Islam and faith in times of crisis: Religious observance and Muslim communities in the pandemic

Abstract

This article explores the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on Muslims living in Birmingham, UK on religious observance and faith in times of crisis. This article presents qualitative insights into participants experiences of the impacts of the pandemic and the national measures taken on their religious observance including impacts around prayer and worship, the use of technologies to mediate faith practice, communal worship and wellbeing, worship under socially distanced conditions and the observance of Ramadan and Eid. In exploring these experiences we reveal a range of ways in which Muslims have been impacted, as a result of the distinctive nature of Islam as embodying specific aspects of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. We explore the dynamic between impacts religious observance and the ways in which religious leaders drew upon Islamic scripture and teachings to reinforce adherence to local and national guidance as a dutiful responsibility to others. We also unpack what this means for Muslims, faith and community connectedness in times of crisis such as the pandemic.

Keywords: Pandemic; Covid-19; Muslims; Faith, Islam, Identity, Communities

Introduction

Recent public opinion in the UK has highlighted the view that British Muslims are not yet fully integrated into British society. A YouGov (2015) poll found that 55 percent of people believed that Islam was not compatible with the values of Britain and more than one in four people believe that there are 'no-go' zones, where people who are not Muslim cannot enter (Jones and Unsworth 2022). Alongside this data when it comes to Covid-19, Muslims have been viewed as being 'super spreaders' of the virus (xxx. 2022), poisonous creatures, receiving special treatment, whilst being unworthy of treatment. Narratives made false claims about the vaccine being part of a larger Muslim plot to rule the world and unscrupulous parallels that claim Covid-19 originated from the Quran (xxx. 2020). Whilst any form of stigma and hatred take an element of reality—the truth is that people from minoritised ethnic groups such as Muslims are two to three times more likely to die from Covid-19 than the general population (The UCL Institute of Health Informatics 2020). The data demonstrates that the risk of death from Covid-19 is: 3.29 times higher for Pakistanis than the general population; 3.24 times higher for Black Africans; 2.41 times higher for Bangladeshis; and 2.21 times higher for Black Caribbean and 1.7 times higher for British Indians (The UCL Institute of Health Informatics 2020).

In relation to Covid-19, Muslims are also impacted by high rates of mortality, ill-health, work and employment, home life, household dynamics, mental health and religious practice. The insights provided in this paper demonstrate the extent to which Muslims in Birmingham were impacted by the pandemic, and the measures they took to manage it, with regard to their ability to observe religious festivals and engage in faith practice (Misra et al. 2020). The specific dynamics of faith and practice in the context of Islam meant that Muslims were faced with several unprecedented challenges regarding their faith practice during the pandemic, including facing Mosque closures, impacts on the ability to engage in valid congregational prayers because of social distancing, practices around fasting, observation of Ramadan and Eid and the community connectedness which is strongly associated with Mosques and

collective worship. We outline several distinctive ways in which Muslims as a faith community drew upon their faith in the pandemic at a time of crisis.

Religious Practice and Birmingham

The interrelationship between religious, ethnic and national identity has shaped questions about the role of Muslims and their social identity too. These include questions about religious conservatism, national and international allegiances and the notion of the Islamic Ummah. Muslims are not a homogenous group, yet the 'Ummah' is the Islamic term to describe a large community or group of people. There is an assumption that Muslims show allegiance to this global 'Ummah' in the first instance, before their own country. Hopkins and Kahani Hopkins (2009) believe that this forms part of the new 'cultural units' that exist within social grouping and which is inherent in all types of individuals and communities. They refer to the way in which the cognitive representation of a person and their self leads to group membership. This form of essentialism also lends itself to multiple identities which are used to form a British Muslim identity.

In Birmingham, BAME groups make up 42% of the Birmingham City local authority (ONS 2011). According to data from the ONS, 64% of deaths at Birmingham City Hospital were from individuals from BAME backgrounds at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020. The census data also indicated that there were 5 wards in Birmingham in 2011 with more than 50% of the population identifying as Muslim, with 3 of those wards recording more than 70% of residents identifying as Muslim (ONS 2011). This demographic suggests that there is significant risk of the disparate impacts of Covid-19 measured across black and South Asian minority ethnic groups more generally within the wards identified above.

