

PERSPECTIVE

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Comparing Tablighi Jamaat and Muhammadiyah Responses to COVID-19

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- While scientists and medical professionals have tried to save the lives of those infected by COVID-19, and have worked hard to find a vaccine and cure, religion has often been seen as impeding the community's efforts to deal with the pandemic.
- Even worse, religious people have been accused of aggravating the contagion by organizing big gatherings and circulating conspiracy theories or fatalistic arguments regarding the pandemic. For example, Tablighi Jamaat was described in some media as the “largest viral vector of the COVID-19” or a “Super-Spreader”.
- A kinder perception of religion's role during the pandemic acknowledged its positive impact in providing *doa* (prayer) and *fatwa* (edict) which supported efforts to limit the contagion. Religious organizations urged their followers to avoid congregations and to observe religious rituals at home.
- COVID-19 has thus triggered diverse reactions from the Islamic community in Indonesia, ranging from passive and fatalistic responses to positive ones. The Muhammadiyah case provides a positive contrast to the less helpful stance of Tablighi Jamaat. Portraying the fight against the pandemic as *Jihad Kemanusiaan* (Jihad for Humanity), Muhammadiyah not only issued guidance in line with social distancing protocols, but also mobilised its assets to help offset the state's limited resources. For instance, it rallied volunteers and configured 77 of its medical facilities to handle COVID-19 cases.

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INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, *doa* (prayer) and *fatwa* (non-binding legal opinion) are two words commonly used to describe the contribution of religion during the COVID-19 pandemic. The perception of this limited role of religion has become the main feature on academic articles and media commentaries (both conventional and social media).¹ Worse than that, religion has often been seen as a problem in dealing with COVID-19. While scientists and medical professionals have tried to save those infected with the coronavirus and worked hard to find a vaccine for the disease, religious people have been accused of spreading the virus by organizing big gatherings and distributing fatalistic arguments against the pandemic, or worsening the situation by impeding the efforts of government in mitigating COVID-19.

The emergence of COVID-19 clusters in Indonesia linked to religious gatherings, such as the Protestant Churches of Western Indonesia (GPIB) in Lembang and Kebon Jeruk Jami Mosque in West Jakarta, contributed to the spread of religiophobia or at least the growth of perception that religion is the anti-thesis of science and that religious groups are anti-science communities.² When doctors and nurses put their own lives at risk in the fight against COVID-19, some religious people arrogantly said that they were immune from viruses because they were close to God.³ When the government struggled to flatten the COVID-19 transmission curve by asking people to exercise social distancing, some religious leaders saw the pandemic as divine retribution for sins. The solution for this, according to them, was to ask forgiveness from God and to go closer to God by visiting houses of worship more frequently. They ignored government regulations on physical distancing, believing that since they had prayed to God, God would protect them.

The big gatherings of the Tablighi Jamaat in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), Gowa (Indonesia), and Delhi (India) contributed towards antipathy against religion and even stigmatized this especial group as a “super-spreader”. This virus has been named by some people in India as “Tablighi virus”.⁴ Some news and commentaries even called them “the largest viral vector of the COVID-19”.⁵

Why did religion suffer such a negative image during this pandemic time? Has religion played only a very limited positive role, i.e. *doa* and *fatwa*, during this outbreak? This article intends to discuss the diverse responses of religious communities to COVID-19 by looking at two polar groups, the Tablighi Jamaat and the Muhammadiyah. It is hoped that a more balanced perspective on religion can be achieved and religiophobia avoided.

TABLIGHI JAMAAT: COVID-19 VECTORS?

Tablighi Jamaat is one of many Sunni communities, the dominant group in Islam. Although their “dress code” is similar to Salafi groups, such as wearing white robes & turbans, they have theological differences, particularly in the way of disseminating religion and in the concept of *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’* (loyalty and disavowal). They are also not part of radical or terrorist groups and instead is a nonviolent religious group.⁶ Besides being known for their dress code (bearded, wearing trousers above ankles, and covering head), this group is known for their travelling and door-to-door missionary activities and their “occupation” of mosques, i.e. sleeping, cooking, washing, and learning religion in mosques.

