

The Dynamics of Islamic Law in Times of Crisis: Nigerian Muslims' Perceptions of Socially Distanced Ṣalāh During the Pandemic

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Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji dilema etika dalam pengambilan keputusan hukum Islam (ijtihad) selama pandemi COVID-19, dengan menyoroti pembatasan salat berjamaah demi menjaga kesehatan. Studi ini berfokus pada komunitas Muslim di Nigeria yang memilih menunda salat berjamaah demi melindungi jiwa, sembari tetap beribadah secara mandiri di rumah. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif melalui studi kepustakaan, analisis fatwa, dan data sosiologis, artikel ini menemukan bahwa prinsip perlindungan jiwa (*ḥifz al-nafs*) dalam *maqāṣid al-syarī'ah* menjadi dasar legitimasi keputusan keagamaan di masa krisis. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa etika ber hukum Islam bersifat adaptif dan kontekstual, serta memungkinkan pembacaan hukum yang selaras dengan prinsip kesehatan publik. Kontribusi ilmiah artikel ini terletak pada integrasi *maqāṣid al-syarī'ah* dengan prinsip kesehatan masyarakat serta penyajian perspektif sosiologis atas respons keagamaan. Kajian ini memperkaya wacana global terkait respons komunitas Muslim di luar kawasan Timur Tengah dan Asia Tenggara terhadap pandemi.

Kata Kunci: *Etika hukum Islam, maqāṣid al-syarī'ah, kesehatan publik, COVID-19, perspektif sosiologis.*

Abstract

This article examines the ethical dilemmas faced by Muslim communities in making Islamic legal (*ijtihād*) decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly regarding the suspension of congregational prayers to protect physical health. Focusing on the Muslim community in Nigeria, the study highlights how believers opted to postpone communal worship in mosques to preserve life while continuing individual prayers at home. Using a qualitative approach through literature review, fatwā analysis, and sociological data, the article demonstrates that the protection of life (*ḥifz al-nafs*)—a core objective in *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*—served as the religious justification for prioritizing public health. The findings reveal that Islamic legal ethics are adaptive and contextual, allowing jurisprudential flexibility in times of crisis. The article's scholarly contribution lies in integrating *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* and Islamic legal ethics with public health principles while offering a sociological

perspective on religious behavior during emergencies. It also enriches global discourse on faith-based responses to the pandemic beyond the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

Keywords: *Islamic legal ethics, maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah, public health, COVID-19, sociological perspective.*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began spreading globally in late 2019, has not only affected the health and economic sectors but also posted significant challenges to religious practices, particularly in Islam. One of the most impacted rituals was *ṣalāh al-jamā‘ah* (congregational prayer), which traditionally emphasizes physical closeness as a symbol of spiritual and social unity. Implementing health protocols such as physical distancing disrupted this arrangement, triggering intense theological debates. In various Muslim communities, including those in Nigeria, a critical question emerged regarding the validity of *ṣalāh* performed with physical distance between worshippers. Some viewed this practice as a legitimate form of contextual *ijtihād* within the framework of *maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah*. In contrast, others rejected it, arguing that it deviated from the Prophet's tradition (*sunnah*) and amounted to *bid‘ah* (innovation).

Several international studies have examined how religious groups responded to the pandemic, including within the Nigerian context. Ibuot, Uchendu, and Kertyo (2024) revealed that Christian and Muslim communities in Nigeria relied on religion as a source of meaning during the crisis. However, tensions frequently arose between ritual practice and public policy. Chukwuma (2021) found that churches in Nigeria adapted their worship by implementing social distancing and suspending traditional liturgies. Although the focus was on Christian institutions, the findings offer a relevant comparison to how mosques and Muslim communities adjusted. Sambo (2021) highlighted how Islamic scholars in northeastern Nigeria played a vital role in disseminating public health protocols through religious *fatwā*, illustrating the significance of local religious authority in mediating between crisis management and religious law. An epidemiological survey in Nigeria (PMC, 2020) reported that 45.3% of respondents believed prayer was the primary tool for preventing COVID-19. However, many did not strictly follow social distancing measures—indicating a gap between religious belief and compliance with medical guidelines. In addition, the Pew Research Center (2020) noted that globally, Muslims were generally receptive to authoritative *fatwā* during the pandemic. However, the degree of compliance varied depending on trust in governmental and religious institutions.

