**WINNING THE BATTLE OF AUTHORITIES:**

**THE MUSLIM DISPUTES OVER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC PLAGUE IN CONTEMPORARY INDONESIA**

**Masdar Hilmy**

*State Islamic University (UIN) Sunan Ampel Surabaya*

*E-mail*: [masdar.hilmy@uinsby.ac.id](mailto:masdar.hilmy@uinsby.ac.id)

**Khoirun Niam**

*State Islamic University (UIN) Sunan Ampel Surabaya*

*E-mail:* [khoirunniam@uinsby.ac.id](mailto:khoirunniam@uinsby.ac.id)

**Abstract:** Scholarly works on how Indonesian Muslims perceive and respond to the pandemic plague—including the Covid-19—have left an untouched theoretical gap. As far as it is concerned, the works on the theme of pandemic plague consist of sporadic and preliminary brief reflective pieces. It is within such a context that this article is a groundbreaking effort to fill the academic gap in this theme. This article seeks to portray the dynamics of religious disputes among Indonesian Muslims over the pandemic Coronavirus inflicting all over the world. The paper argues that the public sphere serves as an open stage of idea contest among members of the society in which sacred texts-based ideas and scientific based ones are publicly tested. While the majority of Muslims complies with the official protocol of disease prevention, some others however are resistant with it on the grounds that the protocol can undermine the spirit of Islam and the quality of faith. Their resistance to some degree indicates the dominance of deductive paradigm that can endanger the religious authority in public sphere.

**Keywords:** religious authority, pandemic plague, deductive reasoning, inductive reasoning.

**Introduction**

As far as scholarly works are concerned, there is no serious undertakings to find out how Indonesian Muslims perceive and approach pandemic plague such as the Covid-19—other name for the Coronavirus. There are some works, of course, but nothing more than sporadic brief reflection about the plague (Fathurrahman, 2020; Jahroni, 2020; Niam, 2020). Scrutinized more closely, what underlies the public debate is the response of Indonesian Muslims as dynamic intellectual as well as theological discourse in public sphere on how Muslims’ understanding of the plague has transformed over time from fatalistic God-centered attitude towards more science-based one. In spite of such a persistent fatalistic God-centered attitude, Indonesian Muslims in general have evolved into more diversified understanding of the plague. As a result, there is a wide range of public discourse among Muslim community on how the pandemic plague is perceived; how they deal with it; what is the paradigmatic framework is employed in confronting the plague; and so forth.

A series of questions above, as far as the writer is concerned, does not receive any adequate thought to discuss in a serious academic undertaking. In line with the effort to undertake a groundbreaking study, this article is made. This article seeks to portray the dynamics of public debate among Indonesian Muslims on the Covid-19 plague sweeping out the world in early 2020. This article uses qualitative analysis based on data taken from prominent Muslim figures spread out in various sources such as social media or mainstream one. Prior to presenting public discourses among Indonesian Muslims regarding the Covid-19 plague, this article begins with brief overview on the plague in the Muslim history. This historical overview is continued with an account of how some Muslim organization such as Muhammadiyah, NU and MUI respond to the plague, before it continues to analyze the public debate from the perspective of religious authority.

This article argues that public debate over the Covid-19 plague represents the battle of authorities between inductive scientific reason as represented by science on the one hand and the deductive textual one as represented by religion. Despite the persistence of deductive reason, the inductive reason finally wins the debate by the state-sponsored adoption of medical protocols of the plague prevention. In the long-run, the inductivized religion seems to be a realistic solution in compromising the never-ending battle of the two reasons in response to the pandemic plague.

**The Pandemic Plague in the history of Islam**

Throughout their history, various pandemic plagues have stricken Muslim communities. The first deadly plague has swept out Muslims during the reign of Umar Ibn Khattab, the Prophet’s Companion and the second Caliph. A lot of Prophet’s Companions has been the victims of the plague. The plague occurred in 17/638 or 18/639 (al-Suyuthi, 1997, p. 145). In the history of Islam, this plague is known as Tha’un ‘Amwas. The term ‘Amwas is taken from the site where the plague firstly spread. It is located in Syam or Syria now. It was reported that the plague has claimed no less than 25.000 lives (Dols, 1977, p. 21). This plague not only stroke ‘Amwas, but spread out to neighboring areas such as Iraq and Egypt. This plague was initiated by famine and hunger in the area of Syria to Palestine which made the population exposed to the plague. Plagues are usually connected to diseases, due to the deteriorating condition of the people and they invite the plague-carrier animals such as rats to the food storage in the people’s houses (Dols, 1977, p. 22).

Ibn Hajar al-Athqalani (d. 852 H) is among the generation of Muslim scholars (*ulama*) undergoing the pandemic plague. His three daughters have been the victims of the plague. As a part of his deep condolences, he wrote a treatise for remembrance of the plague called *Badhl al-Ma’un Fi Fadhl al-Tha’un* (exerting all helps amidst the plague/*tha’un*) (Byrne, 2012, p. 3). In this work he said that a horrible plague has ever stricken Syria in 794 H (al-Asqalani, 1993, p. 328). In order to confront the spread of the plague, Muslims gathered in an outdoor space to perform prayers. It was said that to fulfil the prayers, the crowd with their superiors (*al-kaba’ir*) went out outdoor in droves. They started to perform prayers together. However, after the prayers the plague deteriorated and claimed more deaths, while prior to prayers gathering the scale of the plague was still limited (Byrne, 2004; Cantor, 2001; Person, 2011; Scott and Duncan, 2004; Naphy and Spicer, 2001).

