

Of pandemics, penury and philanthropy in South Africa: lessons from Islamic humanism

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to consider cultural ethos of philanthropy that has proved effective in minimising the plight of the vulnerable in general and particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. By discussing the divergent philanthropic approaches that have been adopted to counter the challenge of the pandemic, this article fulfils one of comparative laws' crucial tenets to improve the local environment by learning from other jurisdictions.

Design/methodology/approach – An exploratory and qualitative method through categorical and theoretical analysis of recent and historical scholarship on the Islamic culture is undertaken. An extensive use of journalistic and editorial reports on the South African context is explored to demonstrate the plight of the vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings – The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed how economically and structurally fragmented South African society is. More specifically, it has reinforced the existence of an “invisible” group of people – the poor and vulnerable – who have been hit harder by the government's responses aimed at containing the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The depiction of an unequal and uncaring society has spurred extensive rhetoric and reflection centred on the need to regain society's conscience as regards the plight of the poor. This article finds that much as there has been an awakening towards societal inequality and vulnerability, there are, however, no concrete suggestions upon which change of attitude can be founded. Further, it can be argued that the plight of the vulnerable could have been softened had society cherished a culture of charity. Taking a cue from Islamic culture, this article avers that there is a need to embed philanthropy within society's cultural norms so as to forge effective bonds and maintain social cohesion.

Social implications – The practical implications of this article relate to the need for the revaluation of the moral campus of South African communities. It supports calls for the alignment of community attitudes with humanity so as to improve the lives of the less privileged members of the society. Additionally, this discussion adds value to the scholarship, which aims to engender community-based welfare schemes for the benefit of the vulnerable.

Originality/value – By highlighting socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the vulnerable and highlighting the Islamic approaches to ameliorating the condition of the poor, it is hoped that this article will stimulate debate that can bring change for marginalised groups. The analysis provides some crucial discussions for potential societal interventions, which could assist in revisiting how society takes care of the poor and vulnerable.

Keywords Culture, Philanthropy, COVID-19, Islamic, Vulnerable, Community, South Africa

Paper type Viewpoint

1. Introduction

COVID-19 plunged millions into poverty as countries went into lockdown, jobs dried up and people living in cramped, unsanitary housing struggled to keep the virus at bay[...]. Ending extreme poverty is not impossible. Hypothetically, it would take \$100bn to make everyone on Earth have more than \$1.90 a day. Aid and private philanthropy could cover that sum twice over, with money to spare. (The Economist, 2021, “Poverty and the pandemic”, p. 87)



Throughout history, pandemics have had uncanny ways of exposing not only the weak partnership between states and communities but also the frailties of civil society's norms and structures (Gómez & Harris, 2016; Schwartz, 2014). Much as they tend to spawn positive effects, such as scientific advancement, new technologies and infrastructures (Rosenberg, 1992), pandemics also expose the dark side of humanity, particularly the dislocated and disrupted personal relationships. More specifically, epidemics in the mould of the COVID-19 entrench of the social-economic discrimination of the vulnerable (Snowden, 2019; Honigsbaum, 2019; LePen, 2020), hence shoving them below the poverty line (Crosby, 1989). Such a gloomy depiction of the aftereffects of pandemics has recently been witnessed in South Africa.

In this article, I argue that this pandemic should not go to waste. Rather, it should be noted for enabling a reflection on the interactions between market economies and humanity. In the South African context, the pandemic has been an expose on society's loss of humanity and the disregard of the crucial intersection between social and economic ties. Put differently, the pandemic and the resultant pandemic-related responses such as lockdowns have "revealed a very sad fault line in our society that reveals how grinding poverty, inequality and unemployment is tearing the fabric of our communities apart" as well as "the gross inequalities in our society, which we either chose to ignore or had become nonchalant about. . .] We have come to realise that a society built on inequality, a society where people live like kings – and like paupers – is not sustainable in the longer run."