The implications for religious practice in the context of national and local responses to the threat posed by the pandemic carried with it implications for religious practice which would invariably impact across all religious groups, however there were some implications specific to Muslims owing to Islam as faith embodying both aspects of *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxy* (Graham 2017: 350). Of specific interest for our purposes here is the emphasis on *orthopraxy*, and the clear and prescribed emphasis on religious practise within the context of Islam. Within the Islamic faith, pathways to spiritual enrichment through practice sit at the centre of Islam as a 'lived way of life', characterised by *orthopraxy* (Graham 2017: 350). These pathways to spiritual enrichment are clearly connected with practice, with *rewards* being directly incurred for those who engage in *good deeds* consistent with pursuing the right path (Bhatti et al 2016: 39). This relationship between practice and spiritual enrichment pose some distinctive challenges for Muslim groups within the context of national and local lockdown measures, and these experiences in the case of Birmingham are detailed later on in this article. Whilst many other faith groups including sectarian denominations also place emphasis on the importance of ritual practice, when focusing on Muslim groups, responses to the pandemic would raise further questions across the legal provisions in the context of *Shar'I'ah* around prayer, ritual practice, physical needs and wellbeing (Al-Astewani 2021: 9).

There are interesting nuances within the dynamics of orthopraxy here, with practices around prayer, fasting, charity and pilgrimage pertaining to faith and belief, and the legal provisions concerning physical needs which include a duty to protect the value of life (Al-Astewani 2021: 9). Whilst it is important to acknowledge that within an Islamic perspective, Muslims have a duty to adhere to the law of the land within which they live (El Ayoubi Gebara 2017: 324), it

is also important to acknowledge that *Shar'I'ah* will remain important in informing Muslim perspectives on responses to the pandemic and their implications for faith practice. The pandemic also posed unprecedented circumstances which would place the tension between orthopraxy regarding faith practice and orthopraxy concerning duty to protect the value of life at the centre of dilemmas facing Muslim communities (Al-Astewani 2021: 9) and local and national authorities issuing public health directives in response to Covid-19. As we will explore later on, the intersecting timelines of the pandemic in the UK and the Islamic calendar for 2020 would see Ramadan and Eid fall within the national lockdown. Invariably, lockdowns and the additional implications for the closure of Mosques posed immediate challenges within this context, and the dynamics of this tension are explored through real world insights into the case of Muslims in Birmingham in the presentation of findings in this article.

In addition to the implications of the pandemic for religious practice and the specifics of this experience for Muslims in Britain, pre-existing literature also indicates that the kind of orthopraxy associated with Islamic observance has been valuable for facing times of crisis. Whilst the threats posed by the pandemic for Muslims in the UK has represented an unprecedented set of challenges, there has been scholarship which has focused on how Islamic teachings can be applied to inform practice in comparable circumstances. One example is provided by Ahmad and Ahad (2021), whose analysis focuses on how pandemics have been discussed historically in Islamic scripture (Ahmad & Ahad 2021). For instance, Ahmad & Ahad (2021) draw attention to the responsibilities and duties Islamic scripture has previously encouraged in relation to managing or responding to threats of disease pose by plagues as examples of times of crisis (Ahmad & Ahad 2021). Within these examples, consistencies can be identified between the kinds of responses permitted and advocated in Islamic scripture and those which have been manifested in responses to the pandemic including isolation, quarantine, sanitation and even vaccination (Ahmad & Ahad 2021). Whilst the above is clearly relevant for our previous consideration around Islamic orthopraxy focused on the duty to preserve the value of life (Al-Astewani 2021: 9), orthopraxy pertaining to spiritual wellbeing can also be understood to have implications as strategies for maintaining psychological wellbeing. El-Majzoub et al (2021) argue that faith and spirituality provide significant coping mechanisms in times of crisis such as the pandemic (El-Majzoub et al 2021: 4566).

Furthermore, emerging research has focused on Muslims specifically and faith practice and religious coping within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (Thomas & Barbato 2020). Thomas & Barbato (2020) analysed the relationship between symptoms of depression and self-reported religious coping with 543 participants of which 339 were Muslim and 204 were Christian (Thomas & Barbato 2020: 498). There findings demonstrated that Muslims reported significantly higher levels of religious coping compared with their Christian counterparts (Thomas & Barbato 2020: 498). Their findings also indicated a moderate inverse relationship between symptoms of depression and self-reported religious coping, meaning that as religious coping is higher symptoms of depression are lower (Thomas & Barbato 2020: 498). The implications here are twofold, in that the indication is that religious coping is likely to provide some benefit for individuals of faith in times of crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the fact that Muslim participants reported far higher levels of religious coping than their Christian counterparts would also imply that they were at a greater level of benefit in terms of combating symptoms of depression in the context of Covid-19. This is an important consideration moving forward if we consider all of the emphasis on orthodoxy and orthopraxy

