

## **SA Faith Communities and Covid-19: Between Political Idiocy and Religious Belief**

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On 19 March 2020, one (Qarie) Ahmed Saeed posted an ill-considered Facebook advert saying that his religious school based at his residence in Lenasia will be arranging the Muslim congregational Friday prayer with “no restrictions”. For Muslims globally, the Friday prayer - as the five daily prayers - is sacrosanct.

Mr Julius Malema, the Economic Freedom Fighters leader, responded on Twitter by posting a screengrab of Saeed’s message with the comment, “You see now.”

This immediately sparked an inflammatory and viral Twitter war with comments such as “Jamnandas unstoppable”; “Mr Malema, don’t start with Muslims. They’ll bomb our whole country to ashes, they don’t mind dying for Allah these ones! Please!”; “Jamnandas must take his people and leave Mzansi”, and “Islam is the world’s biggest problem! Coronavirus is nothing to compare these assholes”.

Saeed responded on social media stating, “Stop creating panic and false information.” The prayer will be performed and a “maximum capacity of Muslims that can be accommodated is 40.” Saeed does not seem to belong to any reputable and representative Muslim organisation; he is a one-man show. Yet, his unwise Facebook message has brought harmful and hurtful attacks on Muslims in South Africa, seemingly from the blind followers of the Commander-in-Chief.

### **Political Idiocy**

More disconcerting are the wholly unwarranted, unjustified and idiotic political attacks on Minister Pravin Gordhan, who is not a Muslim. If anything, he is a Hindu – a follower of a different religion from Islam. Equally revolting is the underlying rhetoric by some of Malema’s followers that Muslims are violent, destructive, problematic, such as their rant that Minister Gordhan must take ‘his people’ and presumably go back to India.

Malema was correct in raising the alarm about Saeed’s post. But the cryptic and blameworthy undertone of his post is deeply worrying. There is no context, no proper counter message. This is dangerous stuff. In a situation of growing unease, and early signs of mass panic over the Coronavirus, he seems to be allotting blame on Muslims (and implicitly on Indians) for disregarding the government’s restrictions on public gatherings. There is no acknowledgment that institutions of other faith communities and businesses too are not adhering fully to the recently announced government restrictions.

Politicians, religious leaders and prominent figures in civil society must not play with fire in a situation of mass social unease. The little spark of a matchstick can easily light the flame of widespread social strife and conflict, at times targeting minorities. For rational South Africans, an impending pandemic mixed with undertones of anti-religious and racist rhetoric is toxic and obnoxious. It must be condemned strongly.

If there is anything to learn from the Rwandan genocide, it is that the mass media can affect societal conflict in general and ignite violence against an ethnic and/or religious minority. We know that the main Hutu radio station broadcasting anti-Tutsi propaganda spewed by some politicians and religious figures during the Rwandan genocide significantly influenced Hutu participation in the violence against Tutsis. Research into counterfactual estimates suggest that almost 10 percent of overall participation can be attributed to the radio station's broadcasts, and almost one-third of the violence by militias and other armed groups. South Africans should take heed.

### **Religious Belief**

At the same time South Africans should take heart from President Ramaphosa's recent engagement with religious leaders. Religious figures of stature and maturity understood the gravity of the imminent health and social crisis and wholeheartedly endorsed the government's restrictions on travel and public gatherings, and other interventions.

It is commendable that the Easter mass of the Zion Christian Church and the Muslim *Ijtima* scheduled over the same weekend have been cancelled. Likewise, fund-raising dinners by the Saaberie Chishty Ambulance Service and the Madressa Zia-ul-Badr have been postponed until further notice.

The Annual Gandhi Walk to be held early in April in Lenasia also has been called off. Similarly, Salaamedia's *#Slashing the Silence: Unearthing Sexual Abuse Workshop* has been postponed.

The Via Christi Community issued a statement that "one of the important goals of our Sunday services is to make all feel welcomed and experience our love and care, and, now more than ever, our greatest priority is to care for our beloved community, their health and safety. In challenging times like these, with the impact of Coronavirus, we would like to inform you that we ... have decided to cancel Sunday services at the church on 22<sup>nd</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> of March 2020."