By contrast, and as will be discussed below, arguably, Islamic culture seems to have provided mechanisms that have shielded the vulnerable from the harsh impact of the pandemic. Why they fared better is partly attributable to the operation of cultural ethos. In this article, I add to the line of welfare scholarship by examining how cultural ethos of Islam can provide a platform for the re-examination of the potential influence of cultural norms on philanthropy in the South African context. This article maintains that fundamental lessons can be drawn from guiding principles of Islamic cultural values of altruism. It is not the clamour for the transplantation of Islamic norms; rather, it is inspired by the rationales that underlie such norms. It is stimulated by the reality that the breakdown of societal cohesion has not helped the plight of the vulnerable and that Islamic moral conscious philanthropy provides crucial lessons from which South Africa's social assistance policy can be examined. This article reiterates that when Islamic ethos is considered, the results could be cultural values that are tied to charity, the minimisation of opportunism and an enhanced social conscience, particularly to the plight of the vulnerable.

This article is organised around five themes. Section 2 sets the scene by giving a summary on how Islamic societies have utilised their cultural norms to protect the vulnerable in society, and Section 3 summarises how the poor have been impacted by the pandemic in the South Africa. This is followed by a discussion of the role of culture in shaping human relations in Section 4. It offers a theoretical discussion of how certain cultural tenets could assuage human anguish amid challenging market forces. Section 5 discusses how Islamic culture has arguably managed to entrench an environment, which permeates a social conscience which engenders charity. Section 6 concludes.

2. A primer on Islamic response to the pandemic

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has spawned a relatively large corpus of diverse scholarly output, which has sought to shape public and individual responses not only to the disease but to how believers should treat the poor. Most of these writings revisit the role of Islam as constitutive elements or medium of ameliorating the position of the vulnerable during the pandemic. For instance, Piwko (2021) emphasises how the pandemic has reinforced cultural norms aimed at the fulfilment of community duties towards the poor and

the brotherhood. Compliance with COVID-19 contained measures, such as travel restrictions, has been eased by linking the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad who exhorted believers to exercise hygiene and minimisation of travelling or visiting each other during the plague and the avoidance of the sick.

Compliance with such edicts and social and religious orders resulted in *inter alia*, the suspension of religious practices, such as congregational prayers at mosques. Similarly, others demonstrate how the pandemic has re-awakened religiosity and robust adherence to the religious practices of Islam. In particular, questions have been raised as to the role of obligatory alms (*zakāt*) and other forms of charities, and how these can be used in assisting those who have been negatively impacted by the pandemic. Scholars have pointed out how the religious leaders have pronounced *fatwas* allowing the payment of the annual obligatory alms in advance, ahead the specified or regular times marked by the passing of a full lunar year. These measures are aimed at motivating those with resources to provide immediate and urgent assistance to members of society who are in need.

Furthermore, *fatwās* on the coronavirus have buoyed philanthropic causes, which include those providing resources to entities, such as hospitals and other entities that provide necessary care especially to vulnerable members of the society (Morales & Renomeron, 2021). In an environment where social gathering has been discouraged, Muslims came up with innovative strategies of dispensing aid to the poor, particularly during Ramadan. These are best exemplified by drive-thru *iftars* and coronavirus task forces (Mukit, 2021).

Similarly, scholars have documented how Islamic social finance through philanthropic giving, such as *zakat* and *waqf*, have had an effect of not only minimising the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on society by, for instance, increasing the well-being of the less privileged but also the efforts to rebuild Islamic economies (AbdulKareem, Mahmud, & Hassan, 2021). Through *Waqf* or “religious endowment”, devout or charitable donation, or social development, for instance, the maintenance and provision of mosques, Muslims have benefited from a system that supports the eradication of poverty during the pandemic (Ainol-Basirah & Siti-Nabiha, 2020). Such strategies steeped in Islamic philanthropy no doubt proved to be effective not only as supplements to government measures in mitigating the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the people and society at large but also provided instructive approaches in enhancing the safety and dignity of the human being during the pandemic.

3. The South African experience

The South African experience exemplifies the above outlook. The lack of enduring values of philanthropy and the inadequacies of government’s strategies means that the poor and vulnerable have borne the sharp end of the pandemic. The sledgehammer response by the South African government – a lockdown enforced and characterised by routine callousness by the army and police (Retief, Nicolson, & Haffajee, 2020; Arnold, 2020), has worsened vulnerability by cutting them off from their sources of livelihood, such as garbage collection and street begging. Without access to social funding, the lockdown has compelled the poor to make tough choices between submitting to the containment mechanisms of the lockdown and going hungry or breaching them by going out in search of food and being punished for that (Polity, 2021).