This organization was established in 1926 by Muhammad Ilyas al-Kandhlawi (1885-1944) in the Mewat region of India. Today, Tablighi Jamaat has more than 20 million members, spread across more than 150 countries. This organization is commonly not perceived as a threat because it has maintained an apolitical stance and an indifference to political issues. This is one of the reasons why it has been accepted in many countries and has been able to attract many followers, even among politicians.⁷ Although a missionary group, the Tablighi does not try to convert non-Muslims to Islam. Its focus is instead about the transformation of individual Muslims into becoming more pious and devoted. This is illustrated in their simple slogan: is “Oh, you Muslims, be good Muslims”.

The international headquarters of Tablighi Jamaat is in the Nizamuddin West district of South Delhi, India and is called Nizamuddin Markaz. Headquarters (*markaz*) have also been established in many countries and, in Indonesia, this is located at Kebon Jeruk Grand Mosque in West Jakarta.

One of the main features of the Tablighi is its teaching on *Tafrigh-i-Waqt* (sparing of time) or withdrawal from the world for religious missionary works. Called *Khuruj* (proselytizing tour), this involves spending 40 days in a year away from home for *da'wa* (missionary activities). The purpose of this teaching, as stated by Muhammad Ilyas, is: “to encourage people to come out of a worldly and static environment in order to enter a new, purer and dynamic one where there is much to foster the growth of religious consciousness. Besides, travel and emigration involve hardship, sacrifice and self-abnegation for the sake of God’s cause, and thus entitle one to divine succor”.⁸ During these tours, members are generally dressed in simple, white, loose-clothing, carrying sleeping bags on their backs.



Tablighi Jamaat organizes annual meetings, named ‘*Ijtima*’, for spiritual enrichment in several countries. These have been usually attended by hundreds of thousands, and even millions, of participants from around the world. The *Ijtima* in Bangladesh, called Bishwa Ijtima, for instance, was attended by millions of people and became the second largest Islamic gathering after Hajj.

This year’s *Ijtima*, however, attracted public attention and controversies.

Three Tablighi's *Ijtima* were believed to be the largest-known centres of transmission for COVID-19. They are the *Ijtima* held in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) on 27 February to 1 March, the *Ijtima* in Delhi (India) which took place on 13-15 March, and the 18 March *Ijtima* in Gowa (Indonesia) which was cancelled at the last minute. These three big gatherings have been perceived as major coronavirus hotspots or viral vectors of the COVID-19, contributing to the spread of the disease in several countries. A significant proportion of the confirmed cases of COVID-19 in India, Malaysia, and other countries are believed to have been infected during those *Ijtima* or from people who attended the *Ijtima*. As reported by IPAC, 1,068 out of 14,265 cases in Indonesia by 11 May 2020 were from the Gowa cluster; by mid-march, two-thirds of 673 cases in Malaysia were linked to Kuala Lumpur's *Ijtima*; and by 18 April 2020, 29.8% of 14,378 confirmed cases in India were linked to the Delhi *Ijtima*.⁹

The Tablighi Jamaat initially dismissed the extent of the pandemic. This stance, commonly reiterated in conventional and social media, is based on the belief that "God is greater than Coronavirus. We are afraid of God, not the virus". When several governments implemented new social distancing regulations, members of the Tablighi Jamaat still shook hands and hugged each other. They said, '*None of Us Have a Fear of Corona*'.¹⁰ Tablighi's response to COVID-19 reflects two characteristics of this movement: first, their disdain for knowledge or their anti-science stance, and their focus on action or religious rituals. Second, the movement requires its followers to have personal relationships and close ties or interactions with each other, exhibited through practices of hugging, shaking hands, and eating and travelling together.