The central research problem arises from the tension between two pressing concerns: the need to protect public health by following WHO protocols, and the religious imperative to observe Islamic law in its ideal form. Within the Nigerian Muslim context, responses to physically distanced ṣalāh revealed a diversity of theological, social, and political perspectives. This indicates that in times of crisis, religious observance is shaped not only by scriptural sources but also by trust in state institutions, the influence of religious authorities, and the doctrinal orientation of different Islamic schools of thought.

This study aims to explore in depth how Nigerian Muslim communities responded to physically distanced ṣalāh during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also seeks to identify the theological, ideological, and sociopolitical foundations underlying the acceptance and rejection of this practice at the community level. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on Muslim communities in Nigeria, which are often excluded from dominant global fiqh discourses. It offers new insights into how non-Arab Muslim populations navigate the flexibility of Islamic legal thought (fiqh) under emergency conditions. It underscores the importance of contextual interpretation in preserving the relevance of *sharī'ah* in a global crisis.

Research Method

Given the nature of the topic, which involves religious behavior over time and in response to crisis, a qualitative historical approach was deemed most appropriate. This study employs a qualitative historical research design to examine how Nigerian Muslims negotiated the practice of congregational prayer with physical distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The historical approach is appropriate for tracing temporal developments in juristic rulings, institutional responses, and community behaviors under extraordinary public health conditions.

Primary sources include fatāwā issued by Islamic authorities such as the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, official mosque communications, and contemporary news coverage documenting the closure and reopening of mosques, ritual modifications, and community reactions throughout 2020–2021. Secondary sources encompass classical and contemporary Islamic jurisprudence texts (particularly on rukhsah and dar' al-mafāsīd) and peer-reviewed literature on Islam and public health.

Data collection involved systematic searches of digital archives and institutional repositories using relevant keywords (e.g., “ṣalāh,” “COVID-19,” “social distancing”), as well as purposive sampling of key documents. Where feasible, semi-structured interviews with imams, Islamic jurists, and active congregants were conducted to capture firsthand perspectives. All interviews followed ethical guidelines and were conducted with informed consent.

Sampling and Respondent Selection: To ensure geographical and denominational diversity, purposive sampling was employed to select respondents from Nigeria's six geopolitical zones: North Central, Northeast, Northwest, South South, Southeast, and Southwest. Participants were chosen within each zone—including imams, Islamic jurists, and regular congregants—based on their active engagement in mosque leadership or public religious discourse during the pandemic. This approach enabled the study to capture a broad spectrum of theological orientations and communal responses, particularly across urban and semi-urban contexts.

The analysis adopted a thematic content analysis model. Data were open coded to identify key ideas such as "necessity," "religious obligation," and "public health compliance." These codes were then categorized into broader analytical themes—legal reasoning, communal adaptation, and ideological orientation (conservative vs. reformist)—and further refined through selective coding to produce a cohesive narrative.

The study applied triangulation across textual, media, and interview sources to ensure methodological rigor. Credibility was supported through member checks and peer debriefing, while contextual detail enhanced transferability to other Muslim-majority contexts. Ethical integrity was upheld via IRB approval and anonymizing sensitive data and securing data storage.

While the study is contextually focused on Nigeria, its findings offer relevant insights for comparative Islamic legal and sociological studies on ritual adaptability during public health emergencies.