in the context of Islam, and the ways in which these might have been impacted by the interventions necessitated by the pandemic. For instance, whilst Mosques are primarily places of worship, they afford nuanced roles in the lives of practicing Muslims, and provide practical, social and emotional support in addition to facilitating spiritual connectedness (Hassan et al 2021: 9). As local channels and points of access for this kind of support, Mosques are in many ways integral for wellbeing among Muslim communities, and isolation and lack of access to the support they afford is likely to increase the risk of developing symptoms of depression for some Muslims, which may even persist beyond the pandemic itself (Hassan et al 2021: 10).

Methodology

This article draws upon an 18-month project conducted in 2021 that utilised a snowball sampling methodology to extract qualitative data about the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on Muslims in Birmingham. In total, the data collection for the project involved conducting a scoping questionnaire at stage one with 72 participants followed by 27 semi structured interviews with participants at stage two and finally five focus groups with a total of 34 participants (28 additional participants, accounting for 6 which had previously participated at stage two). Due to the nature of lockdown restrictions an online questionnaire was designed and disseminated amongst three of the major Mosques in Birmingham. The aim was to try and capture a range of religious affiliations. The project was also subjected to ethical clearance from our institution. Carrying out the project under the conditions of the pandemic posed a series of challenges which required making adaptations to research practice and one of the most notable adjustments was the use of online interviews. National and local lockdowns meant that interviews conducted early on at stage 2 of the data collection were conducted online out of necessity, with in-person interviews becoming more utilised as restrictions eased. Even following the relaxing of restrictions, we continued to offer participants the option of conducting interviews in-person or online to mitigate concerns around additional exposure to Covid-19 and to also allow them to take part in comfortable and familiar settings. All in all, 19 interviews were carried out online and 9 took place in person. Whether interviews were in person or online affected how we were able to interact with participants, and there was a shared sense across the research team that there was more sense of connection, rapport and the ability to show support when interviewing in-person despite efforts to apply a consistent approach when interviewing online. This was compounded through variances within and between online interviews themselves, as some participants preferred to be 'off-camera', which further affected our ability to 'read' social cues and expressions which we were able to with those 'on-camera', or during in-person interviews. As this adaptation was initially a necessity due to factors outside of our control, we accepted that we would need to utilise a combination of online and in-person data collection techniques and remain mindful of the potential impact on our interactions with participants.

Whilst the project overall draws data from a total of 133 participants, this article draws insights from data collected at stages two and three of the project. The data was analysed using a thematic analysis as a method suitable for identifying, organising, and offering insights into patterns of meaning across data, with a view to understanding collective and shared meanings and experiences (Braun & Clarke 2012: 57). Given our focus on Islamic religious practice and religious observance, this approach would allow us to explore insights into lived experiences of Muslims across several wards in Birmingham including Small Heath,

Sparkbrook, Bordesley Green, Washwood Heath, Alum Rock, Handsworth/Winson Green and Lozells. Participants ranged from community members, community leaders, Mosque leaders, Imams, Chaplains, Muslim community organisations, and non-faith community organisations with significant Muslim stakeholders. Across the overall study we had 58 male and 69 female participants - 39 male and 31 female at stage one (questionnaire), 21 male and 40 female at stages two (interviews) and three (focus groups). Pseudonyms are used throughout the presentation of findings here so as to avoid providing any identifying information, although as necessary where individuals have held particular roles of responsibility either within the community, Mosques or other Islamic or community organisations a description of their role is also given. The findings presented below are set out through three main themes focused on impacts on *prayer and religious practice*, *the observance of religious festivals* and *faith in times of crisis*.

