continuation of the dualistic interpretation of the plague between rationalistic and fatalistic reasoning that has appeared in Islamic history. In today's modern era, it is necessary to build a new paradigm that respects religious and scientific perspectives in a balanced manner so that it can transform from a dualistic approach to an integrative approach.

Keywords: *Covid-19 pandemic; restrictions on worship; response of Indonesian Muslim community; rational reasoning; fatalistic reasoning*

Abstrak: Pandemi Covid-19 yang beberapa waktu lalu melanda dunia telah mempengaruhi sejumlah aspek dalam kehidupan umat manusia, termasuk dalam pergaulan sosial masyarakat. Di Indonesia, Covid-19 bahkan telah memunculkan kebijakan tentang pembatasan dalam praktik beribadah. Artikel ini mengkaji dan mengevaluasi secara kritis

atas ragam interpretasi dan respons organisasi keagamaan serta umat Islam Indonesia terhadap ketentuan pembatasan ibadah selama pandemi Covid-19. Menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif berbasis kepustakaan dan pendekatan sosiologis, artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa perbedaan penafsiran terhadap Covid-19 di kalangan masyarakat muslim telah berperan penting dalam membentuk respons dan perilaku beribadah selama pandemi. Sebagian umat Islam berpikir rasional dan memaknai Covid-19 sebagai bencana dan ujian kemanusiaan. Atas dasar hal tersebut mereka bersikap lebih adaptif terhadap kebijakan dan aturan pemerintah dalam menjalankan ibadah. Sementara itu, sebagian umat Islam lainnya yang berpikir fatalistik dan menafsirkan Covid-19 sebagai hukuman dan takdir Tuhan sehingga mereka menentang protokol kesehatan. Perbedaan penafsiran dan respons umat Islam terhadap peraturan pembatasan beribadah selama pandemi Covid-19 tersebut sebenarnya merupakan kelanjutan dari penafsiran dualistik terhadap wabah antara penalaran rasionalistik dan fatalistik yang pernah muncul dalam sejarah Islam. Di era modern saat ini, perlu dibangun paradigma baru yang menghargai perspektif agama dan keilmuan secara berimbang sehingga mampu bertransformasi dari pendekatan dualistik menuju ke pendekatan integratif.

Kata kunci: *Pandemi Covid-19; pembatasan ibadah; respons masyarakat muslim Indonesia; penalaran rasional; penalaran fatalistik*

Introduction

The presence of Covid-19 pandemic in last three years had a significant impact on religious landscapes and reshaped religious beliefs and institutions in various ways. The pandemic affected religious practices and teachings, leading to significant changes in how religious communities engaged with their members. It forced religious institutions to adapt to new challenges, such as the forced cessation of religious gatherings and the need to shift practices to comply with public health regulations. In other words, the pandemic has challenged the flexibility and adaptability of Islam in addressing historical dynamics and building the capacity of faith to shape religious understanding and action according to changing circumstances.¹

¹ Katherine Marshall, "COVID-19 and Religion: Pandemic Lessons and Legacies," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 20, no. 4 (2022): 80–90.

The pandemic has prompted the release of religious provisions and regulations by authorities, including the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Islamic civil society organizations, to manage religious worship in line with the health protocols amid the pandemic. These regulations have sparked controversies and debates, leading to diverse responses in negotiating religiosities within the Muslim community because touched sensitive dimensions of people's religiosity, particularly in the context of congregational prayers. The implementation of these regulations has led to tensions between stakeholders with their religious interests and identities. It also become a stage for negotiating religious adjustments on worship practices.²

Religious leaders have reacted to the worship regulations during the pandemic in various ways. Some religious leaders and organizations have supported the government's policies, citing the need to protect public health and comply with health protocols. They have emphasized the importance of understanding and complying with government policies to combat the spread of Covid-19. On the other hand, there have been opposing views from religious leaders who argue that congregational prayers are compulsory and should not be restricted, questioning the acceptability of government recommendations and arguing that governments are not allowed to issue fatwas. These opposing views have led to intense debate and diverse responses within Indonesian society.³

Numerous researchs have been conducted by many scholars related to the responses of Indonesian Muslims toward worship restriction regulations. The trend of research regarding to these topic can be classified into four typologies: (1) responding the new worship provisions through *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* perspectives as can be seen in the Nurhayati and Albani work. They concluded that MUI's Covid-19 fatwas on worship restrictions were in line with the essence of *maqāṣid*

² Imam Ghazali Said and Nyong Eka Teguh Iman Santosa, "Negotiating Religiosities among Indonesian Muslims amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: Acceptance, Resistance, and Transformation," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 15, no. 2 (2021).

³ Adil, Muhammad, and Miftachul Huda, "Understanding Responses to Worship Regulations in the Pandemic Era: Text Data Mining Analysis in the Indonesian Context," *Religions* 14, no. 4 (2023): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040549>.

al-shari'ah;⁴ (2) capturing the diverse responses to the worship restriction in the form of the fragmentation of religious authority. The general research on this topic can be divided into two trends, either dialectical contestation in theological issues or epistemological debates. Nur Hidayah argued that the Islamic theological consideration between *jabariyah* vis-à-vis *qadariyah* was an impactful reason for Muslims to obey the health protocols or not.⁵ In different point of view, Masdar Hilmy and Khoirun Niam found that the emergence of public disputes over the Covid-19 pandemic was rooted in a battle of authority between inductive scientific reasoning and deductive textual reasoning (science vis-à-vis religion);⁶ (3) another piece of research on the topic of worship restrictions during the pandemic merely focuses on describing the role of several Indonesian Islamic organizations or institutions and individual preachers in dealing with the worship guidance during the Covid-19 pandemic, as can be traced in Ahmad Taufik's article;⁷ and (4) last but not least, several articles examined the reception of Indonesian Muslims toward new worship regulations in a specific case. Ghazali Said's work can be characterized by this trend. Based on field research in Surabaya, he classified the Muslims reception of worship prohibition into two general attitudes between rational acceptance and skeptical resistance.⁸

Even though a number of studies have looked at the strategic role that religion played during the pandemic, there has not been much scholarly focus on analyzing and comprehending how the Indonesian context's public prayer restrictions have been received.