Research Finding

Religious Worship and Devotion in the Wake of COVID-19: Navigating Public Health and Spiritual Commitment

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic posed a significant challenge not only to global public health systems but also to believers' spiritual and religious lives worldwide. In

Islamic theology, as in many other religious traditions, acts of worship such as congregational prayer, mosque attendance, and communal gatherings represent not merely rituals but a direct form of devotion and connection with God. However, the health protocols necessitated by the pandemic required a critical re-evaluation of how such devotion could be safely expressed.

In Nigeria, the government confirmed its first case of COVID-19 on February 27, 2020, prompting a series of public health interventions, including lockdowns, movement restrictions, and the closure of religious centers. These measures, while essential for public safety, directly impacted religious observances. Mosques, churches, and madrasahs were temporarily closed, and large-scale gatherings like Friday prayers, Sunday services, and Ramadan congregations were either canceled or significantly restricted.

From an Islamic perspective, this situation presented a theological tension: how can believers uphold their duty to worship Allah collectively while also adhering to the Qur'anic imperative to preserve life (*ḥifẓ al-nafs*), one of the core objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*)? The solution lay in a balanced application of Islamic jurisprudence and public health considerations. For instance, Islam permits suspending communal acts of worship during times of danger. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ advised:

"If you hear of a plague in a land, do not enter it; and if it occurs in a land while you are in it, do not leave it." (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 5730). This hadith forms the basis for quarantine and movement restrictions during pandemics. Additionally, the Prophet ﷺ emphasized that protecting others from harm is an ethical obligation: "There should be neither harm nor reciprocating harm." (*Ibn Mājah*, no. 2340). Considering such teachings, religious authorities in Nigeria and globally supported temporary suspensions of in-person worship, promoting alternative forms of devotion such as individual prayer at home (*ṣalāh fī baytihi*), online sermons, and remote religious education.

Statistical data from Nigeria between August 2020 and December 2021 showed significant spikes in COVID-19 cases, especially during increased movement and gathering periods. For example, between December 2020 and March 2021, over 76,000 new cases were recorded, highlighting the dangers of mass gatherings if not appropriately managed. This reality compelled the state and religious leaders to continue reinforcing social distancing, hand hygiene, and limited congregation sizes—even during sacred periods like Ramadan and Eid. (*Exemplars in Global Health*, 2021)

While the pandemic altered the traditional modes of worship, it also deepened individual reflection and spiritual resilience. Believers turned to supplication (du‘ā’), charity (ṣadaqah), and acts of kindness as alternative expressions of devotion. In Islamic theology, intentions (niyyah) hold immense value. Thus, the sincere intention to safeguard life while temporarily forgoing communal rituals is acceptable and praiseworthy in the sight of Allah.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic made public worship realign with public health. Far from contradicting medical guidelines, Islamic teachings provided a moral and legal foundation for navigating this crisis with faith and responsibility. Through this lens, the restrictions were not seen as a denial of religion but as an act of obedience to divine commandments on the sanctity of life.

Islamic Ethical Teachings and Public Health Principles during the Pandemic

Islam comprehensively guides all aspects of life, including during health crises such as disease outbreaks. This concept is reflected in the primary objectives of Islamic law (maqāsid al-sharī‘ah), one of which is the preservation of human life (ḥifz al-naḥs). In this context, protecting oneself and others becomes a religious priority. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, “There should be neither harm nor reciprocating harm” (Narrated by Ibn Mājah, no. 2340), which serves as a foundational principle in the formulation of disease control policies.

Additionally, Islam emphasizes cleanliness and hygienic behavior. The Prophet ﷺ stated, “Cleanliness is part of faith” (Narrated by Muslim, no. 223), aligning with modern health protocols such as handwashing and sanitation. Regarding sneezing etiquette, the Prophet ﷺ said, “If one of your sneezes, let him cover his face with his hand or garment and lower his voice” (Narrated by al-Ḥākim). This demonstrates an early awareness of droplet transmission, long before it was scientifically understood.

