

Emergency and Solidarity: An Islamic Perspective

Francesca Maria Corrao

Faith is a spiritual element linking the human being to a universal essence, and it is also an essential element that regulates human relations on earth. Islam is thought to be above all a religion concerned with rules, but from the very outset compassion and solidarity have loomed large among the priorities of a good Muslim. This paper presents in a comparative perspective some aspects of Islamic solidarity according to the sources and the opinion of some contemporary Muslim intellectuals, with reference to the recent pandemic crises.

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Intercultural Dialogue on Solidarity

In the cultural exchange between the Islamic countries of the Mediterranean and Italy, during the last few decades there has been a great deal of emphasis on the need for dialogue. In a recent conference at LUISS¹, Don Samuele Sangalli said that now is no longer the time for conversions but to convert to true human behavior. It is time to oppose the particularist visions in order to have a shared view to the good of humanity; this new attitude also involves correcting the historical vision and the language that leads to interreligious conflict. Rabbi Joseph Levi added that today working together is a moral obligation. The pandemic has highlighted even more the need for collaboration and solidarity to counter the sentiments of closure expressed in particularism and partisan nationalism.

These are manifestations of the selfishness that emerges in the face of the fear and uncertainty of the present increasingly threatened by economic crises, disease and conflict. Religion has the mission of awakening the sense of solidarity towards other human beings, in an active way. A religious doctrine can become rigid if it does not apply to reality. This is therefore the urgent need of today – to put into practice the humanistic teaching that is at the heart of religions, as Saint Francis had already demonstrated in his dialogue with Sultan al-Kamil in 1219 when he felt the need to put into practice dialogue with the one people considered basically inimical.

Solidarity is not an abstract concept, it requires concrete actions; in this regard, the director of the Great Mosque of Rome Abdallah Reduan, explaining the importance of action in the interests of solidarity, quoted a saying of the prophet:

“The Prophet (ﷺ) said, “Every Muslim has to give for charity.” The people asked, “O Allah’s Prophet! If someone has nothing to give, what will he do?” He said, “He should work with his hands and benefit himself and also give for charity (from what he earns).” The people went on to ask, “If he cannot find even that?” He replied, “He should help the needy who appeal for help.” Then the people asked, “If he cannot do that?” He replied, “Then he should perform good deeds and keep away from evil deeds and these will be regarded as charitable deeds.”²

From this emerges the clear indication to support the life of others in every possible way. This last quotation brings us closer to another great virtue of the Muslim, which is kindness towards the weak, also understood as solicitude for others, and also solidarity. The scholar Ida Zilio Grandi also specifies that the Arabic term for “gentle” or *rafiq* can indicate the companion and in particular the inseparable one, with identical stops and stages; and from the same root the two terms *rifqa* and *rufqa* are indicating a united group of people on the move³. Kindness is understood in the sense of solidarity towards the weak, as can be seen from a verse of the Qur’an (4:36)

“Serve God and join not any partners with Him: and do good to parents kinsfolk orphans those in need neighbors who are near neighbors who are strangers the companion by your side the way-farer (ye meet) and what your right hands possess: for God loveth not the arrogant the vainglorious”⁴.

Speaking of the importance attributed by Islam to support and solidarity, the Egyptian philosopher Hasan Hanafi explains:

“Man does not live alone. He lives with others in community. He is a part of a whole, a member in a social group. His social justice and equity would distribute the common wealth among all, in accord with work and productivity. Sharing the common wealth amongst all is a sign of the unity of God.”⁵

Religious Solidarity in Time of Distress

The Covid 19 emergency has awakened a new sense of responsibility for many people by finally reflecting a supportive image of our society, which in recent times had been overshadowed by a disturbing pall of indifferent

selfishness. As Pope Francis pointed out in one of his recent appeals “the source of joy is to begin to be attentive to others”⁶. A similar concept is inherent in the Islamic devotional obligation of zakat, the alms that go to purify individual wealth to help those in need. In a modern interpretation of charity, Hanafi affirms that it is the result of the

“concentration on the heart as value. Fasting does not mean simply going without food during daytime for reasons of health, but moral affirmation of the existence of the poor. Sharing one’s assets (through charity) means not only material redistribution of wealth, but moral purification of the wealthy. Pilgrimage is not only a journey towards a certain place at a certain time, but a yearly meeting of men to share their common experiences and take collective decisions”⁷.