Prayer and religious practice

One of the most significant areas within which religious observance was affected during the pandemic was around prayer, and there were a number of specific impacts around prayer and the closure of Mosques in March 2020, particularly within the context of national and local lockdowns. These conditions would invariably raise questions as to the ways in which those seeking to continue faithful religious practice would respond to the pandemic around them in the context of Covid-19 (Wibisono & Rahman 2021: 3). It has been argued elsewhere that communal cultural practices such as burials, funerals, communal prayers and weddings are a significant element of cultural practices for Muslims which in the national picture were not given timely attention (Shahid & Dogra 2022: 788). In the case of Birmingham, whilst the national lockdown would be announced on the 23rd of March 2020, our research findings have documented that over half of the Mosques in Birmingham had closed for Friday prayers by the 13th of March, and by the 20th of March all Mosques in the city had closed completely. This also reflects action taken by Muslim organisations nationally, with the Muslim Council of Britain, the Wifaqul Ulama, and the British Board of Scholars and Imams, all publishing religious fatwas and guidelines surrounding the closure of Mosques during the pandemic and prospective guidelines for their reopening. Not only did this represent pro-activity on the part of Islamic leadership organisations, but it also ensured that all measures regarding the lockdown conformed to Islamic jurisprudence (Ouassini et al 2022: 203). Our findings demonstrated that in Birmingham, the closure of Mosques in advance of the announcement on the 23rd of March resulted in many Muslims in the city losing access to being able to engage with collective worship for over a week before the start of the national lockdown. Among participants, many reported the effects of this being felt almost immediately. For instance, Adam outlined his experiences:

> *For somebody like myself, I used to attend the Mosque regularly for prayers, at least three times a day and that completely came to a halt. …we used to gather with other people, in groups, you know, you have that sort of community spirit.* (Adam).

The relationship between prayers as religious practice and collective worship as a social experience was consistently raised among participants when reflecting on the implications of praying individually. Mahmoud's experience echoed that of Adam, with his conviction being that:

> *'Praying within congregation shoulder to shoulder, that's how it should be… there wasn't that connectivity."*

These sentiments indicate some consistency with Thomas and Barbato's (2020) analysis of religious coping which we have considered previously. However, Iswanto et al (2022) provide insights more directly relevant here, with specific regard to the impacts of isolation and lockdowns on wellbeing. They argue that, whilst quarantine is the most common and best technique for combating the spread of infectious diseases, it may adversely affect the psychological health of individuals (Iswanto et al 2022: 1). Furthermore, these conditions can cause or intensify depression symptoms (Iswanto et al 2022: 1). These premises informed a multiple regression analysis which indicated that all components of Islamic beliefs had a significant role in reducing Covid-19-induced depression (Iswanto et al 2022: 1). Against this backdrop, measures which include isolation and restrict access to worship then are likely to have some impact of the overall wellbeing of practising Muslims, consistent with the insights we have presented above.

Indeed, part of the reason for why the closure of Mosques posed such a challenge for faith practice among Muslims in the context of the first national lockdown was in part due to the importance placed on collective worship over individual prayer in Islamic religious practice. The question over the distinction between praying individually and collectively was also a concern which was shared not only amongst participants within the research but also across the community more widely. For instance, Hamza, one of the participants in the study was somewhat uniquely positioned in his role as Lead Community Engagement Officer for the Local Public Health Authority (LPHA), and as such had responsibilities around both coordinating with the community in the process of closing Mosques in the city, and also in mediating between the LPHA and the community. He explained that concerns around praying at home were shared widely enough that religious leaders were called upon within the community:

> *"The lay person doesn't have the understanding, where the scholars and the Imams came out and said "Look, your worship will be accepted, you'll get the same rewards because it's circumstantial."* (Hamza, Lead Community Engagement Officer, Local Public Health Authority).

Hamza's emphasis on the conditions of the pandemic are consistent with wider Islamic teachings which state that the house can be the *Masjid*, if necessary (Islam et al 2020: 504). Whilst there was a general consensus among participants that praying at home was not preferred, a number of participants found some positive aspects to their experience. For example, Kaia reflected that, whilst the adjustment had been difficult for older family members, being at home throughout the first national lockdown in particular it had allowed her and her family members to focus on "*giving more time to your own religion because sometimes, if I'm honest, you get so busy with work that you forget and you just miss it.*" Ibrahim also highlighted the benefits for the family as a unit praying at home during lockdowns:

> *If you pray at home, I think that helps keep your own family together… You're praying together as a family, and not necessarily going to the Mosque. (Ibrahim).*

Kaia echoed this sentiment whilst emphasising the opportunity to foster greater familiarity with faith practice in the home: *'praying at home because no one's out, everyone's at home,*

so it's more of like, "everyone let's pray together", like the kids would join in. It was just about making them learn about your faith' (Kaia). These experiences can also be considered in the context of some of the wider trends with family structures in south Asian communities. For instance, British Asian households make up 21.2% of 'other households' with dependent children, which is the category within which multi-generational families are recorded. The significance of this figure can be put into context when considering that British Asian groups make up only 7.5% of the general population (UK Government 2019). In previous research, multi-generational families have been recorded under the classification of 'complex households' (see FNSEM 1994), with the most common form of complex household being adult children living with one or two parents (Hussain 2010: 871). In these circumstances then, the opportunity for congregational prayer likely higher than in more typical nuclear family units.

