

Religious Co-narration of Corona

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At the dawn of 2020, everyone was continuing their race: men of power and powerless citizens, economic giants and penniless little people, warriors and refugees, destroyers of the planet and defenders of colors and smells, of everything that still moves in the universe of the living.

While the machines and machinists were roaring all over the world, some vague stories started emanating from China. An unknown virus presented itself as mysterious, elusive and “perhaps” dangerous. Then suddenly, as soon as the new protagonist took on a global dimension and spread at lightning speed, everything came to a sudden halt. We thought we couldn’t brake, couldn’t stop the installed mechanisms and turntables without respite. Individuals, families, institutions, and states suddenly came to a standstill, as if by magic unimaginable. The end of the Second World War lies far in the past, and *Homo sapiens* believe themselves to be invincible, as masters in control of land and sky, of the dead and the living.

Only, here, however, they are dethroned by a virulent virus that strikes hard until death – and, beyond damaging the human body and its vital functions, attacks the social body as a whole. A phenomenal malfunction has occurred. The relationship between the “self” the “other” becomes challenged more than ever. And institutions that “think”, communicate, organize, and coordinate are disorganized, overwhelmed, and catastrophic. From hospitals to schools, universities to courts, ministries to factories, airports to military bases... everything, absolutely everything, is now destabilized and affected.

An unbelievable situation? Not quite, and the history of medicine proves it. The work of globalization carried out by viruses has been known since humans were first hit by epidemics. Nevertheless, a major difference has emerged with the novel coronavirus. We have seen that the reaction of each state – of each society according to its economy, healthcare system and culture – varies significantly. From Trump and his constituents who blame media hysteria and the Democrats’ and China’s “viral” conspiracy, to Macron who activates his lexicon of war, to religious orthodoxies – of all tendencies – who sell off containment measures and implore divine intervention to eradicate the diabolical virus. Everywhere, the psycho-social effervescence seems to be at its height, and the coronavirus’s ability to thwart national or global narratives is quite astounding.

Ironically, after only a few weeks, doctors, nurses, and orderlies who were demonstrating or resigning *en masse* to fight against the application of market laws to healthcare, and the unworthy conditions of their work, were transformed into national heroes. Politics are now forced to change the discourse – to justify to lawyers and guardians of constitutions the

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questioning of fundamental rights, as well as military and police intervention, to enforce the limits imposed on freedoms. Moreover, the legitimacy of the political narrative sometimes seems to be lost between epidemiologists and science professionals.

Are we faced with an exploding narrative mode? And if so, which new narrative mode?

In the midst of discussion about a post-corona era on normality, which will certainly not be the same conversion as before, as well as the return to normalcy, or even the formula for the *neu Normalität* that kept repeatedly being uttered by certain German political figures, what will become of our individual and collective narrative? Of our cultural identity according to Covid-19? Will we be more selfish or more supportive? Will we be more consumerist or more protective of nature and life? Will we narrate the story by ourselves more or will we be more attached to new communication giants that contrive stories and shape minds?

Albert Camus already knew this in 1941 – in the middle of World War II, European fascism, and the brutal colonization of Arab African countries – when he wrote: “But once the doors were closed, they realized that they were all, and the narrator himself, caught in the same bag and had to be dealt with. (...) The plague had covered everything. There were no longer individual fates, but a collective story that was the plague and the feelings shared by all.” For an epidemic does not only lock individuals in their homes, it forces them to suspend the communicational experience of feeling together, tasting together, looking at each other, touching each other, and, above all, talking with each other. The coronavirus strikes bodies *and* words. The collective narrative is thus forced to stop, or metamorphose.

In the midst of the confinement that has spread throughout the world, the fight against the new virus has been forced to leave medical facilities and take on another color: that of spiritual warfare.

Holy April!

All the big monotheistic parties were there: Easter for Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christians; Jewish Passover; and Ramadan, which was scheduled for the last week of April. Due to the coronavirus and containment measures, masses, celebrations, and prayers were cancelled and generally replaced by other forms of digital communication. The image of the Pope walking alone to the Church of San Marcello, in the center of Rome and transmitted to the whole world, touched souls and left a lasting impression that was never before seen. Two weeks later, he prays alone, in the middle of St. Peter’s Square, deserted and desolate. In Jerusalem, for the first time in more than a century, the Holy Sepulchre is closed during Easter weekend. The communal history of a religion, of believing groups or individuals, is thus taking shape, from private rooms and spaces to fragmented and disparate narratives that come together to weave a collective co-narration. Co-narration, or almost. For these limitations and deprivations of “normal” religious sociability have not been to the liking of more fundamentalist currents, such as Christian and Jewish ultra-Orthodox, evangelicals, and Muslim extremists. And a counter-narrative emerged. During Easter weekend, the priest for the Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet parish in Paris organized an open night mass. On the parish’s website,

a message encouraging physical presence was addressed to the faithful: “the video transmission of Sunday Mass does not replace or dispense those who are able to do so from the obligation to attend Mass in person.” For Orthodox Christians, apart from a majority who followed the services at home, resistance from some religious and political authorities was observed in Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine. In March, *Le Monde* had already reported that the head of the Kiev Cave Laureate called on the faithful to “rush to the churches”. No wonder that this place of worship has become one of the virus’s major epicenters, with almost a fifth of all contamination in Kiev traced back to it.