Similar pandemic plague has also swept out Cairo, Egypt, in 833 H. The response to the plague from Muslim population was also the same: mass public prayer in an open space. What happened to the plague after mass public prayer? The situation deteriorated, the death toll increased as the plague contaminated all praying attendants. As quoted by Ibn Hajar:

“The death toll was only 40 people prior to praying. The crowd went out in droves into outdoor space on the 4th Jumadil Ula, after they were being asked to do fasting for three days in advance as what they have done prior to prayers asking for raining (*istisqa’*) and they performed prayers and returned home respectively. As one month it passed by (since the mass public prayer), the death toll in one day reached one thousand people in Cairo, and it continued to increase exponentially since then.” (Nuha, 2020).

What Ibn Hajar has recorded indicates that Muslims have undergone waves of gloomy pandemic plague since the beginning of their history. The death toll caused by those plagues also countless. More importantly, any effort to expel those plagues always the same: outdoor mass public prayers where contagion among them is unavoidable. As a result, the mass public prayer does not make them any better; it even makes the plague worsen. Considering that the same method of cure does not give any solution, there should have been other efforts taken into account in order not to repeat the same mistakes at all times. The repetition of the same mistakes might be caused by the lack of shared knowledge regarding the contagious effect of the plague. As a result, history always repeats: every plague results in massive death-tolls among Muslims Stearns, 2008, p. 53).

The plague ‘Amwas represents one of the most memorable events in the history of Muslim society because such an event affects directly on how Muslims respond every pandemic plague afterwards. Muslims need theologically sound justification in response to every pandemic plague in order to give them a sense of authentic “self.” They feel necessary to be well-equipped with a standardized code of religious conduct derived directly from the two most authoritative sources in Islam, i.e. the Qur’an and the Prophetic Hadith. By and large, there are three Islamic teachings-derived principles upon which most of the Muslims base in responding every pandemic plague as follows: (1) the pandemic plague is a heavenly blessing and plague-stricken death for Muslims is considered martyr and punishment for non-Muslims ; (2) a Muslim shall not enter a plague-affected lands if he/she is outside of the lands and; (3) the plague is not contagious because all diseases come from Allah (Dols, 1977, p. 23).

The three principles above have ever since continued to invite further controversies and public disputes each time the pandemic plague inflict upon Muslims. As has obviously been demonstrated throughout the Muslim history, especially during the plague ‘Amwas, public disputes over those three principles took place due to the fact that it is simply unacceptable to acknowledge the deadly pandemic plague as heavenly blessing and the plague-stricken death as martyrdom, the nature to flee, as well as devastating effects caused by the plague. Therefore, it is simply unrealistic to assume that those principles represent the whole picture of Muslims’ aspiration in responding the plague, either during the Middle Ages or nowadays. Those principles, nevertheless, have established the normative grounds for Muslim community in general in response to the pandemic plague.

In regards to the first principle, some Muslims consider that the plague as heavenly punishment (*adzab*). Such an attitude has deeply rooted to the Jewish and Christian theological heritage. In such a context, the pandemic plague tends to be regarded as an admonishment and punishment from God due to sins and moral violations conducted by human being (Meri, 2006, p. 236). For example, the pandemic plague inflicting the Damascus Muslims in Syria was believed to be caused by the sins they have conducted, namely the rampant drinking alcoholic wine forbidden (*haram*) in Islam. Due to such a reason, based on Umar’s command, Abu Ubayd has lashed them according to Islamic law (al-Suyuti, 1997, p. 145). The belief that the pandemic plague represents heavenly blessing and martyrdom for Muslims was mostly accepted without dispute among Muslims.

Apart from those viewpoints above, it is believed that God has sent the plague and humans have no choices but accepting it. Such a belief can also be found in the discussion of the second principle; Whether or not someone chooses to stay in the pandemic area cannot change the humans’ fate because God has determined the death for each person. This argument fits in line with what Abu Musa al-Asy’ari has developed regarding the pandemic plague (Kathir, 1985, p. 78). It is reported that when some companions of Abu Musa came to his home in Kufah, he asked them to stay outside of his home because in the inside there was a plague-stricken member of his family, and instead he urged them to drive away from his home into an open space and city garden. The point, according to Abu Musa, is that a Muslim cannot be blamed if he/she flees from the pandemic plague because God has determined the date for his/her death (Kathir, 1985, p. 79). Due to such an argument, Abu Musa supports Umar’s decision to flee from the stricken-pandemic land whereas Abu Ubaydah chooses to stay in Damascus Syria. Among the Prophet’s Companions who were died because the ‘Amwas plague are Abu Ubaydah himself, Abu Yazid ibn Abi Sufyan, Muadz bin Jabal and his son (Dols, 1977, p. 25). As a result of their death, Umar appointed Mu’awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan as the Commander in Syria and left him an opportunity to build his power from Syria.

Other than the ‘Amwas plague, there were another series of pandemic plagues sweeping out the Muslim lands in the Middle East, one among which is the “violent plague” (Dols, 1977, p. 25). The plague was named as such due to the fact that the plague has swept out Baghdad in 69 H/688-689 CE like flash flood. The next massive plague crashed in 87 H/706 CE which was named “girl plague” (*al-Fatayat*). According to Alfred von Kremer—as quoted by Dols—there has been a series of massive pandemic plagues sweeping out the most parts of the Middle East in 448-449 H/1056-1057 CE (Dols, 1977, p. 32). On the other hand, as Ibn Hajar has maintained, deadly plague has crashed Samarkand and Balkh that claimed more than 6,000 lives per day (Dols, 1977, p. 32). In addition, a series of plagues has also stricken Egypt and Syria. In 455 H/1063 CE the plague hit Egypt which spread out to the lands of Europe. In 469 H/1076-1077 CE, a massive plague also swept Syria (Dols, 1977, p. 32).