⁴ Nurhayati Nurhayati and Muhammad Syukri Albani Nasution, "Maqāsid Al-Sharīa in the Fatwa of the Indonesian Ulama Council Regarding Congregational Worship During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Asy-Syir'ah: Jurnal Ilmu Syari'ah Dan Hukum* 54, no. 2 (2020): 251–75.

⁵ Nur Hidayah, "Dari Jabariyah, Ke Qadariyah, Hingga Islam Progresif: Respons Muslim Atas Pandemi Covid-19 Di Indonesia," 2020.

⁶ Masdar Hilmy and Khoirun Niam, "Winning the Battle of Authorities: The Muslim Disputes Over the Covid-19 Pandemic Plague in Contemporary Indonesia," *QIJS: Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies* 8, no. 2 (2020): 293–236.

⁷ Ahmad Taufik, "Respons Komunitas Muslim Indonesia Terhadap Wabah COVID-19," *Jurnal Bimas Islam* 14, no. 2 (2021): 273–310.

⁸ Said and Santosa, "Negotiating Religiosities among Indonesian Muslims amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: Acceptance, Resistance, and Transformation."

Furthermore, restricting daily prayer in public places like mosques is one of the unique aspects of enforcing worship restrictions that controls social movement. Given this, it is necessary to have a thorough understanding of the rules governing prayer. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to critically evaluate the numerous sources and viewpoints regarding the responses to the provisions of worship restriction and comparing them to the pre-modern Muslim responses to gain a comprehensive.

This article argues that the emergence of various Indonesian Muslim responses on worship regulations is a continuation of the dualistic interpretation toward plague throughout Islamic history. Using qualitative library-based research, which involves a step-by-step process of gathering information, the paper will begin with a brief summary of diverse plague interpretations within Muslim societies from early Islam to medieval period because these period became the foundational principles for later Muslims attitudes toward plague. After describing a historical overview, the paper will discuss how Muslim organizations and each member—both from institutional or community-based Islamic organizations—responded to the Covid-19 pandemic, such as the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and Tablighi Jamaah (JT). All of public discourses on worship restrictions will be analyzed through sociological approach, because religious life is a form of sociological study and enables us to see it as a temporary social product that capable of being changed in the specific context.

The Interpretations of Plague and Its Historicity in Islam

Historically, there were several plagues afflicted Muslim communities in the early Islam.⁹ The ‘Amwās plague (688/689 AD) was one of the most crucial parts in the Islamic history, because it directly affected later religio-legal interpretations and Muslim attitudes toward plague. During this plague, there was a memorable debate between Abū ‘Ubaydah ibn al-Jarrah and ‘Umar ibn al-Khattāb about the possibility of fleeing from plague. According Abū ‘Ubaydah, by quoting Prophetic tradition, he declared that we cannot flee from

⁹ Lawrence I. Conrad, “Arabic Plague Chronologies and Treatises: Social and Historical Factors in the Formation of a Literary Genre,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 54 (1981): 51–93.

plague because it was a God's mercy which destined to be the death causes of previous pious people (*fanā' ummatī bi al-ta'n wa al-tā'ūn*). In contrast, 'Umar stated that we should flee from plague-stricken land not to reject the decree of God, but moving to God's other destiny. To strengthen 'Umar's decision, 'Abd al-Rahman ibn 'Awf came to him and quoting other Prophetic tradition that said "if you are aware the plague has invaded a country, you must not enter it, but if you find yourself in it, you must not flee from it."¹⁰

The mainstream reasoning of early Muslims in dealing with the plague outbreak can be summarized into three provisions: (1) the plague was seen as a form of mercy as well as a warning from God, a reward of martyrdom for Muslims who die during plague, and a punishment for the infidels; (2) a Muslim is not permitted to enter and escape from plague-stricken region; and (3) they commonly denying the existence of disease transmission (contagion) because plague infection is purely due to God's will, except Abū Mūsa al-Ash'arī.¹¹ Abū Mūsa was an exceptional case because he urged his friends not to stay at his home in order to prevent them being infected the plague from his family members and recommended them to go out to the open areas of the city.¹²

In the medieval period, the activity of translating medical literatures of Greco-Roman scientists into Arabic—especially the works of Hippocrates (*Epidemics I-III*) and Galen (*De differentiis februm*)—caused a significant change on the way Muslims approached the plague phenomenon.¹³ This shifting process became clearly visible when the global Black Death pandemic (*al-mawt al-aswad*)—consisting of bubonic plague and pneumonia—struck the Middle East during

¹⁰ Simon V. Pierre, "Can We Flee the Plague? A Theological, Moral and Practical Issue in the Early Islamic World," *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 1, no. aop (2021): 1–16.

¹¹ Michael W. Dols, "Plague in Early Islamic History," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, (1974): 371–83.

¹² Dols.