While both the accounts from Kaia and Ibrahim above highlight benefits for the family unit through praying at home, Ibrahim's account draws attention to the distinctiveness of the family all praying together in part due to the tendency for men to pray at the Mosque and for women to pray at home. When discussing Mosques as places of worship for women, Sania stated: '*I know we're allowed to, it's from the beginning of time from as far as, since I was young, it's been a place for men more so the women' (Sania).* Samreen also echoed this in her own practice: '*It didn't really affect me that much because I prefer praying at home rather than going to the Mosque. I actually was okay with just staying at home and praying at home' (Samreen).* This distinction in religious practice is framed by gendered expectations, namely that for men it is obligatory to attend congregational prayers, but for women this is not obligatory (Nyhagen 2019: 332). Women are also prohibited from praying whilst menstruating, and this has also been used as a partial explanation for why women are unable to be Imams, owing to the potential interruption of being able to lead prayer due to menstrual cycles (Nyhagen 2019: 332). That women are not obligated to engage in congregational prayer then is connected to notions of fertility and motherhood, and this in turn maps into gendered roles within the home. There is a complex interplay of cultural and religious factors in this process. In Islamic foundational texts, the institution of motherhood is a valued aspect of women's roles, yet these texts remain relatively silent on specifics of what motherhood should actually be (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2016: 15). It has also been argued that much of what are perceived as traditional female roles have actually been informed by cultural customs which predate Islam and reinforce traditional gender roles - especially those regarding women's responsibilities in the home and family (Read 2003: 208). These cultural expectations position women as primary caregivers of their children, but also caregivers to extended family members as well due to household structures (Lee & Osbourne 2024: 128). Beyond impacts on prayer and practice, these kinds of gendered expectations were reflected in Laila's account of balancing being ill with Covid with childcare responsibilities: '*With the children, when you're unwell, when you're the mother, even though you're unwell, you have to carry on and do it yourself and that impacted me a lot. It made my recovery longer' (Laila).* Sania also recalled her experiences working with Muslim women during the first national lockdown, and her observations on how gendered roles intersected with employment status to inform responsibilities around home schooling:

> *It was deciding who, when the kids were out of school, often it would end up being the mother." (Sania).*

The transition towards the modification of restrictions around the national lockdown from 1st of June 2020 opened up further opportunities with regard to Mosques and congregational prayer. The relaxation of restrictions from the 1st of June would allow for two people from separate households able to mix indoors in socially distanced conditions (Brown & Kirk-Wade 2021: 29), and this would be followed by places of worship being permitted to open for private prayer on the 15th of June 2020 (UK Government 2020). In Islamic practice the minimum number of people required to hold a valid congregational prayer is two, and so in theory this would allow for worship which was technically collective to be facilitated indoors (Islam 2022: 15).

Livestreaming became the main point of access for engaging in valid congregational prayers until the further relaxation of restrictions on the 4th of July, which would allow places of worship to reopen with restrictions on congregations which could be up to thirty people under socially distanced conditions (MCB 2020). This account is consistent with cases elsewhere, where online mediums such as YouTube and other social media platforms providing synchronous online-religious activities during the Friday prayers in many parts of the UK (Ouassini et al 2022: 203). Whilst the insights above have demonstrated some of the challenges posed by the first national lockdown for practicing Muslims, the relaxation of restrictions in July and the prospect of returning to valid congregational prayers in Mosques posed some new challenges. Hamza, the Lead Community Engagement Officer for the LPHA explained:

> "Places of worship were open for communal prayers but with restricted numbers."
> (Hamza, Lead Community Engagement Officer, LPHA).

The insights presented here demonstrate a number of ways in which prayer, both individual and congregational, were impacted by the restrictions in the context of the national lockdown, and also the steps taken to relax restrictions afterwards. There were also a range of other impacts on religious practice which were experienced as a result of government responses to the pandemic, including around the observance of religious festivals.