More tellingly, “millions face hunger as lockdown crimps incomes and leaves families increasingly exposed. They include 1 million domestic workers, nearly 90 000 waste pickers, 3.5 million elderly and 12 million children (Sunday Times, 2020a).” It would therefore not be cynical or irresponsible to state that the responses to the pandemic have arguably been as horrendous as the pandemic itself.

Although the South African government promulgated a multi-billion rand relief package and emergency fiscal stimulus packs aimed at cushioning the citizenry and businesses (SA Government News, 2020), front page headlines of corruption in the disbursement of such relief have been apt demonstrations of the disconnect between rhetoric and reality, much to the prejudice of the poor (Auditor General, 2020; BBC, 2020). By his own admission, the president of South Africa bewailed the bottlenecks and shameful corruption, which have impeded the disbursement of such aid to the vulnerable (SA Government News, 2020; Sunday Times, 2020b).

In addition, while these interventions are laudable, they are nonetheless, fleeting. Worse still, in as far as they do not look at the underbelly of vulnerability, these emergency interventions have proved to be short-lived. In essence, they have amounted to mere “a plaster-sticking exercise . . . [offering] temporary and inadequate relief. . . [and] too little for the most vulnerable people.” Add to that, unlike the working and middle classes, vulnerable communities live outside the formal economy and generally do not derive much benefit from such gazetted measures. Similarly, “while middle classes are generally treated with respect by those enforcing the lockdown. . . [the] poor. . . have been subjected to abuses. . . this has included unlawful and violent evictions (Buccus, 2020).”

In a society of four million people who are employed in the informal sector and where 18 million people depend on social grants, the current ad hoc efforts will never suffice. Ordinarily, government would be expected to relocate its resources and spending priorities to focus on the vulnerable. However, with the South African government having to tackle high poverty, overstretched social assistance program shrinking fiscal resources worsened by weak economic growth (World Bank, 2021) expecting the government – whose country’s economic outlook has recently been downgraded to junk status (ENCA, 2020; Investec, 2020) – to meaningfully intervene to address societal scarcities would be too optimistic.

In that environment, civil society needs to adopt a more proactive approach in addressing the plight of the poor. Community-based schemes to substitute or complement key government services and obligations are required. It should not take a pandemic to galvanise communities to revisit and reinvent its collective conscience. What is required is an ingrained and proactive culture of preparedness, which is steeped in community moral conscience. What is desirable is an entrenched philosophy, a proactive culture of giving and caring for the vulnerable in society. Charity should not be a populist tool that takes advantage of the vulnerable to score social and political points. Doing that reduces the poor to a pawn in the hands of the well off. That conscience should be embedded in the realisation that “that we’re all in this together, that what affects one person anywhere affects everyone everywhere, that we are therefore inevitably part of a species, and we need to think in that way rather than about divisions of race and ethnicity, economic status, and all the rest of it (Snowden, 2020, p. 3).”

4. Culture and human relations

Culture refers to “the shared values of members of a society that are inculcated at an early age and that pervade all aspects of living. . . It shapes a large body of intuitive and habitual responses to the daily challenges of life. Its embraced rules of behaviour enable much of life’s complex daily decision-making processes to be carried out on autopilot, thereby removing a significant amount of the unwanted tension in our lives.” The role that cultures play in shaping community outcomes is a well-researched subject and only needs a brief narration (Kawadza, 2014; Jeanrond, 2010; Greif, 1954; Bennett, 2011).

Extensive research has shown that cultural values which place emphasis on moral equality of individuals tend to be associated with greater socially acceptable behaviour. For instance, it has been contended that cultural values, including trust and morality, have a significant impact on economic outcomes and cultural attributes, such as “thrift, hard work,

tenacity, honesty, and tolerance – contrast with the xenophobia, religious intolerance, bureaucratic corruption . . .” have a positive impact on social interaction (Guiso, Sapienza, & Zingales, 2006). In essence, therefore, culture provides an informal or extra-judicial enforcement mechanism whereby members of the society are judged according to the norms (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994).

This is achieved mainly through communication, which is aimed at inducing a sense of guilty for failing to abide by societal norms (Friedman, 2008). In this regard, collective condemnation and chastisement through, for instance, disapproving comments, “dirty looks, disparaging remarks, ostracism, and the like (Stout, 2006, p. 34)” constitute an effective form of social control mechanism and a form of deterrence. More particularly, such condemnation acts “a credible and potent force in behaviour-modification by forcing the delinquent to realise that the stigma emanating from acting contrary to social norms could be costly to their reputation and these unofficial sanctions have widely been recognised as constituting an auxiliary administrative enforcement strategy complementing the official criminal and civil sanctions (Kawadza, 2014, p. 117).” For those reasons, it is clear, therefore, that cultural norms’ censorious attitude towards non-conformists has an inherent and “powerful way of inducing moral uprightness through collective morality and a sense of shame for breaking the law (Kawadza, 2014, p. 117).”

