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Voices of Youth: A Conversation on Employment





Dealing with Negative People: Tips from the Quran for Muslim Activists

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Many religious guidance and *fatwas* (Islamic legal opinion) that require adjustments and restrictions to Muslims' religious duties as part of national counter measures to the COVID-19 pandemic were issued all over the world. Examples are the closure of all mosques and accompanying restrictions such as to the number of congregants for obligatory daily and Friday prayers. In addition, there was a suspension of travel for *haj* (major pilgrimage) and *umrah* (minor pilgrimage).

There seems to be a consensus among official muftis, individual scholars and religious organisations on the content of the guidance and *fatwas* as seen by the similarities between them.

However, some Muslims in Singapore are still apprehensive about them. They question the validity of the guidance and *fatwas* issued by the Office of Mufti claiming that they are issued under the pressure to please the non-Muslim government of Singapore, although the same measures are being practised in Muslim countries.

Many activists and staff of local religious institutions have had to bear the brunt of insults and harassments while on duty and through social media platforms from these apprehensive Muslims.

The most recent incident is the overly emotional response towards the booking system for *Eid Al-Adha* prayer slots at all local mosques. The slots were fully taken

up in just five minutes after the opening of the booking time. The response has caused the Chief Executive of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), Mr Esa Masood, to issue a public statement appealing for calm and understanding via MUIS' official Facebook page on 28 July 2020.

Such extremely negative behaviour is not new. It has been observed in the past when sensitive issues were discussed. These reactions are shameful and do not reflect the good manners taught by Islam – the religion of the community.

True, muftis and Muslim scholars could err and their opinion may not always be the best for a circumstance. Therefore, their stance can be

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challenged, corrected and feedback must be allowed. However, this should not be a justification for abuse and insult towards them or Muslim activists who are merely executing the issued guidance and *fatwas* on the ground.

Although these negative behaviours must constantly be addressed, they will not totally disappear from the community. The Quran regards them as an everlasting nature of *da'wah* (conveying the message of Islam) works which had been faced by all Prophets in the past and will continue in the future. Thus, knowing how to manage these negative behaviours in life is important, especially for Muslim activists at mosques and religious organisations.

INSIGHTS FROM THE QURAN

Many verses of the Quran contain tips on dealing with negative people for Muslim activists. Due to the space constraint, this article will focus on the two verses below:

"And when you see those who engage in [offensive] discourse concerning Our verses, then turn away from them until they enter into another conversion. And if Satan should cause you to forget, then do not remain after the reminder with the wrongdoing people." (The Quran, 6:68)

"And those who fear Allah are not held accountable for the disbelievers at all, but [only for] a reminder - that perhaps they will fear Him." (The Quran, 6:69)

The verses were revealed in response to an incident of pagan Arabs who insulted and mocked Prophet Muhammad (*peace be upon him*) when he came and sat with them in their social gatherings for the purpose of building rapport and conveying Islam to them. Via the verses, Allah *swt* taught the Prophet (*pbuh*) how to deal with such behaviour and people in his *da'wah* work.

Leave them

In these two verses, the Quran firstly instructed the Prophet (*pbuh*) to turn away from the people in the instance they showed overtly negative behaviour towards him. However, verse 6:69 concluded with an exhortation to continue the task of admonishing the sinners.

The reason such people should not be totally ignored and left out in *da'wah* work is because one should not be prejudiced to believe that this attitude will be their behaviour towards *da'wah* all the time. If they are totally ignored and avoided, how could the *da'wah* message reach them then?

Furthermore, if they are members of the Muslim community, they are still in need of religious guidance and services from *asatizah* (religious teachers) and religious institutions in addition to access to mosques.

This lesson is deduced from verse 6:68 that allows the Prophet (*pbuh*) to come again another time when the same people ceased showing negativity towards him. In 6:69, the Quran asserts that such people, despite their negativity, could still attain *taqwa* (God consciousness) – change their bad attitude and behaviour – if they were regularly given reminders. In another verse, the Quran reminds us that such a change of behaviour depends partly on divine *hidayah* (guidance) too, and not merely in the hand of *da'wah* activists (The Quran, 28:56).

The wisdom behind the command to turn away when facing negative behaviour from people is to avoid escalation of negativity. Responding negatively to them would only add negativity and worsen the situation which often does not address the crux of the issue. This is the least Muslim activists could achieve if responding with kindness or being forgiving is not tenable yet.

Focus on tasks at hand

When avoiding negative people is unavoidable, Muslim activists are to leave the judgement of the people's behaviours to God and to focus instead on delivering the tasks that the activists are entrusted to fulfill as recommended in the Quran, "Not upon the Messenger is [responsibility] except [for] notification..." (The Quran, 5:99).

Self-introspection and improvement

Although the Quran advises Muslim activists to turn away from people when they are very negative, this does not

Although the Quran advises Muslim activists to turn away from people when they are very negative, this does not mean that activists should close their minds from being self-introspective and reflective – that there could be better ways to communicate with them or options in dealing with the issues at hand. This is because verse 6:69 recommends that the continuous reminder of Islamic teachings be delivered to such people, especially when they are not in a state of provocation or when the right opportunity appears.

mean that activists should close their minds from being self introspective and reflective – that there could be better ways to communicate with them or options in dealing with the issues at hand. This is because verse 6:69 recommends that the continuous reminder of Islamic teachings be delivered to such people, especially when they are not in a state of provocation or when the right opportunity appears.

Self-introspection and reflection are also necessary because the negative behaviour could be the result of the activists' own weaknesses or mistakes. Since the Quran informs us that those negative people "...might become conscious of God" (6:69), i.e. they could change for the better, Muslim activists should contemplate on how to engage them in a manner that would not invite negativity from them or cause them to be defensive. This would require knowledge and skills on good communication and, thus, it is important for the activists who are committed to *da'wah* work to invest their time and efforts in acquiring them in order to be effective.

Delaying good counsel

The two verses discussed in this article teach us that it is permissible for Muslim activists to ignore and turn away from evil deed when it occurs before them. This is if immediate advice or counsel may not produce a positive effect at the moment, or if it may invite greater harm such as worsening the already tense situation. However, the activists at the point of time must intrinsically disagree with the act. The advice may be delayed until another opportunity arises where it may be more acceptable and effective.

Although the two verses discussed in this article were originally revealed to pagan Arabs who were hostile towards the Prophet's (*pbuh*) *da'wah*, the lessons deduced from them could be expanded and applied when encountering any negative person today, regardless whether he is Muslim or non-Muslim. It could also be applied in other contexts such as

through one's personal relationship with family members or friends, in working relationships at offices and workplaces, and on social media platforms too. ■



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