Islam also teaches the importance of social ethics to prevent harm to others. The Prophet (detarraN) ”efas era smilsuM rehto dnah dna eugnot esohw morf eno eht si milsuM A“ ,dias ﷺ by Bukhārī and Muslim), indicating a prohibition against spreading disease irresponsibly—whether through action or negligence. Moreover, he also said, “If you hear of an outbreak of plague in a land, do not enter it; and if it breaks out in a land while you are in it, do not leave it” (Narrated by Bukhārī and Muslim). This hadith is a strong precedent for quarantine and travel restrictions during pandemics.

From a tafsīr perspective, Qur’anic verses such as “And do not throw yourselves into destruction with your own hands” (Qur’an, 2:195) and “Do not kill the soul which Allah has forbidden, except by right” (Qur’an, 17:33) are frequently cited by scholars such as al-Qurṭubī

and al-Shawkānī in discussions of public safety and legal precautions. These verses reinforce the obligation to avoid self-harm and the responsibility to protect others from avoidable harm, especially in matters of health.

These prophetic traditions and Qur'anic principles support public health interventions such as quarantine, social distancing, and adjustments in religious practices, including congregational prayers (ṣalāh al-jamā'ah) during the pandemic. Unfortunately, non-compliance with these values in specific communities led to a rapid spread of COVID-19. For instance, Nigeria's first confirmed case, reported by the NCDC on February 27, 2020, originated from a foreign traveler.

Community Response in Nigeria

In Nigeria, applying Islamic ethical teachings was met with varied responses. While some religious leaders actively promoted compliance with public health guidelines by referring to Islamic legal maxims (qawā'id fihiyyah) such as “harm must be eliminated” (al-darar yuzāl), others were hesitant due to misinformation or distrust of government directives. In several Muslim-majority areas, congregational prayers and religious gatherings continued despite warnings, contributing to localized outbreaks.

However, a more effective virus mitigation was observed in communities where Islamic leaders collaborated with health officials. Musa Yusuf Owoyemi (2021) notes that Islamic values significantly shaped ethical behavior when properly mobilized. Similarly, Abdulrazak Adesina Oloyede (2022) highlights how fatwā and public sermons referencing Islamic jurisprudence helped to legitimize public health restrictions, especially when grounded in the maqāsid al-sharī'ah framework.

The Adaptability of Ṣalāh al-Jamā'ah Law to Social and Public Health Contexts

The legal framework governing congregational prayer (ṣalāh al-jamā'ah) in Islam is dynamic, as Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) has adaptive mechanisms that respond to social realities and environmental conditions, including public health crises. This flexibility is rooted not only in textual sources (naṣṣ) but also in foundational principles such as maqāsid al-sharī'ah and jurisprudential maxims that take into account lived realities (al-wāqi'). Within this framework, public health becomes a legitimate consideration for adjusting religious practices, including communal prayer.

As Kamali (2006) explains, principles of fiqh such as al-maṣlaḥah al-mursalah (public

interest), al-‘urf (social custom), and taghayyur al-fatwā bi taghayyur al-zamān wa al-makān (the change of fatwā according to time and place) allow religious authorities to respond to local and contextual needs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these principles provided legal and ethical grounds to impose restrictions on communal worship for public health.

Furthermore, Rane and Hersi (2021) emphasized that religious policy responses in various Muslim countries during the pandemic demonstrated that fiqh is not rigid but rather responsive to real-world constraints. They found that both local and international scholars generally adopted a maqāṣid-based approach to reinterpret religious obligations in ways that would prevent greater harm (mafsadah), such as the spread of infectious disease.

Similarly, Hashmi (2020) argued that the legitimacy of legal flexibility in Islamic worship depends on the ability of communities and scholars to understand contextual values. He stressed that legal adaptation does not signify a departure from religious principles but rather reflects the realization of Islam’s core aim: to bring mercy and promote the public good.