¹³ Melanie Alexxann Koskella, *A Universal Approach to Plague Epidemics in Fifteenth Century Mamluk Egypt and Syria: Contemporary Bias, Classical Islamic Medicine, and the Voices of the Ulama* (The University of Utah, 2014).

two periods (1347-1527 AD and 1517-1894 AD).¹⁴ However, the attitude of medieval Muslims was not monolithic. Michael W. Dols classified the various interpretations and responses of medieval Muslims toward the Black Death pandemic into the three following typologies:

First, the plague interpretation that based on the medical paradigm (medical interpretation), especially on miasma theory, as initiated by Qustā ibn Lūqā (d. 912 AD) and Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037 AD). In this paradigm, *al-tā'ūn* defined as an illness resulting from poisonous gas or substances (*māddah summiyyah*), which then causes deadly swelling or lumps that appeared around the bottom of the armpits, behind the earlobes and groin.¹⁵ According to Ibn al-Nafīs (d. 1288 AD), miasma can occur due to the two factors, namely: (1) geographical factors (*asbāb al-arḍiyyah*), such as large amounts of waste water and rotting carcasses; and (2) meteorological factors (*asbāb al-samā'iyyah*), such as irregularities in climate and weather conditions.¹⁶ In short, the scientific interpretations of plague are considered more superior and authoritative than religious interpretation.

In addition, Ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 1374 AD) stated that the Muslim orthodox fatwas which denied the existence of plague transmission between humans was an erroneous view and should be criticized because those fatwas contradicted with empirical evidence and Prophetic tradition. He built his argument by using empirical findings that Muslims who were isolated from the outside in Seville prison during the pandemic were actually better protected from disease transmission.¹⁷ As a preventive actions to against the Black Death pandemic, Ibn Abī Ḥajalah (d. 1375 AD) appealed public to keep their distance from people who were infected the plague because the disease could be transmitted through polluted air.¹⁸ In detail, Ibn

¹⁴ Michael W. Dols, "The Second Plague Pandemic and Its Recurrences in the Middle East: 1347-1894," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient/Journal de l'histoire Economique et Sociale de l'Orient*, 1979, 162–89.

¹⁵ Michael Walters Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East* (Princeton University, 1971).

¹⁶ Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, "Badhl Al-Mā'ūn Fī Faḍl al-Ṭā'ūn [On the Virtues of the Plague]," *Riyad: Dār al-ʿAṣima*, 1991.

¹⁷ Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East*.

¹⁸ Dols.

Khātimah (d. 1369 AD) suggested six preventive-curative efforts during the pandemic: (1) maintaining environmental cleanliness; (2) practicing self-isolation; (3) consuming healthy diet and herbal drinks from myrrh or saffron; (4) pay attention to sleep schedule; (5) cupping treatment (bloodletting) and consuming plums, violets, tamarind, etc.; and (6) maintaining psychological health.¹⁹

Second, the next type of response model that emerged within medieval Muslims was based on religious reasoning (religious interpretation). A plague (*al-tā'ūn*) that occurred within Muslim societies has been believed as a warning or divine punishment by God for the moral laxity of Muslims. This was the reason why 'Umar ordered Abū 'Ubaydah to lash people who drank wine in Syria, because it was thought as the main cause of Tā'ūn 'Amwās.²⁰ In detail, Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalānī (d. 1449 AD) explained through his monumental work entitled *Badhl al-Mā'ūn fi Fadl al-Tā'ūn* about three fundamental views of religious reasoning in dealing with the plague outbreak: (1) people who died during the plague will be rewarded martyrdom; (2) the emergence of the plague was caused by the piercing of Jinn (*wakbḥ al-jinn*); and (3) there is no contagion that totally without the decree of God.²¹

According to Justin K. Stearns, the presence of Ibn Hajar's plague treatise succeeded in reinforcing the orthodoxy of Ash'ariyyah theology. In the pre-Ibn Hajar era, especially in the 14th century AD, scientific paradigm became the main reference for Muslim scholars

¹⁹ Dols.

²⁰ Dols.

²¹Ibn Hajar divided the typology of understanding related to disease transmission into four types: (1) diseases can be transmitted by themselves. This is the view of the disbelievers; (2) disease can be transmitted through something that was deliberately created and placed by Allah on everyone, except for people who have miracles or karamah. This is the Islamic view but has been rejected (*marjūh*); (3) a disease can be transmitted not by itself, but through causality that has been outlined by God in general, such as the process of burning fire; and (4) diseases cannot be transmitted by themselves, but are purely based on God's providential will. For example, there are people who gather with people who are sick but are not infected. On the other hand, there are also people who are infected with the plague, even though they have never met anyone who has been exposed to the plague. The last two typologies are accepted in Islam. See Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalānī, *Badhl al-Mā'ūn fi Fadl al-Tā'ūn*, 343-344.

who produced plague treatises at that period, such as Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 1348 AD), Muhammad ibn al-Lakhm al-Shaqrī (d. 1348 AD), Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 1350 AD) dan Ibn Muflīh al-Maqdisī (d. 1362 AD). However, since Ibn Hajar wrote *Badhl al-Māʿūn* and *Fatḥh al-Bārī Sharh Ṣabīh al-Bukhārī*, the pattern of plague reasoning among medieval Muslims experienced dramatic changes. The sophistication of his interpretation of Prophetic traditions enabled him to deligitimize the hegemony of scientific paradigm that merely focus on empirical evidence and neglecting metaphysical dimensions. Therefore, his works became the main reference for numerous later plague treatises written in the 17th to 19th centuries AD.²² Nevertheless, in term of treatments, Ibn Hajar still advise people to combine between religious and medical treatments.