In summary, cultural norms have an innate capacity to embed socially desired ethos, such as a fundamental sense of responsibility to community members. As such one would be right in stating that “if we learn anything from the history . . . it is that culture makes all the difference (Landes, 1998, p. 34)” and that “culture matters (Ibrahim and Rashid, 2008, p. 45).”

5. Market economies and cultural norms

In general, the early localisation, enrolment and deployment of cultural ethos means that by the time a child attains maturity, he/she would have yielded to certain beliefs. After all, it is “at the levels of the household and the community that most of the key social and economic functions can be effectively fulfilled (Stout, 2006, p. 34).”

However, attaining community consciousness in current market economies is not always without challenges. Globalisation with the resultant displacement of populations has come with moral fragmentation, loss of community and society and increased individualism (Goldsmith, 2001). Put differently, market economies encourage citizens to “distance themselves from traditional institutions such as their villages and extended families, which weakens their ties to the society that surrounds them (Tirole & Rendall, 2017, p. 48).” In the end, therefore, immigration is generally associated with the abjuration of culture and the betrayal of community ethos. As such, the ascendancy of the market economy and its characteristic self-interest has led to the displacement of social conscience and the elevation of the “contractual view of ethics” whose attitude to human grief is:

Why should I care? If I am as contented as can be expected and my world is well tended and well protected, why should I lift a finger? And if I do decide to do some good, why should I do anything for anyone beyond my immediate circle? Enlightened self-interest is based on the idea that I do good to others in order that they will do good to me. So, I have no apparent reason to do good to those who are incapable of returning the favour.

In that setting, moral relationships – human values and conscience – have been redefined; “[s]ome have argued that self-interest might actually have become not just acceptable but normative.” In essence, that setting makes an opposite depiction of the “triumph of economics over human values, world with neither pity nor compassion.” Prevailing market economy paradigms seem to provide a fertile ground upon which the dark side of humanity and its broken social exchanges find root.

6. Islamic ethos

Despite the moral malaise and polarising economic conditions, Islamic cultural values and moral obligations have arguably withstood the challenges of capitalism (Tripp, 2006). The ability to forge effective bonds and maintain social cohesion while at the same time sustaining fundamental market economic values is one of the positives of that culture (Tripp, 2006).

The accomplishment of that is credited to the long standing Islamic philanthropic traditions rooted in the sacred Qur'anic beliefs, values and practices. Such beliefs have had an impact of cohering society through ethos that make charitable ideals and practices a collective phenomenon. In other words, "the responsibility for social welfare has been distributed variously among individual, families, government, and associations of many types (Singer, 2008, p. 2)." More specifically, philanthropy in Islamic tradition is better understood as "the believer's moral obligation to do good work on God's behalf (McChesney, 1995, p. 6)," and this "prompts people to act in a pious and just manner. At the same time, this ideal inspires everyday behaviours that shape relationships between human beings (Singer, 2008, p. 18)."

6.1 Pillars of Islamic philanthropy

At the core of Islamic charity is the understanding that God is the source of wealth and hence the obligation to give away what God has given. Based on that conviction, generosity has been codified and conveyed in social principles of *salihat* ("just deeds") where Muslims are expected promote social justice with particular emphasis to the welfare of the poor and weak (Bashear, 2004; Laqueur, 1957). The ensuing is a discussion of some of the principles that reinforce Islamic philanthropy.

6.1.1 Zakat. Because charity is divinely commanded in the Qur'an, Muslims are obliged to embrace and socialise beneficence into various practices, the prominent aspect being the giving of *zakat* or alms (Bashear, 2004). That obligation forms part of the five pillars of Islam and connotes not only one's salvation but also an assurance of a place in paradise after death as a reward for generosity. Similarly, failure to give alms means condemnation. As such, *zakat* is a spiritual and personal matter; it is about the giver not the beneficiary and is a demonstration of one's faith and obedience (Kailani, 2019; White, 2018).

