

Covid-19: The Science of Bodies or the Science of Religions?

By Noraini M. Noor

Covid-19 has taken the world by storm. What is happening now is unprecedented. The whole world is terrified, for the 'scourge' seems to know no boundary. All are affected; irrespective of East or West, socioeconomic status, and other schisms that have divided people. The disease does not discriminate.

Many countries are imposing forms of lockdown to counter the 'onslaught' of the virus. These and other measures have been taken by the authorities, but they have not given people much confidence. At this time of uncertainty, how can we make sense of this forced isolation, fear, anxiety, insecurity, and confusion that is encircling our 'normal' lives? With the passing days and the increase number of cases and deaths, many are overwhelmed with fear, grief and distress, so how should we appraise the situation?

Here, we put forward two views of reality pertaining to Covid-19 (the term for the 2019 form of the coronavirus): the (bio) medical model of allopathy and the model based on the traditional religious view of Islam. The former is currently the more familiar and prevalent view and it regards Covid-19 as a virus and therefore treatment is symptomatic, as a vaccine has yet to be developed (at the time of the writing of this essay). The latter religious or theological view sees the Divine as the source of every existence, including diseases.

Within these two views, how is Man understood? Is he acknowledged only as a phenomenon or more than a mere body? Only then can we respond appropriately.

Man, from the Medical Model

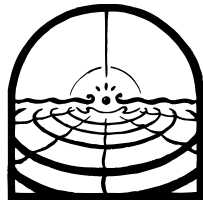
To understand the dominance of this model, we need to go back in time, to its historical and philosophical beginnings for developments in medicine have to be viewed as part of the larger historical and societal changes occurring within Western civilization. The Reformation period of the 16th Century marked a radical shift from the medieval understanding of the world and the universe. In medieval Christian thought, earthly life was inevitably prone to striving, suffering, and death because of the concept of 'original sin.' The constant reminder of Man's original sin and the guilt associated with it, and people's bondage to the Church and feudal lords made this a dark period in Western civilization.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564) inspired a new world religious movement to liberate the masses from their old religious bonds. The movement together with new philosophical insights advocated new ways of thinking that encouraged people to look for rational and logical interpretations of the world, and, in doing so, laid the foundations for modern science and a new theory of the physical world.

Starting with the radical theoretical innovations of Kepler and Galileo, and ending with Newton, a new reality of the world was conceived. In this natural philosophy (or physical science as it is now known), Galileo distinguished between primary and secondary qualities of natural objects, the former being objective and the latter subjective. Natural philosophy's focus was on the primary qualities. He also advocated modern science to concentrate on the microscopic atoms that aggregated to form the macroscopic objects. Descartes (1596-1650) continued with this new vision of reality, completing the total mechanization of nature by replicating what Galileo did to the external physical world within the human self. He separated the mechanical world/*res extensa* from the *res cogitans*, resulting in the well-known Cartesian mind-body dualism, which has a strong bearing on how Man is later conceived. He viewed the human body and brain as a machine though acknowledging that humans have an immaterial soul, which he termed as 'mind.'¹ Because the latter is immaterial, the former is emphasized. Though recognizing that this is an incomplete conception of Man, he

¹ He was the first major thinker to use the word 'mind' (Latin, *mens*) as an alternative to the word 'soul' (*anima*). To Descartes, mind and body, one immaterial and other material, influence each other via the pineal gland.

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