The philosopher aims to underline the importance of the community and relations of support and sharing among human beings. These in Islam are based on the ‘asala’, the purity of the origins that constitutes the element of fundamental cohesion for Muslims but also for Arabs. The spirit of solidarity among Arabs, the ‘*asabiyya*, according to the Maghrebi historian Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), when society is coming apart allows for the survival of the group; although in this particularism there are the seeds of separation. *The spirit of ‘asabiyya* is what has given strength and cohesion to Muslims and has favored the expansion of Islam; this spirit also has a negative aspect because it can lead to the closure of the community in itself leading it to develop racism and sectarianism, which cause enfeeblement and decadence racism and sectarianism.⁸

Islam was born in the Mediterranean area and is proclaimed as the third revelation following the other two great monotheistic religions, Judaism and Christianity, which share much of the sacred scriptures to which Islam also refers. In particular, the Book of Exodus (12, 49) treats solidarity in the sense of acceptance

The same law shall apply both for the native-born [Israelite] and for the proselyte who joins you⁹

and, more precisely in the book Leviticus (25, 35)

If Thy brother be impoverished, and weak of hand, and thou receive him as a stranger and sojourner, and he live with thee¹⁰

This is not very different from a saying of the prophet:

“The Prophet (ﷺ) said: It is a duty of every Muslim (to provide hospitality) to a guest for a night. If anyone comes in the morning to his house, it is a debt due to him. If he wishes, he may fulfil it, and if he wishes he may leave it.”¹¹

In these definitions it is evident that true hospitality is much more than mere hospitality: it is the only law to regulate civil life. The principle that informs all human behavior is that which declares the sacredness of life: “If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.” (Genesis 4:15).

In Buddhism the concept of the interdependence of human lives and of these with the environment is valued, also explaining that if you are concerned about peace and your own happiness it is essential to take into account the distress of others, restoring hope and energy to the people who suffer around us. As Nichiren Daishonin said, there can be no peace and serenity if the world around us is devastated by conflicts, and today we can add climate emergencies and pandemics¹².

It is necessary to start again from ourselves, to change our selfish attitude and take into account what is happening in the surrounding world. If we look more closely into the causes and effects of the problems we face today, we find that they also include the incidental consequences arising from our past choices. In order to promote solidarity here I would like to draw attention to the fact that it is essential to have information and education based on respect for the lives of others, to build knowledge less tainted with prejudice. In particular, fostering knowledge of shared values helps to change attitudes in dialogue and consequently in the interaction of a multi-cultural and multi-religious community.

Religious Solidarity Today

The return of religions today is largely due to the ancient and ever-present message that they transmit on the need for solidarity and justice. Needs that

are always alive, even if at times they are hidden in a phase of latency when obscurantism prevails – when the alliance between religious and temporal power aims to repress the discontent of the less fortunate. Yet today it is observed, as in the past, that in times of economic crisis the alliance between political power and faith, in coercive forms, grows because it serves to ensure order for a political power in difficulty. Epochal crises also favor the flourishing of the great salvific utopias; take, for example, the case of the poor of Saint Francis with their yearning for justice and equality among the different creatures of God, or the Indian King Ashoka, inspired by Shakyamuni’s teaching in his policy of aid to the poor¹³.

Many of the fundamental principles of religions are analogous, and always there to be remembered and inspire people in times of crisis¹⁴. Faith admonishes those who are rich at the expense of the poor. The power of religious admonitions gives people the courage to condemn corruption and call for justice.

Key words such as solidarity with the poor and fraternity are part of a language shared by different religious beliefs and also secular principles. The Islamic world has made significant progress in promoting dialogue with other faiths, as shown by the different activities starting from the declaration of the Custodian of the two Islamic Holy Places, Mecca and Medina, and the initiatives of Pope Francis with the “Prince of Believers”, the king of Morocco, and the Shaykh of al-Azhar affirmed respectively with the papers of Marrakesh and Dubai¹⁵.

Since the beginning of the 2020, the pandemic crisis has highlighted the need to move on from dialogue to coordinated actions to promote solidarity, as Abdallah Redouane pointed out. In particular, the director of the Great Mosque in Rome pointed out that we must give concrete help to those most in need. In this regard he mentioned the hadith of the prophet highlighting how important it is to help the poor:

Someone asked Allah’s Messenger (ﷺ). “What (sort of) deeds in or (what qualities of) Islam are good?” He replied, “To feed (the poor) and greet those whom you know and those whom you don’t know.”¹⁶

Just to give few examples of concrete responses given by Muslim religious leaders during the Pandemic in Morocco, I may mention the initiative of

the secretary-general of the Council, Mohamed Yussef, together with other Ulemas, who donated one month of their salaries to a Special Fund for the Management of COVID-19¹⁷.