MUHAMMADIYAH AND "JIHAD FOR HUMANITY"

Muhammadiyah is the largest modernist Muslim movement in Southeast Asia. It was established in 1912 by Ahmad Dahlan in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Although its main goal is religious propagation and modernization, Muhammadiyah is known for the social services it renders, particularly in education, health care, and philanthropic activities. It has 173 colleges and universities, and thousands of schools, ranging from kindergartens to high schools. It also owns and manages hundreds of hospitals and orphanages.¹¹

Muhammadiyah's activities are different from those of other religious organizations and particularly in sharp contrast to those of the Tablighi Jamaat. Instead of dismissing the extent of COVID-19 by spreading fatalistic belief or putting the responsibility completely on the government, Muhammadiyah called its members to wage jihad against the coronavirus. The doctrine was branded as *Jihad Kemanusiaan* (Jihad for Humanity) believed to be based on *maqāṣid al-sharī'a* (goals or objectives of sharia), i.e. *hiḏ al-naḑs* (protection of life). Based on this doctrine, one of the purposes of the coming of Islam is to protect human beings. This organization quotes a verse from the Qur'an as the justification of its call for jihad, namely: 'Whoever saves the life of one person, it is as if he saved all of humanity' (al-Maidah 5:32).

In general, the response of Muhammadiyah to COVID-19 can be classified into two categories: Firstly, as a religious organization, Muhammadiyah provided the theological response in the form of *doa* and *fatwa*. Secondly, as a civil society organization, Muhammadiyah used most of its resources and money for the mitigating of the pandemic.

Muhammadiyah's theological declaration of the fight against COVID-19 as a jihad highlights the devotion of energies, money, and human resources to the "war for humanity". This is equivalent to a "state of exception" or a "state of emergency". Other activities have been cancelled or deactivated, including its congress which was initially scheduled to be held in Surakarta in June 2020.

During the pandemic, Muhammadiyah issued several *fatwas* and religious guidance on how its members can fulfil their religious obligations. Among them are *fatwas* on the observation of Friday prayer, Eid al-Fitr prayer, Tarawih prayer, and Fasting in the pandemic situation.¹² This organization also issued a fatwa on the handling and burying of corpses infected by COVID-19, and the holding of wedding ceremonies during the outbreak. Basically, these fatwas were issued based on the consideration that social distancing (*at-tabā'ud al-ijtimā'ī*) is the only measure through which the virus can be contained. Therefore, all religious or ritual observation had to be adjusted accordingly.