Observance of religious festivals: Ramadan, Eid Al-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha

The first national lockdown which began on the 23rd of March 2020 had specific implications for Muslims observing Ramadan, which would begin on the 23rd of April, just 7 days after the Prime Minister announced an extension to the national lockdown for a minimum of a further three weeks (Institute for Government 2021). The national lockdown in its initial incarnation would subsequently extend to the 1st of June 2020, which would see changes to allow up to six people to congregate outdoors (Brown & Kirk-Wade 2021: 29). With Eid Al-Fitr beginning on the evening of the 23rd of May 2020, a number of participants expressed frustration with timing of the adjustment to restrictions in light of the opportunities this would have afforded for families to celebrate Eid Al Fitr outdoors in groups of up to six across different households. As with some of the impacts experienced around prayer, there were social aspects to Ramadan and Eid celebrations which participants were unable to engage within the context of the national lockdown. In addition to missing the social aspects of observing Ramadan and Eid with friends and family, participants also experienced challenges related to their faith practice in relation to the festivities.

Following the delay in the relaxing of national restrictions to the 4th of July, the timing around the introduction of local lockdown measures would see announcements being made on the

30th of July 2020 which would place a number of areas (Greater Manchester, East Lancashire and West Yorkshire) in the North-West of the country into local lockdowns (Green 2020). Public statements on the timing of the announcement of local lockdowns in the North of England were made by then Health Secretary Matt Hancock which acknowledged that this was informed to some degree by Eid Al-Adha, stating: "*People won't be able to have that household engagement*" (Health Secretary Matt Hancock, cited in Green 2020). Maryam conveyed quite strong convictions about the contrast between the approach to introducing measures which would impact on Eid celebrations and the efforts made to facilitate Christmas, whereby she recalled:

"*It was all open, because people, obviously, will go to the pubs and celebrate. But for Eid, it was it was only like last year and to this year we are [back to] having proper Eid's now.*"

The sentiment that there had been a double standard with regard to Islamic and Christian festivities was emphasised by Ghasan, the lead for Islamic Burials in the West Midlands, who paraphrased concerns in the community: "*they thought it was double standards by the government… When Christmas came round, they changed the rules for Christmas, but for Muslims they didn't change, they didn't have any provision for Muslims.*" It is important to recognise these sentiments in the context of the undertones of local lockdowns, with Shahid & Dogra (2022) arguing that, whilst efforts were made to ensure the ability for families to celebrate Christmas, Eid by way of contrast represented a moment where Muslims were singled out for *requiring* last-minute lockdowns in the North, with the subtext implying that Muslims were to blame for excessive disease transmission (Shahid & Dogra 2022: 788).

The national restrictions which were in place during Ramadan and Eid Al-Fitr would also present challenges for religious leaders in the Muslim communities in Birmingham. Shaykh Osman, a lead Imam, outlined how his position as a community leader encompassed responsibilities around reassuring dissenting voices in the community that, rather than leaving them at a spiritual disadvantage, adhering to national restrictions during Ramadan and Eid Al-Fitr was part of their religious obligations as Muslims.

With Mosques remaining closed, Eid prayers (Eid Al-Fitr) would have to be conducted at home, with Adeeb explaining: "*the Eid prayers at home was kind of unprecedented… it's a public affair so to speak, Eid prayer. We prayed it at home and that was, quite an unprecedented thing.*" Whilst the lockdown would impact the observance of Eid Al-Fitr, there would also be implications for the observance of Ramadan, not only regarding prayers but also the ways in which Muslims would ordinarily end the daily period of fasting.

Adam also emphasised that these impacts were felt across the community, including individuals who did not regularly practice. Hamza provided more insight in his role as Lead Community Engagement Officer, explaining that the tendency for increasing numbers of worshippers during Ramadan was due to individuals attending prayers who would not ordinarily. For these individuals, the closure of Mosques would mean losing the opportunity to engage in worship during Ramadan which would hold a greater spiritual significance:

Whilst it is clear that observing Ramadan, Eid Al-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha within the context of lockdowns resulted in a number of impacts for Muslims both practicing and otherwise, there were some examples where participants highlighted more positive experiences. Whilst Maryam had expressed some frustrations with the ways in which Christmas and Eid had been approached, regarding her experience of Ramadan itself she stated:

> *"It was so nice, because it was one of them ones where you go home, and you're home with family and there's nothing distracting you from praying or reading the Quran or anything."* (Maryam).

Ramadan in the first national lockdown also saw Kaia as a team coordinator for a local Muslim charity organisation to lead on an initiative to deliver food packs for individuals in need. She explained that:

> *"In terms of Ramadan because normally, the Mosque downstairs is normally open in Ramadan, so you get the people that either live on their own, or don't have enough money to buy themselves food."* (Kaia).