In a great deal of literature on the history of Islam and the plague, some scholars argue that Muslims in general tend to be theologically fatalistic compared to their counterparts in Judaism and Christianity in responding the plague (Varlik, 2015, p. 84). While the Jewish and Christian population on the basis of scientific investigation believed the theory of contagion, the majority of Muslims did not. As a result, Muslims were urged not to flee from the plague infected-lands on the grounds that the plague is not contagious; the plague for Muslims is heavenly blessing and the death caused by the plague is martyrdom, while for non-Muslims is a heavenly punishment. Those with different and opposing viewpoints from established orthodoxy will be judged heretic, and he/she will receive the punishment as the consequence for what he/she has done. On the contrary, Christians tend to believe the opposite manner, that one has to flee from the inflicted land due to its contagious nature contained in the plague. If he/she insists on staying in it he/she can risk his/her life that can endanger others (Dols, 1977, p. 32).

In the history of Islam, there is an example of a Muslim scholar whose religious viewpoint regarding the plague differed from the established orthodoxy. It is Lisan al-Din Ibn al-Khatib (d. 1374), a deeply-learned and prolific ministry in Muslim Granada Spain (Stearns, 2009, p. 3-4). This Muslim scholar has written a treatise on the pandemic plague called “Black Death” in which he asserts that the pandemic is contagious. Even though his viewpoint contradicts the established understanding of Muslims, he has empirical evidence to support his argument. Due to his oppositional attitude toward the mainstream orthodoxy, he was consequently punished by the local authority as heretic and was killed. According to some historians, in general Muslim viewpoints on the pandemic plague tend to be fatalistic and of anti-contagion theory. Al-Khatib is among the few who had to risk his life due to his belief against established orthodoxy, and he was killed 25 after the Black Death plague (Stearns, 2009, p. 4).

Islamic scholarship, however, has developed and changed over time. Al-Khatib’s viewpoints regarded by his contemporary coreligionists as heretic in his age have been reexamined by the later generations of Muslim scholars as can be read through the 15th century-scholarly works on *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). The accusation of heretic, therefore, might be politically driven (Perho, 1995, pp. 91-100; Conrad, 2000, pp. 163-177). It is also noteworthy to take into account that despite the fact that there was a major tendency among particular religious community in response to pandemic plague, the religious communities of the Jews, Christianity and Islam shared a common knowledge on the plague, including the Black Death (Stearns, 2009, p. 4).

**Public Disputes over the Covid-19 Pandemic Plague**

1. *Plague as Heavenly Punishment*

The pandemic plague Covid-19 has been perceived differently by Indonesian Muslims and it has invited various responses in the public sphere. Among those responses is the one that regards the plague as the punishment of God due to sins conducted by humans. Anton Tabah, a board member of the Indonesian Council of Muslim Scholars (Majlis Ulama Indonesia/MUI), for instance, has stood in this camp. He argues that the pandemic Covid-19 represents God’s punishment to China due to its atrocities and injustice conducted to fellow Uyghur Muslims (*Terbit*, 13 March 2020). Some even goes further by maintaining that the plague represents as *Ababil*, God’s bird troops sent down by God to destroy His enemies, that is the ‘Elephant troop’ led by the King Abrahah with the intention to destroy Ka’bah (the House of Allah). The bird troops or *Ababil* are equivalent to the pandemic Coronavirus sent down by Allah to destroy China as God’s retaliation to what the country has done to Uyghur Muslims (Zaki, *Hidayatullah.com*, 26 January 2020).

Similar viewpoints are espoused by Habib Novel Chaidir Hasan Bamukmin, one of Habib Rizieq Syihab followers and the Chairman of the Media Center of the Brotherhood of the 212 Alumni. In addition to as the God’s punishment to what China has done to Uyghur Muslims, Novel believes that this plague is also sent down by God as the punishment for the atheism adopted by the majority of its people (*Pojoksatu*, 25 January 2020). It must be acknowledged that China can be considered as a new global power that can challenge the United States of America (USA), the world’s leading super power, but its power has made China arrogant, said Novel. With the virus, God has sent messages to the Chinese people that God exists by sending the plague that has claimed thousands of lives.

The spread of the plague that firstly outbreak in a traditional Market in Wuhan has been also of the thought of popular Ustadz Abdus Shomad (UAS). According to UAS, the outbreak of this virus cannot be separated from the habit of Chinese people to consume raw meats, not slaughtered or wild animals and some other factors. UAS further argues that the fact that this virus does not contaminate Uyghur Muslims is not by accident (*Indopolitika.com*, 16 February 2020). In UAS’s opinion, the Uyghur Muslims have been protected by Allah so that they are free from the virus. Allah has sent his troops, i.e. the pandemic plague called the coronavirus to protect Uyghur Muslims. He further states that “Allah indeed loves this *ummah* (the Muslim community). *Ummah* has lost its power, *ummah* has lost the Caliph (*khalifah*), *ummah* has lost its sultanate, what they can do is only reading the Qur’an and prayer (*dhikr*) recitation. But Allah is still Compassionate and Allah helps His servants with His troops. There is also His last troops called Corona” (*Indopolitika.com*, 16 February 2020). He said that Uyghur Muslims are immune to this Coronavirus due to their habit to do ablution (*wudlu*). This virus will not touch people who are consistent in keeping themselves clean. They do not consume *haram* meats, raw meats, blood, because blood can contain virus. According to UAS, when one applies the teaching of Islam, then Allah’s assistant will be coming (*Indopolitika.com*, 16 February 2020). In other words, UAS regards that the key for the Muslim immunity is the application of Islamic teaching in daily life.

1. *The Plague as Catastrophe*

Apart from those who consider the coronavirus as heavenly punishment, there is also a segment of Muslims who regard the virus as a matter of massive catastrophe. Among those who hold such an assumption is Nasaruddin Umar, the grand Imam (*Imam Besar*) of Istiqlal Mosque Jakarta, who rejects the virus-as-punishment assumption, but as a catastrophe or heavenly test (*bala’*) (*Republika*, 13 March 2020). In his opinion, the Prophet has prayed for his *ummah* from all kinds of *adzab* or punishment—apart from the quality of their faith (*iman*). In his argument, the heavenly punishment goes only to non-believers (*kafir*). The term ‘*kafir’* in this context can mean both denotatively (non-Muslims) and connotatively (those who disregard Allah’s blessings). In his opinion, therefore, there is no more heavenly punishment for Muslims because the Prophet has assured Allah’s forgiveness to them.