Ibn Hajar then gives a perfunctory list of medical treatments and a number of prayer formulae for the afflicted (one of which is remarkably similar to the Lord's Prayer). Altogether, he recommends patience, piety, and the visiting of the sick. Furthermore, Muslims are not to curse one another with plague.²³

Third, the last way of medieval Muslims approached the plague was based on the mystical and sufistic paradigm. According to Michael W. Dols, magical interpretations played a significant role in the popular response to the plague, especially during Black Death pandemic. Foundationally, the source of this paradigm was similar with the previous religious paradigm but different in treatment. They believed that the best protection to relief from plague is doing esoteric practices such as reading specific prayers or incantations and using supernatural devices (cryptograms/*wifq* and talismans). The primary sources for such prayers was the Qur'an, but in some cases they received special plague prayers from spiritual experiences, such

²²The reason for the rejection is because there is an evidence that plague also occur in areas where seasonal conditions are stable and air sanitation is clean. Apart from that, if a plague occurs due to air contamination, it should have an impact on all organs of the body through inhalation of air. However, in fact the plague only affects some organs of the body and not the whole. See Justin K. Stearns, *Infectious Ideas: Contagion in Premodern Islamic Christian Thought in the Western Mediterranean* (USA: John Hopkins University Press, 2011), pp. 73-86.

²³ Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East*.

as dreaming the Prophet. For instance, as-Suhrawardī (d. 1191 AD) said that reciting *sūrah al-burij* at the noon prayer can save us from plague. Numerous works that commonly used as the major reference in seeking specific prayers are *Shams al-Ma'ārif al-Kubrā* by Ahmad ibn 'Alī al-Būnī (d. 1225 AD), *al-Dā' wa al-Dawā'* by Shams al-Dīn al-Jawziyyah al-Zarī (d. 1350 AD), and *Majmū'ah al-Shifā' li Adwiyah al-Wabā'* by Tāshköprüzāde (d. 1560 AD).²⁴

The Respond of Indonesian Muslims Society Toward Covid-19 Pandemic: Between Rationalistic and Fatalistic Reasoning

To begin with, on March 11, 2020, after declaring Covid-19 as a global pandemic, WHO made several health regulations in order to handle the spread of Covid-19. The main point of WHO's pronouncement was the recommendation for all countries to implement social-physical distancing and crowd restriction. In response, on March 15, 2020, President Joko Widodo has issued Government Regulation No. 21/2020 about Large-Scale Social Distancing Restrictions to Accelerate Handling Covid-19. In other words, Jokowi ordered the Indonesians to work, study, and worship at home.²⁵ The day after, on March 16, 2020, the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) issued Fatwa No. 14/2020 on the Implementation of Worship Activities during the Covid-19 pandemic as a response on current social realities and actual needs to prevent Covid-19 transmission. Totally, during the Covid-19 outbreak, MUI has issued 12 fatwas.²⁶

All fatwas that has been issued by MUI can be summarized in the following points: First, everybody must maintaining their health regularly. Self-isolation is obliged for someone who infected by Covid-19. Second, all worship activities are practiced according to the zoning level of Covid-19 transmission. For red zone areas, the

²⁴ Dols.

²⁵ Sukamto, Amos, and S. Panca Parulian, "Religious Community Responses to the Public Policy of the Indonesian Government Related to the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Journal of Law, Religion and State* 8, no. 2 (2020): 273–83, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22124810-2020006>.

²⁶ Jannatin Nisa, Marni Marni, and Lisnawati Lisnawati, "Fatwa Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) Pada Masa Pandemi Covid-19 Dalam Perspektif Ketatanegaraan," *Syarab: Jurnal Hukum Islam & Ekonomi* 11, no. 1 (2022): 37–54.

congregational prayers must be practiced in home and Friday prayer is replaced by noon prayer. For the green zone, it is mandatory to hold Friday prayer by implementing health protocols. Third, the funeral of Covid-19 victims must be carried out according to the direction of health officials. Fourth, it is unlawful for every individual to take actions that cause panic or spreading hoax information about Covid-19. Fifth, encourage the public to comply with the government's vaccination program. Sixth, suggestion to increase worship, prayers, *dhiker*, and reciting *qunut nāzilab*. The legal foundation of these fatwas based on Qur'an, Prophetic traditions, Islamic legal maxims (*usūl al-fiqh*), and several Muslim jurists (*faqīh*) views.²⁷

According to Asrorun Ni'am (the Secretary of MUI's Fatwa Commission), those fatwas emerged primarily based on medical directives from WHO and Indonesian government regulation (Law No. 36/2009 on Health). MUI sees no contradiction between religious reasoning and logical-medical reasoning. Both of them share a same vision and complement each other on safeguarding the human life. Based on this reason, MUI always doing a collective discussion (*ijtihad jama'i*) on issuing Covid-19 fatwas by combining the religious actors and virologists or medical experts, such as Budi Sampurno (professor on medicolegal) and Wiku Adisasmito (Expert Chairman of Covid-19 Task Force). This integrative approach resulted progressive-contextual fatwas in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic.²⁸

The same response can be seen from two most influential Islamic organizations in Indonesia namely Muhammadiyah and

²⁷ Several Islamic legal maxims that used as a resources in issuing fatwas: (1) the prohibition to endanger one's self and harm others (*lā darar wa lā dirār*); (2) resisting harms takes precedence over seeking public interest (*dar' al-mafāsīd muqaddam 'ala jalb al-masālih*); (3) difficulty leads to ease (*al-mashaqqab tajlib al-taysīr*); (4) avoiding any harms (*al-darar yuzāl*); (5) preventing any harms within possible limits (*al-darar yudfa' bi qadr al-imkān*); (6) emergency measure is limited according to its extent (*al-darar tuqaddar bi qadaribā*); and (7) the policy of the government's leader toward people must follow the public interests (*tasarruf al-imām 'ala al-rā'iyah manūt bi al-maslahah*) See Komisi Fatwa MUI, "Fatwa Tentang Penyelenggaraan Ibadah Dalam Situasi Wabah COVID-19," MUI. Jakarta: Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 2020.