A similar pattern was observed with Jewish festivities. In Israel, where all places of worship for the three monotheistic religions are closed, a controversy has arisen over the division of rabbis. The Durkheimian debate on the profane and the sacred has rightfully regained its place here. The problem is none other than whether the use of a videoconferencing application, which is intended to allow families to meet in a different way, could replace collective communions. Some rabbis have not found it difficult to adapt to an emergency situation by accepting the use of this medium to celebrate the feast. The Chief Rabbinate of Israel, however, opposed it. According to him, it was out of question to “desecrate” a sacred day. Needless to say, the confinement imposed in Israel has been significantly difficult to implement among the ultra-Orthodox. They account for 50% of the patients with Covid-19, while only representing about 10% of the Israeli population.

Some of them are also very religious and highly distrustful of the State of Israel. The only authority they refer to is their rabbi. On March 17, an ultra-Orthodox wedding brought together more than 120 people in the Beth Shemesh neighborhood of Jerusalem, defying the rules of confinement. A few days later in Bnei Brak, near Tel Aviv, hundreds of people gathered for a rabbi’s funeral.

Of course, such attitudes are not always justified on strictly religious grounds. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson also became ill from Covid-19 after displaying denialist behavior at the beginning of the pandemic, refusing to accept containment measures and advocating a narrative of strengthening the immune system through exposure to the virus. This policy was shattered by the rapidly increasing infection and death rates. Nevertheless, it is the narrative framework and arguments deployed that make the difference. Israeli health minister Yaakov Litzman, an ultra-Orthodox Jew, said the following in an interview on March 19: “We hope the Messiah will arrive before Easter (...). I am sure he will come to save us, just as God saved us during the Exodus from Egypt. He himself became ill after attending a Shabbat service despite the closure of the synagogues.”

The Jewish messianic argument takes another detour elsewhere. Among the evangelists, as among many Muslims, it is rather a question of diabolical forces which must be combated by means other than medicine. Let us note in passing that if one of the major specificities of Islam is the absence of a clergy capable of taking in hand the normative regulation of worship, evangelism in turn ignores all regulation: each pastor practically has his own “deontic power”.

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In the United States, where evangelists are indispensable supporters of Donald Trump, there is no shortage of examples. In Florida, the evangelical pastor Ronald Howard-Browne was arrested for having celebrated several masses with hundreds of faithful while ignoring confinement measures. He accused the media of stirring up “religious hatred and intolerance” at a time when churches, he said, were a vital means of fighting the evil powers of the coronavirus. From the devil to the charlatan, the gap is not far off. This is how the extremely wealthy Kenneth Copeland, one of the richest televangelists, promised on his television channel that he could cure the coronavirus through the screen... all he had to do was put his hand on the television set!

A political and evangelist friend, the country of Brazil is not lacking in anti-diabolic narrative either. Jair Bolsonaro, president of the extreme right, supported by evangelists during his election, did not even hesitate to issue a decree to include evangelical churches in the list of essential sectors that cannot be affected by containment measures. At the beginning of April, he proposed to set up a day of religious fasting to “deliver Brazil from the evil” of the coronavirus. Silas Malafaia, head of one of the most important churches in the country, first declared: “My friends, do not worry about the coronavirus. It is a tactic of Satan. It feeds on fear.” An on his narration too, by the way.

Outside of places of worship, some Muslims in Egypt (Alexandria), Morocco, and Tunisia, although an abortive attempt in the latter, took to the streets, invoking the greatness of the Almighty (*Allah aqbar*) to eradicate the virus by using a formula drawn from the theological lexicon: *li-raf`i balā al-corona*. A young Egyptian civil society activist had commented with dark humor on the nonsense of the night demonstration in Alexandria, stressing the irrationality and ignorance of men holding hands instead of keeping the recommended distance and staying home. “Do you think – he asked – that the virus will be afraid of you? That it will spare you when you hold hands because it will stop spreading in the evening, for example?”