Similar to what Nasaruddin has argued, KH. Said Aqil Siradj, The General Chairman of NU, argues that the plague represents the humanitarian test (*Kalam.sindonews.com*, 30 March 2020). In his opinion, scientists and religionists (Muslim scholars) share the same responsibility to find out the solution to stop the pandemic plague. Both can complement or do not conflict to each other. While the scientists seek to understand God’s creature, religionists try to find out the relation of God and His creature. He said that “the scientists investigate the biggest cosmos to the smallest virus such as Covid-19. Religionists help to give meaning to deepest human emotion in order to be connected to the Gentlest (*al-Halim*) as well as the Softest (*al-Lathif*)” (*Kalam.sindonews.com*, 30 March 2020). On the other hand, there is no much difference between scientists and religionists. While scientists stay focused on what they investigate and neglect behind the object of investigation as God’s creature. Some others do not; not only focused on the object of investigation but also believe in abstract things behind the working framework of the cosmos. In his argument, “the last group consists of the believing scientists. In dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic plague, the believing scientists are seeking vaccine as well as surrendering to God in order for Him to give safety beyond human being’s efforts” (*Kalam.sindonews.com*, 30 March 2020).

1. *Death as the Predetermined Fate*

In addition to statements above, some Muslim clerics and preachers (*khatib*) try to associate the pandemic plague to death. According to some of them, whether or not the coronavirus plague is coming, the death for everyone is predetermined. The pandemic plague should therefore not make everyone, especially Muslims, afraid of the coronavirus and avoid doing regular prayers in mosques or other houses of worship. In their opinion, there is nothing to be afraid of but Allah. If one is afraid of anything other than Allah, it means that he/she shares God with His creatures (*shirk*) which is a big sin in Islam. In addition, the more one feels afraid the more he/she is fragile to viruses and, thus, reduces the immunity of his/her body. Such an argument can be seen, for instance, among the crowd of Jamaah Tabligh gathering in Makassar which was planned to hold *ijtima’* *ulama* (the gathering of Muslim scholars) on 19-22 March 2020 but cancelled by the local authority on safety grounds (*Kompas.com*, 19 March 2020). According to the committee, the gathering should have been attended by more than 8,000 followers of Jamaah Tabligh. The same event is said to have been successfully held in Malaysia (27 February-1 March) attended by more than 16,000 followers but later serves as the outbreak of coronavirus contagion in the country.

1. *Plague as political means and bioweapon*

Another interpretation on the plague is associated with politics or power-related issues by arguing that the plague is not merely a matter of health and medicine *per se*; more than that, the plague is also about politics. In other words, the pandemic coronavirus is not something happening by accident, but it is by design. Who design the pandemic plague? There must be an invisible power that creates all of the plague story which in turns results in short-term interests such as politics and economy. KH Agoes Ali Masyhuri, a Provincial Board Member of NU of East Java, is among those who hold such an assumption. He maintains that,

“From the existing data, the mortality rate of the coronavirus comprises only 3-5 percent. Due to this reason, which one is dangerous? If there is someone say so just let me check (the mental health of) the person. This (description) is based on data. Don’t you want to be taught to be smart? Why is anything related to coronavirus exaggerated? Radio, TV, newspaper, magazine (all talk about this). That is nothing to do with the virus, gentlemen! There must be vested-interests, namely the trade warfare between China and the US. One proverb says, if there are two big elephants are fighting to each other, there is one deer dead in-between” (*Youtube.com,* 12 March 2020).

In addition to politically and economically laden, some educated persons also assumed the bioweapon behind the pandemic coronavirus. Even though not expressed openly in publics, such an assumption lingers in the minds of some persons, namely the multiplier effect of bioweapon between the US and China (*CNNIndonesia*, 12 March 2020). The assumption of bioweapon is based on the heated trade contest between those two super power countries. The US is assumed to be aware of the increasingly threatening power of China that endangers the long established domination of the US on the global market. As a way to undermine the increasing power of China, it is suspected that the US has sent a secret agent to bring that bioweapon to China. In regards to biowarfare, there are also some persons who assume that the Covid-19 is the leak Chinese bioweapon that proves to be disastrous later on (*Kominfo.go.id*, 30 January 2020). The leak is assumed to have something to do with the low incompetence in dealing with the bioweapon by the Chinese authority.

**Responses of Muslim Organizations**

Not only individually, the issue of pandemic plague of Covid-19 has also been responded by some Muslim organizations such Muhammadiyah, NU, MUI and others. In response to the spread of Covid-19, Muhammadiyah has issued an official declaration (*Maklumat*) consisting the following six points; (1) all activities involving massive attendants within Muhammadiyah units such as religious gatherings, seminars, meetings, and other social activities be postponed, or can be held in a limited and strict way or through technology media; (2) ritual activities such as congregational daily prayers and Jum’ah prayers can be done in the mosque with the following condition; (a). Those who are sick are strongly recommended to perform rituals at home; (b). In emergency, the Jum’ah prayers can be replaced with Dhuhur prayers at home and congregational prayers can be performed at home; (3). Educational activities within Muhammadiyah units and ‘Aisyiyah can be harmonized in line with the government policy either at central level or provincial/district level coordinated by the Council for Basic and Secondary Education (*Majlis Pendidikan Dasar dan Menengah*), and the Council for Higher Education Research and Development (*Majlis Pendidikan Tinggi Penelitian dan Pengembangan*); (4). Philanthropic charity and health in order to prepare the management of Covid-19 suited to the protocols of the Ministry of Health under the coordination of the Council for Supervisor of Public Health in tandem with councils, institutions, autonomous organizations, and other philanthropic bodies; (5). The Central Board of Muhammadiyah has founded the Muhammadiyah Covid-19 Command Center (MCCC); (6). All Muhammadiyah members are advised not to go to places where contagion of Covid-19 is possible (*Suara.com*, 16 March 2020).