²⁸ M. Asrorun Ni'am Sholeh, "Towards a Progressive Fatwa: MUI's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic," *AHKAM: Jurnal Ilmu Syariah* 20, no. 2 (2020).

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). In response on Covid-19 outbreak, Muhammadiyah avoids using atomistic, partial, or even irrational paradigm. They prioritize the use of an integrative interpretation model that dialogues between—borrowing ‘Abid al-Jābirī’s term—*bayānī*, *burhānī*, and *‘irfānī* reasoning. Mark Woodward called it as a combination between modernist Muslim reasoning and medical pragmatism.²⁹ Haedar Nashir (Chairman of Muhammadiyah) stated that Covid-19 was a natural disaster and humanitarian test, not a heavenly punishment or curse. Consequently, Haedar strongly criticized those who spread pseudo-science information and conspiracy about Covid-19, because he considered it as an irresponsible act and made the situation getting worse.

Muncul teori konspirasi, muncul teori-teori politik yang macam-macam bahwa Covid ini adalah buatan untuk menciptakan berbagai hal, pembunuhan manusia secara masif. Pandangan-pandangan ini kalau bagi mereka yang masih awam *Inshaallah* masih bisa dipahami. Yang paling repot itu mereka yang merasa tahu padahal sesungguhnya tidak tahu atau sok tahu. Bahkan ada yang ngutip-ngutip ilmu, agama, menggunakan ayat-ayat yang sejatinya juga tidak pas. “Kenapa sih takut Covid, takut itu kepada Allah, *inna shalati wa nusuki wa maa yahya lillabi rabbil alamin*”, menggunakan ayat tidak pas itu, tidak di situ tempatnya.³⁰

Likewise, the Central Board of Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU) interpreted the Covid-19 as a natural phenomenon (*sunnatullah*) and humanitarian test that required an integrative approach in order to

²⁹ Falahuddin Falahuddin, “Respons Muhammadiyah Menghadapi Covid-19,” *Maarif*, 2020, 137–52.

³⁰ Translate: Various conspiracy and political theories emerged which interpreted Covid as a human invention to create massive human killings. These views for those who are still laymen *inshaallah* can still be understood. The most troublesome are those who think that they know but in fact they do not know or pretend to know. There are even those who quoted science, religion, using Qur’anic verses that actually do not fit. “Why are you afraid of Covid, fear is only to Allah, *inna shalati wa nusuki wa maa yahya lillabi rabbil alamin*”, they used Qur’anic verses that not fit with its context See Afandi, “Pesan Haedar Nashir Kepada Kaum Anti Covid Dan Anti Vaksin: Anda Tidak Bertanggungjawab,” n.d.

save human life. Therefore, PBNU combined Shafi'i legal reasoning below the framework of *maqāsid al-shari'ah* and augmented piety with medical pragmatism as basic paradigm in responding the Covid-19 outbreak.³¹ This unified approach can be seen in Sa'id Aqil Sirad's (General Chairman of NU) statement, he said that "Scientists discuss the largest cosmos to very small viruses such as Covid-19. Religionists help the subtle human thoughts and feelings to stay connected with God".³² In practice, the closure of several Islamic boarding schools and religious pilgrimage destinations can be seen as a serious concern for NU regarding the Covid-19 transmission. Additionally, both Muhammadiyah (SK No. 2825/KEP/I.0/D/2020) and NU (SE No. 3953/C.I.034/04/2020) formed a social movement, namely the Muhammadiyah COVID-19 Command Center (MCCC) and NU-Care COVID-19 Task Force, that prioritized health and socio-economic problem solving during the pandemic.³³

Conversely, the majority of Indonesian Tablighi Jamaah (JT) actually dismissed the existence of Covid-19. They believed that Covid-19 was a human invention that used as a political propaganda. Therefore, JT members do not yet consider Covid-19 as *'uzr shar'i* that legalize the *rukhsah* (legal relief) of worship, because they trusted that Covid-19 never exist. Moreover, JT also arrogantly used textualist-conservative religious reasoning and refused the rational-scientific reasoning. As a consequence, they advocated a fatalistic reasoning that God will protect them from Covid-19. In other words, their resistance based on *jabariyah* theology, a theology that believed human as inanimate objects whose actions have been determined by God.³⁴ The implementation of fatalistic reasoning can be found in the

³¹ Mark Woodwark, "Ramadan in the Plague Year: Indonesian Muslim Responses to the Onset of COVID-19," *Contemporary Islam*, 2023, 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-023-00537-6>.

³² Abdul Rochim, "Wabah Covid-19 Dalam Pandangan Kiyai Said Aqil Siroj," accessed October 6, 2023, <https://kalam.sindonews.com/berita/1573141/69/wabah-covid-19-dalam-pandangan-kiyai-said-aqil-siroj?showpage=all>.

³³ Woodwark, "Ramadan in the Plague Year: Indonesian Muslim Responses to the Onset of COVID-19."

³⁴ Abrar, "The Attitude of the Tablighi Jamaat Toward Covid-19 Pandemic," *ISLAMICA* 15, no. 2 (2021): 242–72, <https://doi.org/10.15642/islamica.2021.15.2.242-272>.

reactions of JT members after the local government cancelled the *Ijtima* in Gowa, South Sulawesi.