Whilst the charity "catered for at least as many non-Muslim members of the community as Muslim members of the community" (Kaia), the initiative drew on traditions which Muslim families had engaged with around food sharing in the observance of Ramadan and opening fasts prior to the pandemic. As Kaia put it during Ramadan:

"*In Asian communities what you do normally do is just cook food one day for your local community*".

For Kaia, this provided a sense of purpose during Ramadan given the unprecedented experience of observing the holy month in lockdown: "it just feels like, you know, it's just something we're doing from the Mosque" (Kaia, team coordinator, local Muslim charity organisation). The accounts documented above demonstrate clear impacts that lockdowns had on the ability for Muslims to observe Ramadan and Eid celebrations, and some of the wider implications of this in terms of the impacts on social bonds within the community and also religious practice and spiritual wellbeing. We will now move on to outline how Muslims in Birmingham drew on their faith in the context of the pandemic as a time of crisis in the coming section.

Faith in times of crisis

One of the main recurring themes raised by participants was around their relationality to their faith throughout the pandemic. As we have seen, the Covid-19 pandemic invariably resulted in unprecedented impacts on religious practice and the observance of religious festivals, but there were also impacts around how participants connected with their faith within the circumstances we have documented so far. For Adam, whilst the circumstances were unprecedented his perspective reflected that held by a number of participants:

"*I think, with a lot of us we saw it as a challenge, it's something to get through, and just be patient and just observe whatever you can do to the best of your ability*."

These sentiments were echoed by Adeeb, who stated: "*I think the faith for me at the time of the lockdown was crucial really in trying to kind of steer through the pandemic… I think faith also had a big part to play in getting you through, getting through the pandemic*." There were overtones in how participants discussed how their faith helped them to navigate the pandemic, and in reflecting on how the pandemic affected her faith Hazirah's insights captured this:

> *"…it strengthened it more, because my faith was everything at that point because there was nothing else, my faith was what brought me out of it."* (Hazirah).

Whilst Adam, Adeeb and Hazirah held a strong sense of resolve in how their faith helped them to navigate the pandemic, Hazirah's conviction around engaging with her faith practice as a strategy for preventing depression brings attention to the backdrop of uncertainty in terms of both the anxieties posed by the threat of Covid-19 and in being unable to engage in communal worship or attend the Mosque. She stated that her faith helped her to deal with uncertainty: "*I had anxiety, but when I'd go to my faith and looked to my faith, you know, in, in Islam it teaches to have faith in Allah.*"

Adam summarised his personal experience and his views on how widespread this might have been: "*I think it was just a time for introspection, just reflecting and finding yourself really. I think that was true for a lot of people*". The impact of Mosque closures was clearly one of the more substantive impacts resulting from the national lockdown, Adeeb expressed taking comfort in the notion of Mosque closures protecting others who may have been most vulnerable to the effects of Covid-19. These sentiments were articulated more fully by Ghasan, the lead for the Islamic burials in the West Midlands:

> "*…you know precaution in Islam it says, you know, precaution is better than cure. Yeah we should cure, [but] you should take precaution - whatever is in your hand, you should do that. The rest you can leave it to God, whatever is destined is going to happen*" (Ghasan, Lead for Islamic Burials, West Midlands).

Ghasan's insights capture some interesting nuances around the relationship between individual responsibility and notions of determinism from a faith perspective. Elsewhere, this has been referred to as 'religious health fatalism', or the notion that an individual's health is predetermined by a higher power, which may influence engagement with public health initiatives such as vaccinations (Ping Wong 2022: 2). However, Ghasan's and Adeeb's insights both emphasise responsibility towards the wellbeing of others. These concerns were also consistent with Mahmoud's sense of adhering to regulations as a responsibility to others: "*it's not just about me, it's about protecting everyone around me as well.*" These sentiments have also been echoed more widely, with many Muslims consciously drawing upon Islamic theology and Islamic guidelines to respond to the moral and ethical challenges of Covid-19, with an emphasis on human responsibility and obligation towards others and the world (Xiong et al 2020: 19). More specifically, there are also Islamic teachings which emphasise responsibility to the self, with a specific emphasis on protecting one's own life in the context of plagues, which the pandemic can be considered as comparable to (Bin Taleb 2022: 90).