The next step, on 24 March 2020 the Central Board Member of Muhammadiyah issued a public letter regarding the Guidance on Rituals in an emergency situation of Covid-19. Through that letter, it was conveyed some guidance of ritual amidst the pandemic plague in line with the legal opinions (*fatwa*) of *Majelis Tarjih dan Tajdid* of the Central Board of Muhammadiyah. That guidance includes fasting during Ramadhan, evening prayers (*tarawih*), and Idul Fitri, should the Covid-19 plague be pandemic during the month of Ramadhan and Idul Fitri. That legal opinion on the guidance of the rituals, according to a Central Board member of Muhammadiyah, has been through a series of intensive and serious scrutiny by religious experts in this modernist organization based on the sound sources in Islam such as the Qur’an and the Prophetic Hadith (*Kompas.com*, 30 March 2020). Such a guidance is intended as general direction for Muhammadiyah members towards a unified framework of ritual based on official attitude of the organization.

The following is the public letter issued by the Central Board of Muhamamdiyah regarding the guidance on rituals during the Covid-19 pandemic plague in Ramadhan and Idul Fitri: (1). Daily prayers are performed at home in order to avoid the spread of Covid-19; (2). Jum’ah prayers are replaced by Dhuhur prayers; (3). The replacement of one sentence in *adzan* (the calling for prayers), from *hayya ‘ala al-shalah* (let’s go to prayers) to be replaced with *shallu fi rihalikum* (let’s do praying in your vehicle) or *shallu fi buyutikum* (let’s do prayers at home); (4). Evening prayers (*tarawih*) at home; (5). Fasting dispensation for medical workers (for not doing fasting during the day) with the responsibility to replace in other days in accordance with Shari’ah guidance, and; (6). Idul Fitri prayer to be cancelled if the plague persists (*Kompas.com*, 30 March 2020).

In response to the plague, NU has also officially issued a letter of instruction to all board members of NU all over the country consisting of the recommendation to comply with all medical protocols released by authoritative institutions such WHO, Ministry of Health, the government-sponsored special taskforce (*Satuan Gugus Tugas*) Covid-19, and the like (*NUonline*, 25 March 2020). In more details, the instruction consists of the following six instructions: (1) to comply with instruction, recommendation, and protocols released by the government in response to the pandemic Covid-19, including stay-at-home and social distancing policy; (2) not to undertake all types of activities involving massive attendants and crowd; (3) close down temporarily the routine activities such as religious gatherings, *Tahlilan* (reciting *Tahlil* together), *Diba’an* (reciting *diba’* together), *Lailatul Ijtima’* (night of gathering), and other gatherings and postpone the organizational programs such as conferences, inaugurations, and workshops; (4) ritual activities such as congregational prayers (*Jama’ah*), *Tahlilan*, and *Dibaan* can be held at home; (5) to all *pesantrens* under *Rabithah al-Alam al-Islami* (RMI) are instructed to close-down all *pesantren* involving a large number of *santri* (students) activities; (6) To multiply prayers and rituals as instructed by the Central Board of NU (PBNU) in advance and seek refuge from Allah SWT with the hope that the pandemic Covid-19 can be dealt with soon (*NUonline*, 25 March 2020).

**The Clash of Paradigms: Religion or Science?**

In response to the issue of pandemic plague Covid-19, the public sphere has been suddenly overloaded by public debates. All news and narratives related to coronavirus uploaded into the social media has been so confusing. Based on the data presented earlier, there have been overwhelming assumptions and perspectives in response to the Covid-19 pandemic plague. The democratic rooms have provided with a huge variety of public perspectives in which each challenges another which results in lively and healthy public discourses on the matter. Among those perspectives espoused, religious perspective in looking at the pandemic plague takes the most lion-share of the public debate, regardless of other perspectives such as health, socio-politics, culture, and economy. What is more interesting is the nature of diverse and conflicting perspectives used in religious perspective, reflecting also the diversity of Muslims’ religious belief and knowledge. Therefore, it can be said that the public sphere serves as the stage for ideas to contest. The final decision lies at the government to take in terms of public policy to deal with the plague.

The public disputes over the Covid-19 pandemic plague represents the battle of arguments as well as paradigms between the science-based pole and religion-based one, despite there is an overlapping consensus between the two. The religion-based pole, represented by the religionists, on the one side, employs deductive reasoning as the basis of arguments in justifying their conception on the Covid-19 and how to deal with it (Hilmy, 2013, pp. 97-126). What is meant by deductive reasoning in this context is employing normative textual arguments derived from the sacred texts in Islam—Qur’anic verses and Prophetic Hadith—to justify their arguments about the Covid-19 plague (Greenberg, 2001; Dicker, 2004). What they see and observe in daily life in terms of socio-religious affairs is looked for its justification from both sacred texts. Due to huge variation of perspective among Muslims, there arise diverse understanding about the plague. As a result, the epistemological collision among them is simply unavoidable, especially when their understanding of the pandemic plague contradict the established medical protocols of the plague prevention.

On the other side, the inductive reasoning is represented by the authority of scientists in science and knowledge production. The inductive paradigm uses laboratory testing, evidence-based observation as well as empirical experiment as its major tool and mechanism in knowledge and science production (Hilmy, 2013, pp. 107-110). It means that what the medical and health authority has carried out so far in identifying the Covid-19 pandemic plague and its efforts in preventing and curing the virus is purely based on the inductive processes, and not the deductive ones. Under such a construction of reasoning, the pattern of scientific development follows bottom-up mechanism, and not the opposite: top-down. Even though in many cases both paradigms share a meeting point, each represents its own epistemology. By and large, both paradigms are basically irreconcilable to one another.