Furthermore, the payment of *zakat* acts as a form of self and wealth purification and serves to legitimise personal gain "by reserving part of it for community benefit; by giving up one part, the owner can enjoy the blessing of what remains. The Qur'an makes abundantly clear God's dislike of avarice and the greedy accumulation of wealth. . . Those who do not pay *zakat* are condemned to harsh suffering on the Day of Judgment (Singer, 2008, p. 36)." The abjuration of personal greed makes an apt contrasting feature, which distinguishes Islamic values from the ethos of market economics. Unlike individualistic personal wealth under market economies, recipients of *zakat* exclude relatives, but instead, it is meant to benefit community members beyond one's immediate family (White, 2018).

6.1.2 Sadaq. Unlike *zakat* which is obligatory, *sadaq* ("to be sincere") is freewill benefaction, and non-observance is not penalised. Besides being one's contribution to the welfare of the community, *sadaq* is also a symbol of atonement for sin. This has an effect of drawing the giver closer to paradise on the Day of Judgment. The rotating Islamic calendar is "marked weekly and throughout the months of the year with occasions for charity giving. . . A shared calendar of holiday and observances seems to provide Muslims in different locations with overlapping if not entirely identical occasions for ritual celebration and charitable giving (Singer, 2008, p. 81)."

The coordinated and systematic calendars ensure consistent performance of acts of benevolence, which guarantees that society is constantly supplied with provisions to meet the

needs of the vulnerable. Festivities and rituals are not complete without the sharing of food and clothing to the poor (Shalihin *et al.*, 2020). For instance, Ramadan does not only entail fasting from dawn to dusk but is also associated with immeasurable charity and the payment *zakat al-fitr* for the benefit of the poor particularly on the 27th night of the Ramadan. The provision of shelter against human and environmental forces is an obligatory tradition for Muslims. Islamic buildings, such as mosques and *zawiyas*, offer safety for the vulnerable and travellers in times of need. As such, the poor are not cast out and left to the mercy of ravaging streets or reduced to begging for survival (Salleh, 2012).

6.1.3 Maslaha. Charity is further expressed in *maslaha* (“public interest”). This is an expression of on-going self-sacrificing beneficence and welfare not only to immediate family members but to neighbours and strangers as well (Cook, 2010; *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2002). As such, charity has been “[c]ulturally, politically, and economically... inseparably embedded in most vertical relationships (Singer, 2008, p. 218)”; the expectation of beneficence creates obligations and entitlements.

Unlike market economics which are steeped in greed and self-promotion, Islamic culture has institutionalised “principles and rules to govern the giving and acceptance of charity in order to guide people and to mitigate some of the less positive human responses – pride, condescension, shame, greed-that might be inspired by acts of charity (Singer, 2008, p. 218).” These are exhibited in broader and enduring cultural principles such as *zakat*, *sadaq* (“donations”) and *maslaha*, which have crucial social implications for community coherence and social order. Besides coherence, they translate into effective schemes of collecting and redeploying wealth, particularly to the poor and vulnerable (Salleh, 2012).

To avoid dependence and the moral hazard that comes with charity, part of the culture exhorts the needy to seek – and society to assist – employment and not to rely on handouts. It means, therefore, that the storehouses are not exploited by those who can help themselves. Once a person is gainfully employed and can meet their own need, their surplus is then given as *sadaq* (Bonner, 2001; Rippin, 1996; Torrey, 1892). This has an effect of contributing to the community’s welfare agenda. In addition, *zakat* is usually deployed as start-up capital. It might also be material items aimed at equipping an individual to embark on a business venture that would make them self-sustaining and secure. Orphans are given work or upskilled, and orphan girls are given dowries to provide them basic financial security (Davis, 2003; Bonner, 2001).

6.1.4 Qur’anic economics. It is on those realities that “Qur’anic economics” have managed to withstand the destabilising market economic ethos and to provide a blueprint the creation of welfare societies. Concepts or practices founded on faith-based wealth circulation and self-purification by giving have had transformative effects on society’s thought and behaviour towards charity and generosity. By taking care of the welfare of the helpless, a Muslim is deemed to be imitating God, who made a gift of his surplus (*fadl*) and sustenance (*rizq*), without ever expecting it to be returned. “Donors were to provide for the needy freely and unstintingly” (Bonner, 2001, p. 121. See also Davis, 2003). Such community-centric traits distinguish Qur’anic economics from individualistic market economics and offer compelling lessons on reshaping community thinking and society’s shared responsibility towards the provision of food, shelter, medical care and education for the poor.