Virus Corona datang seluruh dunia geger. Gampang selesaikan itu Corona. Kirim jemaah-jemaah (Jemaah Tabligh) ke tempat Corona! (teriakan “Allahu Akbar!” dari kerumunan). Virus Corona takut sama jemaah (“Allahu Akbar!”), bukan jemaah takut sama virus! (“Allahu Akbar!”). Jemaah hanya takut pada Allah! (“Allahu Akbar!”).³⁵

Those attitudes contributed on the emergence of new Covid-19 cluster in four different places in Southeast Asia, especially Malaysia and Indonesia: (1) Sri Petaling Mosque, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; (2) Jami‘ Mosque, Kebon Jeruk, Jakarta; (3) Gowa, South Sulawesi; and (4) al-Fatah Islamic Boarding School, Temboro, Magetan. As a result, JT has been negatively stigmatized by many people as “Tablighi Virus” and “Covid Super-Spreader”.³⁶

In summary, all of the pronouncements or fatwas on Covid-19 that have been issued by MUI, Muhammadiyah, and NU truly present Islam as a religion that has a rational entity that can be adapted to the actual context and influences the government’s legislation and policies. Meanwhile, JT attitudes promoted Islam as a conservative religion that only received religious reasoning and refused scientific paradigms. In terms of theology, JT reception on worship restriction can be characterized as a *jabariyyah* theology, whereas other mainstream Indonesian Muslim communities take a middle path between *qadariyyah* and *jabariyyah* that integrates trust in the decree of God and rational practices. These debates can be identified as a

³⁵Translate: A virus comes along and the whole world trembles. It’s easy to finish off this virus. Send the jemaah (the Tablighis) to wherever the virus is! (shouts of “Allahu Akbar!” from the crowd). This Coronavirus is scared of the jemaah (“Allahu Akbar!”), the jemaah isn’t scared of the virus! (“Allahu Akbar!”) The jemaah fears only Allah! (“Allahu Akbar!”). See Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, “Religious ‘Super-Spreaders’ in Indonesia: Managing the Risk of Stigmatisation.” *IPAC Covid-19 Briefing No.4* (blog), 2020, <http://www.understandingconflict.org/en/conflict/read/92/Religious-Super-Spreaders-in-Indonesia-Managing-the-Risk-of-Stigmatisation>.

³⁶ Ahmad Najib Burhani, *Comparing Tablighi Jamaat and Muhammadiyah Responses to COVID-19* (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020).

continuation of dualistic approach in dealing with the pandemic within Muslim societies in the pre-modern era.

Muslim Community Worship Practices during Pandemic: Static or Changing?

On May, 29 2020, the Ministry of Religious Affairs—based on the regulations from WHO and the Ministry of Health—issued SE Mesudahg No. 15/2020 concerning guidelines for organizing religious activities during a pandemic, the practice of congregational prayers has undergone several changes and must follow the following provisions: (1) it is obliged to wear a mask; (2) washing hands with hand sanitizer; (3) restricting physical contact, such as shaking hand; (4) regulate the distance of row spacing (*saf*) between prayers to a minimum 1 meter; (5) prohibiting worship activities in public mosques for children, the elderly people, and diseased person; and (5) always strictly implementing health protocols and limiting the number of prayers. Two months earlier, on March, 31 2020, Muhammadiyah already issued the same regulation in SE No. 03/I.0/B/2020. The next response came out from PBNU issuing SE No. 3953/C.I.034/04/2020 on April, 3 2020. Lately, two months later, on June 4 2020, MUI issued the Fatwa No. 31/2020 about worship guidelines during pandemic. All of national religious authorities either from national institution or non-governmental Islamic organizations have encouraged people to implement the government regulation. The question is how Indonesian Muslim receptions and attitudes toward worship restriction policies during pandemic?; do they support the worship rules or contrary ignore it?, and if so, what are their reasoning?

In response to the questions, the Ministry of Religious Affairs conducted an online survey on April, 24-28 2020. The majority of respondents were ready to comply with health protocols and policies related to preventing the spread of Covid-19, including religious policies. However, there were a total of 24.98% from 18,743 respondents (78.43% Muslims, 7.44% Hindus, 5.74% Christians, 3.53% Catholics, 3.23% Buddhists, 0.62% Confucianists, and 1.01% others) in 34 provinces, who unwilling to not worship at public worship places. In detail, although generally Indonesians (46.24%) agreed to worship at home, but there are 20.89% of respondents who are still ignorant and continuing worship normally (and 12% stated

that they often do it). Ironically, after being traced, most people (50.48%) who ignored the worship restrictions were in the red zone.³⁷ These findings informed us that at the grassroots level, mainstream religious institutions find it difficult to enforce government legislation pertaining to social restrictions. Local religious authorities and particular communities still performing worship normally. So, how these various attitudes emerged within Indonesian Muslims?

Numerous factors triggered to the various responses on worship restriction regulations: First and foremost is the way they approached the Islamic texts. On the one hand, the presence of religious conservatism that used textualist approach has significantly contributed to the vociferous resistance attitudes toward health protocols. For instance, the majority of JT members still practicing congregational prayers normally without wearing masks and physical distancing because its textually ordered in the Islamic texts (Qur'an and Hadith). Even in particular times JT obeyed health protocols, they practiced it not as a scientific awareness on the dangers of Covid-19, but closely motivated by religious advice to obey *ulil amri* (government). Another reason why the strick resistance attitudes emerged within JT members because JT was foundationally established as a field-based preaching (*da'wah*) movement, as represented in the doctrine of *keburij*.³⁸

On the other hand, other mainstream Indonesian Muslim communities adapted new pattern of worship and received the policy of limiting worship activities as something that common sense and has a justification within Islamic jurisprudence texts. They proactively and creatively encouraged people to support new worship procedures such as online Friday prayer, limiting the number of Tarawih prayer's *raka'at* from 23 to 11 *raka'at*, implementing physical distancing between prayers, and spraying disinfectant regularly.³⁹ Interestingly,

³⁷ Akmal Salim Ruhana and Haris Burhani, "Pengetahuan, Sikap Dan Tindakan Umat Beragama Menghadapi Covid-19," *Jakarta: Badan Litbang Dan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI*, 2020.