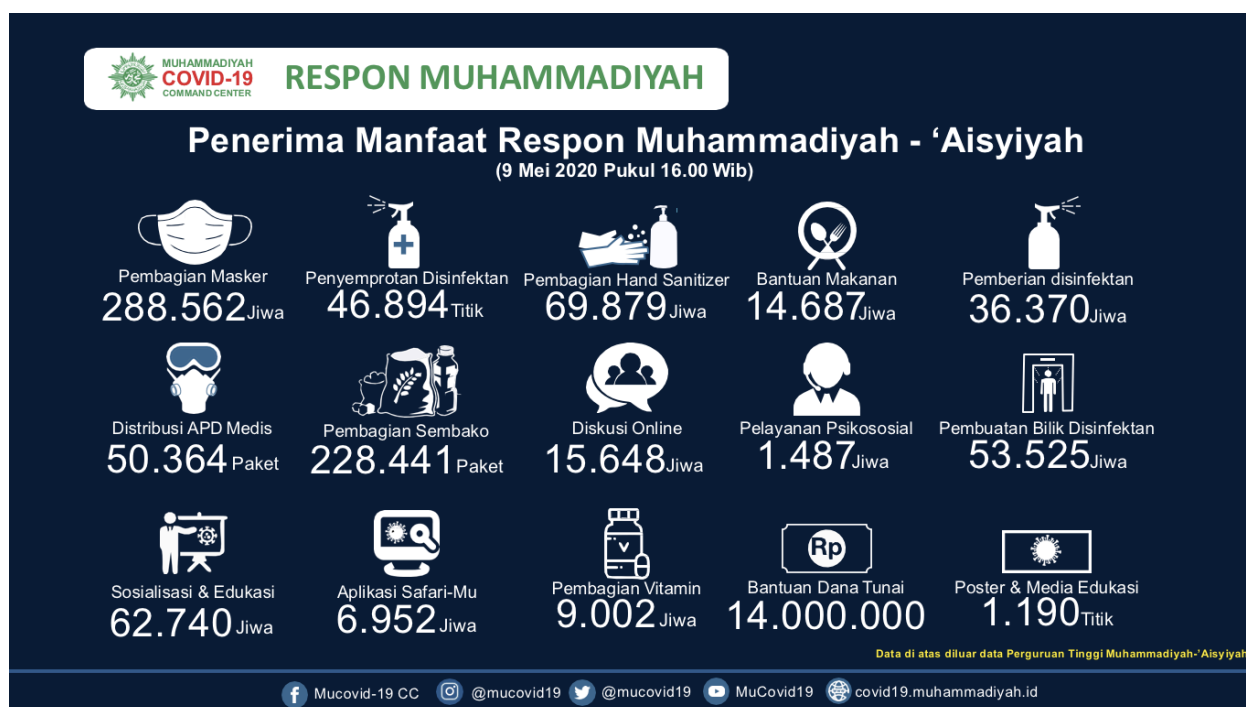
In contrast to preachers who believe that the pandemic is divine retribution for our sins, and that the solution lies in asking for forgiveness from God and increasing visits to places of worship, Muhammadiyah believed otherwise. The pandemic was generally seen to be a test for humanity – a test of patience and capability in problem solving and social empathy. As Muhammadiyah reflects in its circular, among the lessons learned from this pandemic is that we, as human beings, must keep our environment healthy, for it is the cosmic role of human beings to protect nature. The circular also called for an optimistic mindset in tackling the pandemic, through *ikhtiar* or hard work and not through waiting for a miracle. In short, Muhammadiyah's theological response to COVID-19, as stated by Mark Woodward, is "the interplay of divine determinism and human agency" or "a combination of stoic acceptance, faith and determined action".¹³

As stated earlier, *doa* and *fatwa* are not the only ways Muhammadiyah responded to COVID-19. In fact, Muhammadiyah's strength in social services was exhibited in full force during this pandemic. It spent large amounts of money, utilized its resources, and put all its attention towards mitigating the outbreak. A notable humanitarian action from this movement includes converting 77 of its hospitals into COVID-19 hospitals. It was done in response to the flood of COVID-19 patients no longer catered to at state hospitals. The number of COVID-19 cases had overwhelmed the government and state hospitals. Muhammadiyah answered the call from the government for help by offering 77 health institutions belonging to the organization, mostly in Java, to be used as COVID-19 hospitals.¹⁴ More than 4,000 COVID-19 patients were cared for in these hospitals.¹⁵



Muhammadiyah also produced Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) or hazmat suits, gloves, and masks and distributed them to across Indonesia. Other activities included spraying disinfectant in mosques, churches, temples, and other public buildings. Muhammadiyah also provided psychological and religious consultation for those who needed treatment and advice. For the needy, unemployed, and recently retrenched people, Muhammadiyah gave financial aid and staple foods. All these activities were coordinated by the Muhammadiyah COVID-19 Command Center (MCCC) which was established on 5 March 2020 and which now has 30 branches all over Indonesia.¹⁶ In total, Muhammadiyah has spent more than 130 billion Rupiah and involved more than 60,000 volunteers during the pandemic.¹⁷