7. Some remarks on the South African setup

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed deep-seated inequalities in South Africa. In a market economy bereft of economic fairness, the poor and vulnerable suffered more. Sadly, the after-effects of the pandemic on the poor will continue even after the crisis is over. History attests to

the fact that pandemics do not automatically result in the immediate end to the plight of the poor (Honigsbaum, 2019; Snowden, 2019; Schwartz, 2014). This is because governments find themselves preoccupied with redressing the cataclysmic economic consequences of the pandemics, and in that set up, the interests of the vulnerable play second fiddle.

Because of the numerous resource encumbrances that the South African government faces (SA Government, 2021; Congressional Research Service, 2020), it is fair to say that government is ill-equipped to deal with societal evils. Challenges facing the vulnerable could be abated if society took a more prominent role. Besides the inadequacies of the government, other considerations make society better placed to lead philanthropic causes. The risk of red tape, political and propagandistic inclinations associated with centralisation of aid under the government's organs has been touted as factors disqualifying government in philanthropic initiatives. The media has been replete with reports of corruption, looting of donations and lack of transparency which culminates in aid subjected to partisan distribution, patronage and the resultant use of hunger as a political tool for campaigning (Amnesty International, 2021).

On their part, governments tend to be wary of the potential influence that civil society organisations can wield on society and hence the onerous requirements on such organisations. These include the centralisation of aid which in essence means that donations being effected through government channels as well as the requirement that relief agencies apply for authorisation before handing out aid. The standoff between government and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) in coordination of aid in South Africa – and indeed South African – region best illustrates this uneasy relationship (Amnesty International, 2021).

Arguably, the above stated scenario explains why one non profit entity “Solidarity Helping Hand, which distributes aid to thousands of families across South Africa, has threatened legal action should government implement regulations prescribing that the distribution of food to the poor be centralised under government control (Amnesty International, 2021).” Ultimately, therefore, “aid distribution can become a field of conflict and competition between individual donors, government, and NGOs as each seeks to benefit from prestige and influence that accrues to prominent benefactors (Singer, 2008, p. 180).” In this contestation over the distribution of aid, it is the poor and vulnerable who suffer most.

Given the above, charity should be a collective effort. It should not be consigned to the government. Neither should it be confined to the rich and powerful in society. There is, therefore, a need to reshape this perception along Islamic tradition which holds that the “charity relationship exists at all levels of society, defining vertical hierarchies and power gradients even between those who have relatively little (Singer, 2008, p. 223).” Nonetheless, the wealthy members of society should still use their wealth to improve society and leave legacies that benefit wider society as part of *maslaha* or public good.

There is a relatively large population of Muslim in South Africa; this community has maintained a philanthropic culture among themselves. Perhaps such philanthropy should extend beyond that immediate circle of believers not so much as an act of altruism but so that the wider society can draw lessons from that. Because not everyone follows Islamic ideologies and practices, it would not be possible to harness or import Islamic traditions of charity. However, a crucial takeaway for any society that seeks to reorient philanthropy would be the centralisation of welfare donations, a form of centralised *zakat* that would be associated with several advantages “including the ability of governments to tap into income at source in much the same way that social security, health insurance, and other payments may be deducted from individuals’ pay checks. . . [by so doing] a well-run national system ultimately would be more effective at delivering aid to individual needy people, particularly with the tools of modern communication and transport (Singer, 2008, p. 216).”

8. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has proved to be an opportune moment to pause and reflect not only on crucial institutions such as healthcare but also to refocus societal consciences and values. More specifically, other than containing the pandemic (“flattening the curve”), it has spawned the need to examine the need for a common purpose, which can shape society well beyond the pandemic (Financial Times, 2020). An outcome of this self-examination should be how the crisis’ offensive blows could have been softened had society supplemented government’s efforts through an institutionalised and enduring sense of community and empathy.

I share some of the scepticism whether such ideals are attainable. However, the fundamental intersection between culture and community development should not be undermined. There is merit in asserting that a cultural intervention, and the homogenisation of community ethos that new values can be deployed. It can be averred that such a transformation is attainable and ethos, such as those found in Muslim culture, is worth considering.

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