In addition to the characteristics mentioned above, the inductive truth can be replicated in different sites and cases. On the contrary, deductive truth does not need replication in different places and cases (Jones, 2017). As a result, deductive truth is not always relevant to specific cases at empirical level. It is often found out that deductive truth is forced to be applied in analyzing a particular unsuited case which results in an anachronistic situation (Nagel and Wood, 2005, pp. 403-424). For example, UAS’s statement that the pandemic plague represents the heavenly troops to destroy God’s enemies, namely the government of China, as well as to protect the Uyghur Muslims, is problematic according to scientific standard. UAS’s statement cannot explain why the same virus has inflicted not only China, but also spread all over the world including some other Muslim majority countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Malaysia, Indonesia and so on. Inductively speaking, therefore, all statements regarding the pandemic plague as heavenly punishment contradicts the empirical fact; it does not only strike non-Muslim majority countries, but also the Muslim majority ones.

How about other statements in response to the pandemic plague? Among the crowd of Jama’ah Tabligh, for instance, it was provocatively stated that they are not afraid of the coronavirus but Allah. It was also obvious that most of them neglected the medical protocols on the Covid-19 prevention such as social distancing. As can be seen from *youtube* channel, television, or pictures in news media, they stayed in the crowd that neglects social distancing. What happen to them after they had religious gathering in Malaysia and Jakarta? The outbreak of the virus in Malaysia starts from the Tabligh cluster (*Kompas.com*, 19 March 2020). After they had religious gathering in Malaysia, they plan to have a similar gathering in Gowa South Sulawesi with more than 8,000 members coming from South Asian countries. On the way to Gowa, three members of the Tabligh were infected by the virus when they had a stop-over in the mosque Kebon Jeruk Jakarta. As a result, around 3,00 members of Jama’ah Tabligh have been isolated in the mosque since 26 March 2020. Fortunately, the specific task-force of pandemic Covid-19 have moved them into a temporary shelter in an ex-athlete housing in Kemayoran, Jakarta (*Indopolitika.com*, 28 March 2020).

The assumption that the coronavirus represents the leak of Chinese bioweapon has also been refuted by the Chinese authority (Ling, 2020). The issue of pandemic coronavirus as a part of bioweapon warfare between China and the US is also unreliable after the massive outbreak of the same virus in the latter. As per 6 April 2020, the virus has infected 309,254 people in the US, with 9,620 deceased (*Covidvisualizer*.com, 6 April 2020). Among the plague-infected countries, the US has the highest number in victims compared to other Western countries such as Italy with 91,246 active and 15,887 deceased as the second largest number of victims, and Spain with 80,925 active with 12,641 deceased as the third biggest in number (*Covidvisualizer*.com, 6 April 2020). Referring to the data above, arguing that the pandemic coronavirus represents the bioweapon warfare between China and the US is therefore academically unfounded.

In the context of the history of ideas, the inappropriateness of ideas explicitly written in a text to the empirical and historical is called anachronism (Skinner, 1969, p. 3-53). The appropriateness can take various forms; inappropriateness in meaning, inappropriateness in historical background or socio-cultural context, and so on. For example, labelling the pandemic plague as heavenly punishment necessitates a contextual relevance between that assumption and objective condition of the plague; whether or not the empirical reality represents what the sacred texts have stated. Therefore, associating the pandemic plague as heavenly punishment with the objective reality is academically baseless due mainly to the fact that the plague swept out not only non-Muslim countries such as China but also such Muslim majority ones as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the like.

On the contrary, deriving deductively the hidden messages from the sacred texts is not a simple endeavor. It is not a matter of word choice or proper language that is at stake to justify empirical facts with the spirit of the sacred texts. It has something to do, instead, with how to keep the significance of meaning as well as its relevance of the sacred texts with scientific principles. The relevance of eternal messages of religion with the empirical facts can be called as the principle of conformity or diachronism (Schellenberg, 2013, p. 75). Religious diachronism, according to Schellenberg (2013, p. 76), enables religious interpretation to cover visionary and futuristic religious worldview as well as historical one. In the context of adapting to the evolutionary development of science, religion should have not taken judgmental position to contemporary theories of science. On the other hand, it requires sensibility to foresee the changing direction the future and the past, otherwise religion can lose the spirit of the age.

**Towards the Decline of Religious Authority in Public Sphere?**

The question would be, what is the future of religious authority in responding the pandemic plague at large scale such as Covid-19? Is it possible that Muslim community remains to give trust on religionists in understanding the pandemic plague? Or on the contrary: will the religionists lose their religious authority in response to the plague and their position will be replaced by the scientists? Those questions would remain to arise as a corollary of the pandemic plague. Those same questions have also arisen right after the 2004 tsunami hit Aceh that claimed thousands of lives. Under the same pattern of religious reasoning (deductive), the same narratives repeat: the disaster represents heavenly punishment for the sins that humans have carried out. Even though those narratives are not the only one extensively held in the society, it is not an easy task of providing an all-encompassing narrative that covers both deductive and inductive paradigms of religious reasoning.

It is noteworthy, nonetheless, to recognize that Muslims are now undergoing a good process of mobilization in education. Indonesian Muslim community does not consist only of single monolithic homogenous social enclave. Muslims have diversified in terms of their socio-political, economic, and cultural mobilization that result in diversification of religious perspectives in perceiving the pandemic plague. Such a diversification can easily be found in the so-called “traditionalist” Muslims where fatalistic response to the plague is no longer dominant compared to several decades ago where almost all of them are homogenous in their religious mode of thinking (Ricklefs, 2007). Therefore, the same cultural background does not guarantee homogenous viewpoints among one social cluster in responding the pandemic plague.