In Jordan, Prince Hassan bin Talal has proposed coordination between the main institutions of the Islamic world to underline the universality of ritual alms (zakat), establishing an organization for Zakat and mutual support on an international basis¹⁸.

Last July 15, ICESCO (the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) promoted a Webinar entitled “Toward global solidarity”, in collaboration with the WMCC (World Muslim Communities Council) and the MWL (Muslim World League).

On this occasion, a great number of Muslim religious leaders confirmed, together with representatives of the different faiths, what is stated in the above-mentioned declarations of Mecca, Marrakesh and Dubai¹⁹.

They committed themselves to carrying out activities in the educational and socio-cultural area to tackle the crisis caused by the pandemic. The conference reaffirmed the need to guide the efforts of young people of different religions to work together to establish and promote a common system of fundamental ethical values based on two foundations: commitment to universal ethics and the preservation of human dignity.

The final declaration also reaffirmed that the preservation of human dignity consists in five moral principles: faith, peace, solidarity, tolerance and equality. All these principles are subordinated to religious action common to religions striving towards greater human moralization, as expressed by Prophet Muhammad: “I have been sent to uphold and integrate ethical values”²⁰.

Religious Values Supporting Humanism during Migrations Emergency and Pandemia Crises

The migration crisis has highlighted the urgent need to develop actions of solidarity based on shared ethical principles. People flee from famine caused by the environmental disruption resulting from uncontrolled development, which few enjoy, and from wars whose effects in terms of environmental destruction and forced emigration weigh on the weakest. The effects of the resulting migratory and pandemic crises show that humanity cannot survive without global peace and that peace does not exist without global justice.

The problems must be tackled together because in a globalized and increasingly interdependent world it is essential to counter selfish and indifferent thinking with commitment to the culture of tolerance in words and actions. A selfish and indifferent approach opens the way to an overall attitude leading to economic and commercial policies of ruthless competition. Competition, even economic, is an asset because competing for excellence is a source of creative energy but, as Daisaku Ikeda writes in his 2020 Peace Proposal, if this has no ethical limits, it ends up causing even more devastating suffering than the conflicts so far known²¹.

Before entrusting responsibilities for analysis and interventions to the experts of international politics, it will be useful to look beyond our narrow horizons: we cannot be happy if we ignore the suffering of peoples to whom we are bound by historical and geopolitical links, and which involve factors ranging from gas and oil essential to the operation of our technologies to insecure seasonal workers who help us to live our basic daily life. Responsible education and information are essential to awaken us to this awareness. The sensationalism of western media distracts from a broader vision of the immediate existential horizon and above all deludes us into thinking that it is enough to protect our own small areas for everything to go well. Populist propaganda in some European countries suggests that it is necessary to close borders to defend our national interests; it argues that what happens to our neighbor does not concern us: closing our ports to immigrants saves our certainties regarding the defence of our immediate interests; but we must be aware, because these are the same certainties that Europeans did not want to question in the past and that led us into the abyss of the First and Second World Wars. Bringing about some change in the sensationalist media communication that aims to create fear is an important element in countering selfishness, but it is not enough; we also need to remedy an educational system that teaches little in terms of respect and solidarity.

Fueling the tendency to view the world solely as the arena for the competition for survival based on the premise that our life is independent of others ends up in selfishness and indifference. How many young people on the strength of a mass of notions remain disconnected from the world and find themselves more fragile and inadequate when it comes to finding practical solutions to deal with crises. The young people who have taken up activities in associations, helping the elderly, the marginalised and the

disabled in difficulty, or offering support for young people in education, have found a new strength in building alternative solutions that generate hope because they have experienced the richness of “shared life”.

The Muslim countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean have given different responses to the crisis generated by the immigrant emergency and the most recent crisis caused by the pandemic. Islamic solidarity, like Christian solidarity in Europe, has mobilised people both by appealing to spiritual values and calling for practical actions, as we have seen. Despite the risks of contagion, market activities and social life have not come to an end; closing down work activities, especially for the insecure workers, would have led to an immediate economic crisis. Helping the needy has remained an imperative even in political propaganda. In Turkey, for example, the people were reminded of the virtue of the *Ansars*, the Medinese who welcomed the prophet Muhammad when he fled from Mecca and took refuge in the nearby oasis. The Turkish Government has called for Islamic solidarity in welcoming Syrian refugees and has also offered them the opportunity to work and acquire citizenship²². However, this has not been the case everywhere; for example in Libya, where immigrants in transit through the country are treated like slaves, and now the civil war has further worsened the situation. The obligation remains to warn against the political use of religion: the same government that helps Syrian refugees foments war in Libya.