Sociological Analysis

From a sociological perspective, public acceptance of legal adaptations in religious practices is also influenced by levels of religious literacy and trust in religious and medical authorities. In a study conducted by Abdalla and Rane (2021) on Muslim communities in Australia, it was found that the synergy between religious messages and public health protocols significantly improved adherence to worship adjustments.

This reflects a broader sociological dynamic: the decision of Muslim communities to suspend congregational prayer due to health concerns temporarily reveals the interaction between religious norms, social structures, and collective needs. Muslim populations in countries such as Nigeria, Indonesia, and Turkey faced similar challenges when public health authorities issued restrictions on gatherings in places of worship. This raised ethical and sociological questions about how religious norms can be negotiated in emergencies for societal well-being.

As Alkali (2021) shows in his study of Muslim communities in Nigeria, the suspension of congregational prayer during the pandemic was not merely a matter of fiqh but a sociological response to a threat against the social fabric. The community understood that protecting physical health was part of the objectives of Islamic law (maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah), particularly the preservation of life (ḥifẓ al-nafs), which must take precedence when in conflict with ritual obligations.

From the sociology of religion perspective, this phenomenon can be seen as a form of

social adaptation to crisis. Berger (1967) noted that religion upholds social order by sacralizing norms. In the context of the pandemic, however, medical realities challenged that sacrality. Thus, the transformation of worship practices reflects the flexibility of Muslim social structures in preserving religious values while safeguarding community well-being.

Another study by Ahmad and Farouk (2022) in Malaysia found that Muslims with stronger health and religious literacy were more likely to support suspending mass worship activities. This suggests that ethical attitudes toward legal reform are influenced by educational background, religious leadership's credibility, and state institutions' legitimacy.

In conclusion, the Islamic legal-ethical framework that permits alternative forms of communal worship during public health emergencies reflects not only the doctrinal flexibility of fiqh but also its embeddedness in the social realities of the Muslim community. Islamic law does not operate in isolation but evolves in dialogue with society's needs and the imperative of protecting public welfare.

Conclusion

With the coronavirus outbreak in Nigeria, many activities have changed from how they used to be. There was advocacy for virtual lecture, low patronage of media houses, low distribution of food items, cancellation of physical *tafsīr* programme, cancellation of *tarāwhih* prayer, and cancellation of celebration of *laylatu'l-qadr* in the month of Ramadan, restriction of congregational prayers, closure of the sacred house in Makkah and mosques, and proliferation of venal scholars. From the information gathered so far, it is observed that Nigerian Muslims have low respect for the COVID-19 protocol of social distancing. While the first table shows how threatening the infection is, the second table shows the negative response of Nigerian Muslims to social distancing. Only 28% of the mosques comply with the rule of social distancing.

The authors could make the following submission based on the facts provided in the discussion of Islam's position on infection, what constitutes congregation for prayers, and the Islamic legal maxims.

1. Islam is a flexible religion that does not accommodate rigidity of any kind.
2. One of the primary objectives of the Shariah is the preservation of life, and therefore, Islam does not permit anybody to subject their life to destruction.

3. Islam recognises contagious disease and advises that precautionary measures should be taken to contain the spread of any infection.
4. At the time of necessity, it is more rewarding to pray at home for precaution against infections.
5. When prayer is to be observed in congregation at a time of necessity and social distancing is considered a remedy to infection, observing the congregation with distancing is more rewarding than violating the rule and falling into the trap of infection.
6. At a time of necessity. Observing congregational prayers at home is not only acceptable but equally more rewarding.

Given all the above, it is pertinent to recommend that Muslim leaders need to be more informed about the teachings of Islam because their followers are submissive to them in all that they command. They will be held accountable for directing them to the wrong path.

Even though some of the religious leaders have reservations about the sincerity of the government in the pronouncement of the existence of the virus, the religion of Islam enjoins submission to leaders. If the leaders are wrong in what they direct the followers. The followers shall not be required to answer for the wrong done by the leaders.

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