³⁸ Sekar Ayu Aryani, Hisyam Zaini, and Muhammad Yusup, "PANDANGAN TEOLOGIS JAMA'AH TABLIGH DALAM MERESPONS PANDEMI COVID-19," 2020.

³⁹ From 33 mosques in Surabaya, only 6 mosques affiliated to NU and Muhammadiyah that kept congregational prayers and ignoring official provisions on health protocols such as Al-Hakim Gubeng, Al-Michrob Sawahan, Al-Hidayah

there was also a changing of *adhan* text from *ḥayya ‘ala al-ṣalṣ* to *sallī fi riḥālikum* as implemented at Al-Nur Mosque (Tanjung Anom, Surakarta), Al-Falah Mosque (Jati Asih, Bekasi), Darut Tauhid Mosque (Sukasari, Bandung), and Baiturrahim Mosque (Riung, Bandung).⁴⁰

Second, the public dissemination of false information on Covid-19 also contributed in the form of foundational reason in opposing social restrictions. In the early 2020, various controversial statements on Covid-19 emerged among individual religious preachers. Covid-19 has been misunderstood as a heavenly punishment, political/biological weapon, soldier of God, and conspiracy of Zionist-Freemasonry group or the world's elites for reducing population growth.⁴¹ These statements unconsciously affected Muslims attitudes during pandemic. In many cases, JT members said that Covid-19 truly never exist in our life. They interpreted Covid-19 as a purely political conspiracy to polarize Muslim society and considered the fatwas as a form of “mosque phobia”. Thus, it is unnecessary to implement health protocols.⁴² The worse case shown in the statement of influential NU scholar namely M. Najih Maimoen. He openly refused the fatwas issued by Al-Azhar and MUI regarding the prohibition on holding Friday prayer during pandemic based on fatalistic reasoning and conspiracy theories.

Lho ini kan belum wabah menurut saya, belum *ta‘un*. *Ta‘un* itu sudah udah yang mati 1.000, 2.000, bahkan bisa 10.000, bahkan bisa 100.000, itu namanya baru *ta‘un*. *Wong* baru *gak onok* 1.000, paling 100, kok *diarani* wabah itu lho. Ini rekayasa jelas.. *mbuh* Amerika, *mbuh*.. pokok yang penting diperintah Zionis. Saya disini menentang,

Genteng (affiliated to NU), and Al-Azhar Gubeng (affiliated to Muhammadiyah). See Said and Santosa, “Negotiating Religiosities among Indonesian Muslims amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: Acceptance, Resistance, and Transformation.”

⁴⁰ Ahmad Solahuddin, Atiqoh Firdaus, and Saifuddin Zuhri Qudsy, “*Ṣallû Fî Riḥâlikum* During Covid-19,” *Ulul Albab* 21, no. 2 (2020): 396.

⁴¹ Hilmy and Niam, “Winning the Battle of Authorities: The Muslim Disputes Over the Covid-19 Pandemic Plague in Contemporary Indonesia.”

⁴² Saipul Hamdi, *Perubahan Praktek Keagamaan Jamaah Tabligh Pada Masa Pandemi Covid-19* (Pulham Media Press, 2021).

bismillahirrahmanirrahim atas nama saya Muhammad Najih Maimoen menentang MUI, menentang Azhar, menentang MUI Jawa Tengah, saya menentang. *Wallahi* kalau *nggak* diberhentikan kamu akan mendapat siksa, sama dengan orang Yahudi Zionis di dunia akhirat.⁴³

Third, the failure of national policy makers to cooperate with local religious authorities in providing comprehensive information about worship restrictions. Despite the fact that MUI has issued fatwas on zoning areas, the problem was that the Indonesian government had not mapped high-risk and low-risk areas certainly, so no one was sure what the criteria were, thereby permitting arbitrary interpretations and obviously not making a sincere effort to enforce health protocols. As a result, there was a differing response on the ban of Friday prayer between MUI provincial board in Sumatera and Palembang. In other cases, due to the lack of testing, around 196 mosques in Solo and 20 in Pekanbaru are still holding Tarawih prayers, even though their places have been indicated as red zone areas.⁴⁴

As previously presented in the findings, the Indonesian Muslims attitudes toward the regulation of worship restrictions can be classified into two categories: First, the acceptance attitudes that appeared to Muslims who did conformity between their Islamic teachings and medical regulations. They adapted—either totally or partially—the government worship restriction rules by using integrative-contextual approach in order to make Islamic texts become contextualized and reducing the tension between theological

⁴³ Translate: I don't think this is a *Tha'un* (pandemic) yet, not yet. *Tha'un* happen when the victims reaches 1,000, 2,000, 10,000, or even 100,000, that's already can be called *Tha'un*. Now, the victims only 1,000 cases, maybe just 100, how we understand it as pandemic. This is clearly a fabrication... whether from America or not... the important thing is to be ruled by the Zionists. I am here to oppose, *bismillahirrahmanirrahim* on my behalf Muhammad Najih Maimoen against the MUI, against Azhar, against the MUI of Central Java, I oppose. *Wallahi*, if you do not stop it, you will be punished as a punishment for the Zionist Jews in the afterlife. See *Gus Najih Maimoen Menentang Keputusan MUI PUSAT Melarang Orang Jumatan Di Masjid Karena Corona*, accessed October 23, 2023, <https://youtu.be/pUX08oZdzzA>.

