

Important Message to Muslims regarding COVID and the 3 Principles Approach to Fake News

We are currently going through a very challenging and testing time. Challenging, because we are losing our loved ones to this COVID virus, and testing, in that Muslims are being tested in their priorities and their ability to cope in a time of confusion and despair.

Every so often, Allah swt challenges mankind with His might, so that we realise that even our mightiest technology and brains are no match for our Creator and for us to appreciate that we are solely dependant on Him. The covid pandemic is just another example of that realization.

I wish to focus in particular about one major challenge our muslim community is facing in particular which is related to infodemics.

Infodemic is a blend of "information" and "epidemic" that typically refers to a rapid and far-reaching spread of both accurate and inaccurate information about something, such as a disease through social media platforms. As facts, rumors, and fears mix and disperse, it becomes difficult to learn essential information about an issue because social media is spammed with information overload causing confusion.

As Muslims our centuries long Islamic tradition provides some very important principles about how we should seek the truth and then our obligations to uphold what is right.

Here is a summarised list of 3 principles which I highly recommend Muslims should adhere to.

1. *Seek advice from those who possess knowledge about whether the vaccines are halal or haram.*

Ask those 'ulama who have a good understanding of the shari'ah, have taqwa and who have either a very good grasp of the science or have consulted with those who have expertise in the science. Usually these are 'ulama who are respected in their communities and have been teaching the subject for some time and are accountable.

Allah, the Wise, has divided the Muslim community into two types of people: the ahl al-dhikr, and those that depend on the ahl al-dhikr.

"Then ask those who possess the knowledge (ahl adh-dhikr) if you do not know."Al-Qu'ran 21:7 and 16:43

If you are of the latter group then it is incumbent on you to seek advice from these 'ulama. If you are seeking your knowledge from the latter group then this is problematic.

Problem: Unfortunately there are many charlatans of the latter group who are either posing as experts, claiming to have consulted experts or just blatantly stating whatever suits them without verifying. Yet they are taking secondary, tertiary sources from the Internet which suits their agenda and without question forwarding this without having any ability to scrutinise the data. Unfortunately few 'ulama have fallen prey to this group also.

2. *Verify information before passing on to others*

"O you who believe! If a sinning person (someone who is not considered upright) comes to you with a news, verify it, lest you harm people in ignorance, and afterwards you become regretful to what you have done." Qu'ran 49:6

Everyone of us has a responsibility to the community and are obligated by Allah swt to only speak the truth. If you are accepting a report or news from a source with the objective of using this to inform others, then it becomes a duty upon you to verify the information by ensuring it is *peer-reviewed* by experts. Just because somebody is stating something with passion and emotion does not suggest that what this person is claiming is the truth

Problem: Many of us are providing support and motivation (intentionally or unintentionally) to those charlatans who have little expertise by simply forwarding their message. It is important that we realise when it is just a blatant lie, a misinterpretation of important information or just a rant without any actual valid proof.

Abu Huraira reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "It is enough falsehood for someone to speak of everything he hears." Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim

3. *Ask for a Character Profile and expertise of the one who challenges or makes a serious claim*

We have to get into the head of these strange individuals who are vehemently anti-vaxx and are pushing their 5min videos on social media.

Most of their lives they have been refusing vaccinations and peddling conspiracy theories at every opportunity - blaming the kuffar and accusing respected Muslims or organisations of hypocrisy.

Now is the opportune time for them to really let it out and prey on the despair of people. Since there is a serious need for mass population public health interventions like lockdowns and vaccinations it is easier to feed off the fear and anxieties of populations by producing 5min videos with little accountability to the truth.

O you who believe! Be afraid of Allah, and be with those who are true (in word and deeds). [al-Tawbah 9:119]

Some attributes of these individuals.

1. Most of them tend not to be so intelligent and are known not to be very bright amongst members of their communities or people of their expert community and do not have much of a social standing in the community and hence lack of accountability.
2. They are known for making rash decisions and are known for having outlandish or extreme opinions on issues amongst their communities. At times respected members of the community tend to warn you against them. They can be somewhat emotionally unstable or have anger or other emotional issues.
3. They bring Islam into the discourse yet have very little knowledge of the Islamic sciences or use Islam inappropriately to suit their ends- they are not known in good light amongst the ulama and actually become critical of ulama if they are not supported by them. Sometimes they make serious Islamic remarks without hesitation.
4. They thrive on others passing and sharing their fake messages and tend to emotionally appeal without any valuable backing or proof. A good litmus test is that if you pass on any fake information to them that supports their agenda they will not scrutinise or verify it, it but rather use it as their proof.
5. They appeal to the betterment of society and due to their concern for society, yet their track record shows no or very little community service or charitable works.

Avoid these people as they can be harmful with their fake news even if they believe it and seem sincere.

Sayyiduna 'Abd-Allah ibn Masood (may Allah be pleased with him) said: The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: You must be truthful, for truthfulness leads to righteousness and righteousness leads to Paradise. A man will keep speaking the truth and striving to speak the truth until he will be recorded with Allah as a siddeeq (speaker of the truth). Beware of telling lies (and conveying unverified information from unreliable sources), for lying leads to immorality and immorality leads to Hellfire. A man will keep telling lies and striving to tell lies until he is recorded with Allah as a liar.(Reported by Sahih Muslim)

Finally, COVID 19 is a serious viral illness especially for our elderly and vulnerable where it can cost their lives, and also those who have been debilitated by its effects.

Please do not treat this situation as play. Take your information from reliable sources. Ask expert Muslim scholars, muslim medical organisations who consult with experts and remember this...

The level of scrutiny vaccines are facing at the present moment is unprecedented. There are so many safety checks and measures in place to scrutinise its safety and everything is reported and transparent of its adverse effects.

The drug companies and regulatory bodies are being watched very carefully and are under serious public scrutiny. This in itself is reassuring to some degree. We consume all sorts of flavourings and additives in our food and trust food companies who don't have this level of scrutiny.

We turn to Allah swt our Creator and Lord and pray that He removes this pandemic from our lives as soon as possible and cures us of our physical and social ills.

Allah swt forgive me for my shortcomings and give me the strength and ability to speak the truth.

Wassalamu alaykum wrwb

Shaykh Dr Rifaqat Rashid
(Academic Director of Al Balagh Academy, UK)