A positive sense of responsibility and solidarity has spread, independently of religions or ideologies. Interreligious dialogue is showing that these values have ancient roots, are shared by many and must be sustained. Reaffirming the commitment to creating a climate of trust and dialogue and removing the misunderstandings created by the political use of religion, the Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest Islamic network, denounces the political weaponization of religion. In a recent declaration the Secretary General, Shaykh Yahya Cholil Staquof, declared:

*“To embrace tribal identity rather than the unifying, primary message of Islam (rahmah, or universal love and compassion) is to court spiritual and political disaster. In an age of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction, we cannot afford to repeat the tragic conflicts of the past.”*²³

Living together teaches us that the world is not as we ideally imagine,

but a complex reality consisting of overlapping activities and intertwined by countless people and their mutual influence. As religions teach, and as underlined by the principles of the French Revolution (Freedom, Equality and Fraternity), a spirit of solidarity gives meaning to our life and leads us to live better lives.

Notes

- 1 “Religions and Societies in the Mediterranean: solidarity in time of crises” Seminar held in the occasion of the Luiss Summer University, LUISS Rome July 6, 2020
- 2 Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, hadith 48, vol. 2, Book 48, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/24/48>
- 3 Zilio-Grandi I., 2012, “The Gratitude of man and the gratitude of God. Notes on šukr in traditional Islamic thought”. *Islamochristiana* 38, pp. 45-61.
- 4 <https://quranyusufali.com/>
- 5 Hanafi, H., 1995, *Islam and reconciliation, Islam in the Modern World. Tradition, Revolution and Culture*, Cairo Dar Kebaa Bookshop, vol. II, pp. 265-274.
- 6 www.vaticannews.va/it/papa/news/2019-03/papa-francesco-decalogo-vera-felicita-gioia.html
- 7 Hanafi, H., 1995, *Islam in the Modern World*, Cairo Dar Kebaa Bookshop, vol. I, p. 467.
- 8 Corrao F. M., (2017) *Islam Religion and politics*, Rome Luiss University Press p. 52.
- 9 <http://bible.org/books/pentd2.asp?ACTION=displaypage&BOOK=2&CHAPTER=12>
- 10 The Book of Leviticus, Douay Rheims Version, with Bishop Challoner Commentaries
- 11 l-Bukhari, *Sahih*, Book 28, Hadith 15, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud/28/15>
- 12 <https://www.sgi.org/about-us/buddhist-concepts/rissho-ankoku-securing-peace-for-the-people.html>
- 13 Ashoka decided to put an end to the injustices he committed as a ruler in the first part of his life, adopted the Buddhist faith and promoted policies in support of the poor; see J. Keay, *India a History*, New York, Harper Collins Publishers. 2000.
- 14 Meddeb A., (2013) *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relation: From the Origins to the Present Day*, Princeton, Princeton University Press; Aslan E., Rausch M. (eds.) 2017, *Jewish Muslim Relations. Historical and Contemporary Interactions and Exchanges*, München, Springer Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- 15 See <http://www.marrakeshdeclaration.org> ; <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-02/pope-francis-uae-declaration-with-al-azhar-grand-imam.html>; <https://www.oic-oci.org/docdown/?docID=4498&refID=1251>
- 16 Al Bukhari, *Sahih* , vol. 1, book 2, Hadith 28, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/2/21>
- 17 The event was also cited in Georges Fahmi, “Pray in your homes. Religion and the State in North Africa in Times of Covid-19” <https://www.iai.it/en/publicazioni/pray-your-homes-religion-and-state-north-africa-times-covid-19>
On the emergency and solidarity in Morocco, see also the position of the governing religious party: Al-Nour Party, “Salamtk, al halqah al Oulah ... Corona” [Your Safety, first episode ... Corona], in *YouTube*, 24 March 2020, <https://youtu.be/QnLxVpwkTio>.
- 18 <http://www.ipsnews.net/2020/04/declaration-human-solidarity-initiative-coronavirus-pandemic/>

- 19 See footnote 15.
- 20 <https://www.coreis.it/documenti-ufficiali/webinar-icesco-verso-una-solidarieta-globale>
- 21 <https://www.daisakuikeda.opdfrg/assets/files/peaceproposal2020>.
- 22 Ikaya A. and Kuyumcuoglu O., 2020, “The Limits of toleration towards Syrian refugees in Turkey: from guesthood to Ansar spirit”, in Bialasiewicz L. and Gentile V., 2020, *Spaces and Tolerance. Changing geographies and Philosophies of Religion in Today's Europe*, London, Routledge.
- 23 https://baytarrahmah.org/2020_08_18_the-islamic-religious-community-of-italy/

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