The total scramble in the minds of many Muslims throughout the Arab world and the non-differentiation between the political, religious, economic, sanitary, etc., reduces their narrative account of the coronavirus to a kind of macabre caricature and bears witness to a deep collective trauma linked not only to epidemics of the past centuries, but to any irruption of the external enemy. The young activist aptly calls out to them through social networks: “Do you think it’s Napoleon’s French companion or the British occupation? All you have to do is shout, ‘*yasqut, yasqut hukm al-vayrus!*’ (“down, down with the power of the virus!”)”, a slogan that Egyptian demonstrators have used and abused since the popular uprising against Mubarak, Mursi, and even President al-Sisi. Strange normative ambiguity exists in this Islamic narrative. But the political is not the only one to identify with the religious. Or vice versa. The scientist, too. Let us recall that in Iran, the Muslim country most affected by the epidemic so far, the debate did not take long to agitate religious authorities. Some religious leaders have not hesitated to place the religious above all normativity, even that of medical science. The academic and theologian of the holy city of Qom, Moshen Alviri, said that this “historical debate between Muslim jurists goes back to the early days of Islam”. He is obviously right. Except he did not address one fascinating question: Why do normative interferences and ambiguities in spheres that are

viscerally different from each other continue to be so active today? Why must a religious narrative impose its logic on political or medical narratives, for example? In the wake of this questioning, an ayatollah from Qom had already been calling pilgrims since the month of February to go to the mosque which he called a “house of healing”. No wonder then that on March 17, confrontations arose between Iranian police and worshippers who were desperate to visit two holy mausoleums, or that Shiites in Iraq were visiting the *al-qādhim* mausoleum despite government measures banning gatherings.

In this, Shia Islam is not isolated. Sunni Islam, too, invents its own narrative. Generally speaking, religious authorities have complied with political decisions in the fight against the pandemic. One symbol of this: the mosque in Mecca, which has already been closed since the beginning of March. The pilgrimage planned for the end of July will probably not take place this year. *Fatawa* from here and there are calling on Muslims to pray and celebrate the holy month of Ramadan at home. This is emotionally and symbolically very delicate, since Ramadan is the perfect occasion to strengthen family and social ties, as well as share meals, night vigils, parties, and prayers. While for Muslims in Europe and in several Arab-Islamic countries the measures are generally respected, other countries are already ticking like a time bomb. In Pakistan, a country of 200 million inhabitants, mosques and places of worship have been open since the beginning of April and are packed with worshippers. From March 10-12 in Lahore, authorities found themselves unarmed in front of monster gatherings of more than 100,000 people from 70 countries, despite the fact that the fundamentalist organization *al-tabligh* had not obtained the required permission. Cases of contamination linked to participants were subsequently recorded not only in Pakistan, but also in India, Turkey, and elsewhere.

Surfing on anguish and collective ignorance often bears fruit. The Algerian Imam Shems-eddine Aljazairi did not hide his zeal when he wrote on Facebook that he is “afraid that God sent us this virus to make us come back to him and when he sees that we have closed the mosques, he will send us another more virulent virus.” His macabre prophecy strangely rhymes with a famous formula that circulates throughout the Arab world from Morocco to Yemen: “whoever will not be killed by war, will be killed by the Coronavirus!”

Is fear the essential framework of the Arab co-narration during the times of corona? Fear of death? Death by war, by the pandemic, by Daech, by failed revolutions, by an enlightened Islam that struggles to find a different, freer, and more humane narrative path?

Surfing on anguish is, however, not the only lot of Arab-Muslims, nor is it the only lot of religious Orthodox. It is even more serious because it has become the driving force of a global narrative. The crisis of the virus is, at its roots, only a test of the machine that was in full swing. Since the 1990s, and the change in the history of the media, communication, marketing, and management giants have been able to recover the academic momentum of narrative techniques to format minds. The objective: to tell “stories” for the benefit of the gurus of capitalism who are greedy for endless consumption, as well as for elected officials eager to turn citizens into electoral puppets. And then, an even more formidable element was added to the dictatorship of

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media narration: social dictatorship. Michel Foucault had already identified it well in his writings on surveillance societies. But if surveillance is a virus, it feeds on fear.

Every civilization, every culture cultivates the art of telling stories, tales, and myths. Religious co-narration is at the very heart of social dynamism, of the “effervescence” that requires the co-presence of the other, of what makes us human. This dynamism has been greatly destabilized by the pandemic, and researchers are already observing a growing trend of radicalization among both religious extremists and supporters of extreme right-wing policies.

Anxiety is exploding everywhere.

The fear of contracting the virus and dying from it, of never seeing one’s dying loved ones again or burying them with dignity. The fear of losing one’s job, of being homeless, voiceless, and disenfranchised. Fear of violence that explodes in homes against women and children, the extent and consequences of which we do not yet know. World organizations are uttering cries of anguish of famine and impoverishment that will affect millions of human beings. The coronavirus hides behind it many others, and if the anguish explodes, we still have the hope that the current ordeal we are all going through will serve as a warning signal and invite us to rethink our values and systems for a more stable and peaceful existence on this planet.

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