The pandemic phenomenon is purely the phenomenon of health which is able to be approached by rational inductive tools. The intervention of deductive approaches in understanding and analyzing the pandemic plague can lead to religious anachronism. Therefore, the wise choice for religionists is to keep themselves “distant” and let the professionals deal with it. The situation does not make any better when Muslims deploy deductive arguments to understand the plague that can contradict the health protocols of Covid-19 prevention. There are indeed a lot of choices of narratives both in the Qur’an and Hadith in approaching the pandemic plague. Forcing those narratives to justify the plague, however, can be counterproductive to the public policy in dealing with the Covid-19 prevention. It means that the religionists can relinquish the job of plague prevention to those who have authoritative expertise such as WHO, the government, scientists, and paramedics.

In the long term, responding the pandemic plague appropriately necessitates Muslims to “inductivize” the deductive narratives on the plague, disease as well as disaster. Referring to Al-Jabiri’s trilogy of Arab reasoning, there are three reasonings used by the Arabs throughout their history in the formation of their thinking system: *bayani*, *burhani*, and ‘*irfani* (al-Jabiri, 1993). The first reasoning, *bayani*, consists of black-and-white legal system of thinking that tends to be axiomatic. Such a thinking system of logics is employed in legal reasoning matters (Shari’ah). The second reasoning, *burhani*, consists of rational inductive mode of thinking used in the development of scientific investigation. Such a reasoning is employed in the development of science and technology that tends to be closely linked to the use of laboratory and experiment methods. That inductive mode of thinking is in line with the scientific spirit of the Enlightenment (*Aufklarung*). The third type of reasoning is ‘*irfani*, that is the spiritual logics that deals with spiritual, psychological and metaphysical condition of human being.

From those three modes of reasoning, it is only *bayani* and ‘*irfani* modes of reasoning than can be made inductive. The *bayani* mode of reasoning, however, tends to be deductive in nature. While the *bayani* mode of reasoning is fixed and axiomatic, the other two modes of thinking, *burhani* and ‘*irfani*, are highly likely to be employed as a major mechanism in developing modern science and technology since they use inductive mode of reasoning. Both modes of reasoning can be made down-to-earth in a series of academic processes such as laboratory tests and experimentation. For example, as to whether or not a pandemic plague is contagious needs to be tested in laboratory, and it is not enough by referring only to verses of Qur’an or Prophetic Hadith (Stearns, 2011, pp. 108-139). In other words, the key to make deductive modes of reasoning into inductive ones is by laboratory tests, experiments and the like.

The question remains, however, how if the result of laboratory tests contradicts the verses of the Qur’an or Prophetic Hadith? Which one should Muslims refer to? The result of laboratory tests—using inductive mode of reasoning—or the Qur’an and Hadith—using deductive mode of thinking? To that question, Muslims are not to be trapped in judgmental attitude to the validity question of the verses of the Qur’an and Hadith. The judgmental attitude, however, can undermine the *ummah’s* trust to both of them. In the perspective of historical background, each verse of the Qur’an and a Hadith of course has its own contextual explanation (*asbab al-nuzul* for the Qur’an and *asbab al-wurud* for Hadith). It may be safer to place scientific narratives in different position to the Qur’an and Hadith. Let them speak respectively with their own language and worldview, in order to respect one another as well as not to intervene to each other. In this context, it must be admitted that both the Qur’an and Hadith have their own secrets and contexts. Let Muslim scholars refer to both sources in an appropriate manner according to their respective historical contexts.

**Conclusion**

From the description above, it can be summed up that how Muslims respond the pandemic plague is not something new in the history of Islam. Muslim community has undergone several waves of pandemic plague since its formative period. During the period of Umar ibn Khattab, the first pandemic plague called ‘Amwas has inflicted Muslim community in Syria which invited the public debate among Muslims. That plague has resulted in the dividedness of Muslim community into two poles: whereas in the first pole were those who aspired to avoid the plague-infected land, the other one were those who aspired the vice-versa. The same pattern in approaching and responding the plague tends to repeat throughout the history of Islam in which Muslims are generally divided into two poles: those who use rational and inductive reasoning on the one hand and those who use textual deductive reasoning, on the other.

What underlines the Muslims’ response toward the plague seems to be the battle of authorities between the inductive scientific reasoning as represented by authoritative institutions on the one hand and the deductive textual reasoning as represented by some religionists such as preachers and clerics. In the long run, religionists seem necessary to take inductive scientific reason into account on the way they lead Muslims in understanding the pandemic plague in order for religion to comply with science. Despite the resistant attitude towards the plague, the government in the end leads the policy in preventing the spread of the plague by adopting standardized medical protocols such as social or physical distancing, stay-at-home policy, and the like. At this point, neither individuals nor institutions show their resistance towards the government policy in dealing with the plague.

**Bibliography**

Al-Asqalani, Ibn Hajar. (1993). *Badhl al-Ma’un fi Fadhl al-Ta’un*. Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Athariya.

Al-Jabiri, Muhammad Abid Abid. (1993). *Bunyah al-‘Aql al-‘Arabi*. Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-‘Arabi.

Al-Suyuthi, Jalal al-Din. (1997). *Ma Rawahu al-Wa’un fi Akhbar al-Ta’un*. Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyah.

Byrne, Joseph P. (2012). *Encyclopedia of the Black Death*. Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2012.

Byrne, Joseph Patrick. (2004) *The Black Death*. Westport. Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press.

Cantor, Norman F. (2001) *In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World It Made*. New York & London: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.

Conrad, L. (2000). “A Ninth-Century Muslim Scholar’s Discussion of Contagion”, in L. Conrad D. Wujastyk (eds.). *Contagion: Perspectives from Pre-Modern Societies*. Burlington: Ashgate.

*Covidvisualizer*.*com*. Retrieved on 6 April 2020.

Dicker, Georges. (2004). *Kant’s Theory of Knowledge: An Analytical Introduction*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.