⁴⁴ Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Religious 'Super-Spreaders' in Indonesia: Managing the Risk of Stigmatisation."

and scientific reasoning.⁴⁵ Second, resistance attitudes, a form of Muslims attitude that conceptually has an orientation to maintain its textualist-conservative ideology or religious views and hardly to adapt a new discourses.⁴⁶ In detail, it can be divided into two types of resistance attitude: (1) passive resistance, a type of rejection that expressed only in cognitive discourse not practical discourse; and (2) reactive resistance, a sort of refutation that implemented frontally to deligitimize the government rules based on ideological awareness.⁴⁷

Comparing to the pre-modern era, these research findings in line with the Mu‘taz al-Khatīb’s conclusion that Covid-19 has shifted the way Muslims approached the plague. He argued that classical discussion on plague was merely dominated by theological debates on practical theology (*al-lāhūt al-‘amali*). In contrast, although there is still a minor theological debate, but generally the current discussion during Covid-19 pandemic was dominated by applied ethics (*al-akhlaqiyāt al-tatbiqiyah*), particularly medical ethics. This shift emerged because of the rise of modern nation-states that have the responsibility to prioritize the safety of their citizens, which includes setting and mandating public health policies. Moreover, the birth of applied ethics as a distinct discipline of knowledge and the advanced developments in medical science have contributed to overshadowing the theological discourse toward plague.⁴⁸

Therefore, there is a need to make what Steffie Kemp called as “effective faith partnerships” between religious actors and government stakeholders. Steffie Kemp recommended that the debate regarding worship regulations due to health issues should be referred to health experts initially to confirm a basic understanding of the matter. The recommendations of health and religious experts in

⁴⁵ Ahmad Muttaqin, “Religion, Science, and Culture Amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic: Muhammadiyah’s Worship Guidance and Members’ Responses,” *Al-Albab*, 2021, 3–32.

⁴⁶ Said and Santosa, “Negotiating Religiosities among Indonesian Muslims amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: Acceptance, Resistance, and Transformation.”

⁴⁷ Henky Fernando, Irwan Abdullah, and Mohamad Yusuf, “RESISTANCE OF MUSLIMS TOWARD THE GOVERNMENT’S POLICY ON PROHIBITING CONGREGATIONAL WORSHIP DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC,” *Jurnal Sosiologi Reflektif* 17, no. 2 (2023): 351–68.

⁴⁸ Mu‘taz Khaṭīb (al), “Al-Ṭā‘ūn Wa al-Wabā’: Min al-Lāhūt al-‘Amalī Ila al-Akhlaqiyāt al-Tatbiqiyah,” *Tabayyun* 9, no. 35 (2021).

regulating worship policy need to be promoted massively in the public sphere to protect the population from the Covid-19 disease. Additionally, it is suggested that the Indonesian government should provide adequate policy direction regarding the emerging disaster issues and formulate technical regulations with appropriate responses to handle the Covid-19 crisis. Future directions for addressing the responses to worship regulations during the pandemic involve critically examining and understanding responses to public prayer regulations in the Indonesian context. This includes mapping the responses to religious worship regulations from various perspectives of opinion leaders, religious leaders, religious organizations, and leading online news outlets to promote understanding and controlling the spread of the pandemic and building a proper response mechanism towards government policy about worship regulation.⁴⁹

Conclusions

The results of this research suggested that variations in the Indonesian Muslims interpretation toward Covid-19 are a major contributing factor to the challenges encountered in managing the Covid-19 transmission, particularly on worship restrictions. Muslims who saw the Covid-19 as a form of divine punishment, political propaganda, and other conspiracy theories tended to be less stringent when it came to following health precautions, held congregational prayers normally, and promoted a fatalistic reasoning. On the other hand, other Muslims interpreted the Covid-19 as a natural catastrophe, and they believed that the only way to deal with it was to follow health protocols and deepen one's spirituality. Moreover, people who believed that Covid-19 was a humanitarian test made an effort to follow health regulations, develop their spirituality, and think that everything that happened, including the Covid-19 test, had a specific purpose (*hikmah*). Therefore, it is necessary to build a balanced paradigm or approach that respects both religious and scientific perspectives in order to shift the old paradigm from dualistic approach into integrative approach.

⁴⁹ Steffie Kemp, "Effective Faith Partnerships during COVID-19: Lessons Learned from Development Practitioners: Policy & Practice Note," *Religion and Development* 1, no. aop (2023): 1–12.

As a recommendation, the government should have acted much earlier to ban large-scale gatherings and at least had a contingency plan to handle religious activities (particularly congregational prayers) during the pandemic, with a clear agreement between the national government and local religious authorities about the regulations to be followed, including the testing and monitoring of participants. Furthermore, there is a need and potential for broader cross-sectoral and inter-sectoral collaboration, including religious actors, at different levels and places, for pandemic preparedness. This research has limitations because it only focuses on Muslim responses in Indonesia. Therefore, further study that compares Muslim attitudes toward the Covid-19 pandemic in various socio-cultural contexts from different Muslim countries is necessary to gain a global trend on how Muslims approached the pandemic.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest with any party in writing this article.

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