Rabbi Yossy Goldman, the President of the South African Rabbinical Association, said that "guided by top observant Jewish medical experts who are at the forefront of this (Covid-19) crisis, the decision was made that it is pikuach nefesh (a halachic concept which holds that saving of life overrides the authority of Jewish law), and as broken-hearted as we are to close shuls, minyanim, and shiurim, we have no alternative."

Maulana Ebrahim Bham of the United Council of Muslim Theologians of South Africa has stated that the Muslim community is ready to play its role to curb the spread of the coronavirus. The Council has established a multi-disciplinary task team to look at the needs of those who are in difficulty and in need of assistance and support. Classes at Muslim theological seminaries have been suspended in line with schools and universities. Some

mosques have closed their doors to the wider public for prayers. Many others have limited the intake of worshippers to the government stipulated number and have enhanced sanitation standards.

Swami Siva Yogananda of the Saiva Sithantha Sungum has instructed that 18 temples under his auspices will be closed as the “interventions we put into place now collectively as a nation and the changes we make to our lifestyles will determine the extent to which we allow the virus to spread in this country.”

This is the crux of the matter. A growing global and national crisis demands an emergency response. It’s a red flag. And we all must act purposefully and considerately! Our response must not be guided by political idiocy and religious dogma. It must be derived from the concrete experiences globally and nationally, and from the best available research.

Projections developed by the South African Centre for Epidemiological Modelling and Analysis based at Stellenbosch University, together with the National Institute of Communicable Diseases, are indicative of the possible disastrous impact of coronavirus on our population. This is based on an infection rate of 10, 20 and 40 percent, and slow or non-existent response by government over an undefined time period. At an infection rate of 10 percent, 87 900 people could die. At 20 percent, 176 000 could die. And at 40 percent, 351 000 of South Africans could die.

These figures, which do not include those who will be infected and get sick, and who will recover over time, must be understood against the background of HIV-Aids, TB infections, malnutrition and the imminent influenza virus coming with the winter. The situation could be much worse in a developing country such as ours and could result in a total collapse of the health system. Based on current daily figures of infections, by April 1<sup>st</sup>, it is probable that we could have 4000 Covid-19 cases, with 600 requiring intensive care.

No government and sensible religious leader can sit back with folded arms in the face of such an unfolding crisis. It is for this reason that a state of national disaster has been declared by President Ramaphosa. If the pandemic is not halted in its tracks, more drastic social and governmental action will be necessary. Gauteng Premier David Makhura, in his meeting with religious leaders on Friday, 20 March 2020, has hinted that we may be heading either for a provincial or national lockdown. He urged faith-based leaders to make available religious sites as quarantine and treatment centres, if the need arises.

The Imperial College COVID-19 Response Team in London has explained that two fundamental strategies are needed as we await the development of a Covid-19 vaccine. Firstly, **mitigation**, which focuses on slowing but not necessarily stopping epidemic spread, and reducing peak healthcare demand, while protecting those most at risk of severe disease

from infection. Secondly, **suppression**, which aims to reverse epidemic growth, reducing case numbers to low levels and maintaining that situation indefinitely. And then **vaccination**, which is almost a year or more from now.

The interventions decided upon in our country such as washing hands; sanitising hands and items; not shaking hands; being mindful of how we cough and sneeze; curbing foreign travels into and out of the country; closing schools, universities and religious seminaries; staying indoors, particularly the children, the aged, the infirm and the sick; taking the influenza vaccine; minimising social contact (maintaining social distance); closing places of worship or limiting the numbers who enter to pray; organising business meetings using technology; reducing numbers patronising taverns etc. are all designed to mitigate and/or suppress infections.

We all must reconsider holding other large social gatherings such as parties, funerals and weddings. If these measures do not result in containing the spread of the coronavirus, a total lockdown will be implemented. Already, the Islamic Medical Association of South Africa has issued an updated statement on the rapidly evolving situation in the country that “strongly opposes” any continued use of mosques for congregational prayers.

Of course, we should pray. And pray sincerely at that, even if places of worship are not accessible to the public. The Almighty listens to any prayer, even one offered in solitary confinement. And we will have to consistently carry out acts of social solidarity and support to those in desperate need. We don't have to stockpile groceries. Rather, the spirit of human generosity should prevail.

What we certainly do not need is political idiocy, inflammatory anti-religious and racial rhetoric, religious dogmatism, and the bravado that emanates from sheer stupidity and ignorance.

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21 March 2020