Dols, Michael Walters (1977). *The Black Death in the Middle East*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Fathurrahman, Oman. (2020). “Sejarah Wabah Pandemi dan Narasi Agama-agama”. *alif.id*. Retrieved on 21 March 2020.

Greenberg, Robert. (2001). *Kant’s Theory of A Priori Knowledge*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Hilmy, Masdar. (2013). Induktivisme sebagai Basis Pengembangan Ilmu Pengetahuan dalam Islam. *Ulumuna*, 17 (1), 97-126. <https://doi.org/10.20414/ujis.v17i1.173>.

Jahroni, Jajang. (2020). “Covid-19 dan Agama yang Pro-Sains”. *uinjkt.ac.id*. Retrieved on 25 March 2020.

Jones, Adam Leroy. (2017). *Logic: Inductive and Deductive; An Introduction to Scientific* *Method*. London: Fb&c Limited.

Kathir, Ibnu. (1985). *Al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah*, Vol. 7. Beirut: Dar Al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah.

Kementerian Komunikasi dan Informatika Republik Indonesia. (2020). “[DISINFORMASI] Virus Corona Merupakan Senjata Biologis yang Bocor dari Laboratorium Wuhan”. *Kominfo.go.id*, Retrieved on 30 January 2020.

Ling, Justin. (2020). “Report: The Wuhan Virus Is Not a Lab-Made Bioweapon”. *Foriegnpolicy.com*. Retrieved on 29 January 2020.

Meri, Josef W. (ed.), (2006). *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1. New York & London: Routledge.

Nagel, Alexander., and Wood, Christopher S. (2005). Interventions: Toward a New Model of Renaissance Anachronism. *Art Bulletin*, LXXXVII (3), 403-424. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.2005.10786249>.

Naphy, William G., and Spicer, Andrew. (2001). *The Black Death: a History of Plagues, 1345-1730*. Charleston: Tempus.

Niam, Achmad Mukafi. (2020). “Antara Corona, Ulama, dan Sains”. *nu.or.id*. Retrieved on 15 March, 2020.

Nuha, Ulin. (2020). “Sejarah Ummat Islam: Wabah Semakin Parah Setelah Berkumpul untuk Doa Bersama”. *Alif.id*. 25 Maret 2020.

Perho, I. (1995). *The Prohpet’s Medicine: A Creation of the Muslim Traditionalist Scholars*. Helsinki: The Finnish Oriental Sosiety.

Person, Stephen. (2011). *Bubonic Plague: The Black Death!*. New York: Bearport Publishing.

Ricklefs, MC. (2007). *Polarising Javanese Society: Islamic and other visions* (c. 1830-1930). Singapore: NUS Press.

Schellenberg, J.L. (2013). *Evolutionary Religion*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.

Scott, Susan., and Duncan, Christopher. (2004). *Return of the Black Death: The World’s Greatest Serial Killer*. West Sussex: Wiley.

Skinner, Quentin. (1969). Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas. *History and Theory*, 8 (1), 3-53. https://doi.org/10.2307/2504188.

Stearns, Justin K. (2011). *Infectious Ideas: Contagion in Premodern Islamic and Christian thought in the Western Mediterranean*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.

Stearns, Justin. (2009). New Directions in the Study of Religious Responses to the Black Death. *History Compass*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2009.00634.x>.

Stearns, Justin. (2008). “Enduring the Plague: Ethical Behavior in the Fatwas of a Fourteenth-Century Mufti and Theologian”, in Jonathan E. Brockopp and Thomas Eich (eds.), *Muslim Medical Ethics: from Theory to Practice*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

Varlik, Nükhet. (2015). *Plague and Empire in the Early Modern Mediterranean World: The Ottoman Experiences, 1347-1600*. New York & Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zaki, Auda Dhiyauddin. (2020). “China, Virus Corona dan Pasukan Gajah!”. *Hidayatullah.com*. Retrieved on 26 January 2020.

**News Report**

“3 Suspect Corona Ditemukan Saat Tabligh Akbar, Ratusan Jemaah Lainnya Diisolasi,” *Indopolitika.com*, Retrieved on 28 March 2020.

“Anak Buah Habib Rizieq Sebut Virus Corona Azab Kezaliman China Terhadap Islam Uighur,” *Pojoksatu*, Retrieved on 25 January 2020.

“Heboh Virus Corona Karena Azab,” *Terbit*, Retrieved on 13 March 2020.

“Ini Fatwa Muhammadiyah jika Wabah Virus Corona Belum Reda Saat Ramadhan dan Idul Fitri,” *Kompas.com*, Retrieved on 30 March 2020.

“Instruksi PBNU terkait Pencegahan Corona,” *NUonline*, Retrieved on 25 March 2020.

“Kajian Hikmah Agoes Ali Mashuri 11 Maret 2029 Bersama Sarung BHS,” *Youtube.com,* Retrieved on 12 March 2020.

“Maklumat Muhammadiyah Terkait Corona, Atur Salat dan Pengajian Saat Wabah,” *Suara.com*, Retrieved on 16 March 2020.

“Media Asing Sorot Jemaah Tabligh Indonesia: Kami Lebih Takut pada Tuhan,” *Kompas.com*, Retrieved on 19 March 2020.

“Pakar: Corona Harus Ditakuti, Bisa Jadi Senjata Biologi,” *CNNIndonesia*, Retrieved on 12 March 2020.

“UAS: Muslim Uyghur Dilindungi Tentara Allah SWT dari Virus, Namanya Tentara Corona”, *Indopolitika.com*, Retrieved on 16 February 2020.

“Virus Corona Musibah, Bukan Azab,” *Republika*, Retrieved on 13 March 2020.

“Wabah Covid-19 dalam Pandangan Kiyai Said Aqil Siroj,” *Kalam.sindonews.com*, Retrieved on 30 March 2020.