Muhammadiyah, which declared and waged a “total war” against COVID-19, felt offended when the Indonesian government announced that people needed to start *berdamai* (making peace) with the coronavirus and that it planned to re-open all economic activities. In response, Muhammadiyah issued a statement on 28 May 2020, questioning the government decision to start a “new normal” life without the curve in Indonesia being properly flattened. For Muhammadiyah, the government’s decision compromised human life for an economic restart. If the government no longer prioritizes the “protection of life”, then all that Muhammadiyah, the government, and the Indonesian people had done in the last three months would have been in vain.¹⁸



CONCLUSION

There was a wide spectrum of religious responses to COVID-19. Interestingly, these responses do not correlate with previous categorizations or with the dichotomy between radical and moderate Muslims. Certain radical groups of Islam, like the Front of Islamic Defenders (FPI), complied with government regulations on social distancing and even sprayed disinfectant in places of worship and distributed staple foods to the needy.

Standing in sharp contradiction to this is Tablighi Jamaat. Previously known as a non-violent Muslim organization, it has nevertheless indicated its dismissal of government protocol on social distancing by organizing big gatherings. Labelled as “super-spreader” and “viral vectors of the COVID-19”, the Tablighi were perceived as impeding the efforts of government and medical officials to flatten the infection curve, by spreading fatalistic beliefs on death and pseudo-*takwa* asking people not to be afraid of the coronavirus. In many ways, Tablighi Jamaat is an example of the extreme negative response in the Muslim community to the outbreak.

Besides defying the usual dichotomy between radical and moderate, this outbreak also temporarily shattered the classification of Muslim groups into liberal or substantialist, and literalist. This classification does not hold any meaning when one judges it through their diversity of responses to the outbreak. The liberal groups, which were previously strong in discussions, seems less active in leading the *umma* and more reliant on government efforts.

The only categories that have been re-emphasized during the pandemic are the “inner-worldly” versus the “other-worldly” orientations of Muslim groups. Muslim groups with a more “other-worldly” orientation such as the Tablighi Jamaat have a less active response to or entertained a dismissive attitude towards COVID-19, whereas those with are more “inner-worldly”, like Muhammadiyah, seem to be more active and ready to help stop the outbreak. Some health facilities owned by this organization were converted into COVID-

19 hospitals and provided volunteers and substantial economic aid to the government. Followers are also more willing to be coordinated and be mobilized to follow health protocols such as not organizing religious gatherings, not visiting places of worship, and adjusting religious rituals. Hence, the contribution of Muhammadiyah in mitigating the pandemic cannot be only seen through its traditional religious role, i.e. in the limited form of *doa* and *fatwa*, but also in the form of health facilities and human and financial contributions. Indeed, the role of this organization has been to minimize the effects of the government weaknesses in handling the COVID-19.

The Tablighi Jamaat and Muhammadiyah provide two contrasting responses by religious communities to COVID-19. In how they handle the pandemic, it can be seen that religious communities are not monolithic. Religion cannot be seen simply as a problem that impedes the community's efforts to deal with the pandemic. The activities of Muhammadiyah during the pandemic challenge those who see religion as the antithesis of science.

In presenting these two cases, a more balanced perspective in understanding religion and the spectrum of religious responses appears, potentially circumventing religiophobia.

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¹¹ Ahmad Najib Burhani, “Muhammadiyah”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, THREE, Editors: K Fleet, G. Krämer, D. Matringe, J. Nawas, E Rowson, pp. 145-148. Leiden: Brill, 2019.

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¹³ Mark Woodward, “Religion in the time of COVID-19”, *Inside Indonesia*, 20 May 2020.

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¹⁶ MCCC, “Laporan Penanganan COVID-19 Muhammadiyah”, PowerPoint Presentation, 9 May 2020.

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¹⁸ Pernyataan Pers Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah No 002/PER/I.0/I/2020 tentang Pemberlakuan New Normal.

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