In addition to the ways in which participants engaged with their faith in the first national lockdown, there were also a series of challenges around faith and practice which arose with the relaxing of restrictions which would see socially distanced communal prayer return for Mosques in Birmingham. Mosques would be permitted to open for communal prayers with congregations of up to a maximum of 30 under social distanced conditions from the 4th of July 2020 (Brown & Kirk-Wade 2021: 29). Whilst this would allow a return to communal worship for some, lead Imam Shaykh Osman, described some of the challenges this posed:

> "*When the Mosque was closed obviously both were closed. But when we opened for them to come and stand with distancing and offer their prayer, but was not allowed to touch.*" (Shaykh Osman, lead Imam).

We have explored some of the individual experiences of the return to communal worship under socially distanced conditions elsewhere in this article, but what Shaykh Osman's

insights draw attention to concern more the challenges of facilitating something of a 'middle-ground' for collective worship and how this was received by worshippers seeking to engage with their faith in the public health crisis of the pandemic. Ghasan (Lead for Islamic burials, West Midlands) echoed this challenge with a little more conviction:

> *"I used to get abusive phone calls from families and people who weren't 'pro-Covid', saying that you know you people are helping the government and all this."* (Ghasan, lead for Islamic burials, West Midlands)*.*

Ghasan did highlight that, whilst the imposition of restrictions reflecting the approach above had created some resistance and hostility, there had been some variation in approaches, where "*some Mosques were relaxed… as long as you, they left it to the individual basically… if you came to the Mosque and you weren't very happy with the set up, just cover yourself, make sure you've got a mask on and gloves on and [they] provided all that on site*." Whilst there were challenges in the restrictions over communal worship in the first national lockdown which were to some degree alleviated by the ability to attend Mosques under social distanced conditions, we have seen that this also posed challenges in terms of access and the extent to which precautionary approaches were received in some parts of local Muslim communities. These challenges would ultimately be completely alleviated (including with regard to the intermitted impacts of local lockdowns) on 19th July 2021, which would see no further statutory requirements for social distancing (Cabinet Office 2021). Sharif, the CEO for Heath Walk Masjid, a significantly influential Mosque in the city, gave his perspective on faith in the community reflecting on the pandemic:

> *"I think, people definitely when they look back at it now, they became closer to their faith. People were getting sick, they were unable to visit their mothers and fathers in hospitals, their children were getting sick, people who had never been ill before, being hospitalised on oxygen and it really made them think, it brought home the message that we're not promised another day in life…"* (Sharif, CEO, Heath Walk *Masjid*).

The overall consensus among participants who engaged in the research was that the pandemic had brought them closer to their faith for reasons consistent with Sharif's inferences above. Invariably, the impacts on prayer and the ability to observe religious festivals are bound up with the individual and collective ways in which Muslims in Birmingham engaged with their faith in the context of the pandemic as a public health crisis. As we have documented here, this posed challenges not only at the individual level in terms of faith observance, but also in terms of the implications of facilitating communal worship and taking precautionary measures once Mosques were able to reopen. The challenges around facilitating religious observance within both the national lockdown and in the context of social distancing measures and restrictions on congregational worship which would follow ultimately constituted part of the crisis experienced by Muslims during the pandemic.

Conclusion

The insights presented here demonstrate a range of impacts experienced by Muslims in the context of the pandemic which expand across individual worship, collective religious festivities and the extent to which individuals were able to engage in their faith at various stages of the pandemic as a public health crisis. We acknowledge here that individual impacts around worship will have impacted for all religious groups in the first national lockdown, and for those unable to attend religious services until restrictions were lifted. However there were

some impacts which were specific to Muslims and in particular around the timings around the lifting of national restrictions and imposition of local lockdowns and the ability to observe Ramadan and Eid celebrations. Of central importance here was the significance of the social dynamics of observing Ramadan, opening fasts and in the sharing of food and festive celebrations associated with Eid. The impacts on social aspects of religious observance also extended to communal worship, with their being impacts not only with regard to praying individually and the associated rewards and deeds compared with valid congregational worship, but also with regard to the physical contact associated with collective worship more generally. We have also seen that, where Mosques have responded to changes in restrictions, this has also posed challenges which have been met with concern within the community in regard to how far individuals feel able to observe their faith. Whilst these experiences appear to have collectively led to a sense of Muslims becoming closer to their faith, at least from the perspectives of religious and community leaders, this will have invariably emerged as part of the wider challenge of navigating faith and worship which has been distinctive for Muslims in the context of the pandemic.

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