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*Discourse of Hygiene in Islam: Response
of the Muslims in China to SARS Event¹*

Islamski dyskurs na temat higieny: chińscy muzułmanie a kwestia SARS

ABSTRACT

The general mentality of the public in China towards religion is that it is definitely “backward, anti-science, and connected with superstition”. This public opinion continues even though the country has embarked on its ambitious opening and reform program for more than twenty years, and despite freedom of religious practices being guaranteed by the national constitution. Such a paradoxical phenomenon is due to and is obviously rooted in the long-standing communist propaganda and its atheistic ideological education. Lot of Chinese people, particularly young people, regard religion as totally negative and thoroughly opposite to science. The majority of Chinese also think religion has been blocking China's road toward its modernization and social advancement. However, SARS, or the “Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome”, the grave pestilence, which caused several hundred people to die and infected thousands, plunged China in a calamity during the first part of 2003 and has taught people a bitter lesson. It was not religion causing this virus. Rather religion took a positive role to prevent its spreading and to promote a scientific, healthy way of life.

In the event of SARS, Muslim clerics and scholars wrote articles in their discourses to discuss Islamic hygiene, nutrition, and the way to keep in good health from the perspective of the Quran, the Hadith (the Prophet Muhammad's speeches) and the Sunna (examples of the Prophet Muhammad). For instance, Islam teaches people to not consume impure meats such as pork or dead cattle, and it prohibits consuming blood, dog meat, meats of strange poultries, and other animals that may trigger plague, i.e., eating civet meat causes the virus of SARS. Muslims also say that the Quran advises people to eat food in moderation and not to lead an extravagant life. Islam also teaches people not to be greedy in life-

¹ I acknowledge the generous support from the “Local Social Initial” program of the Metanexus Institute in Philadelphia, PA, USA. Their traveling fund made possible for me to read this paper at the International Conference “Continuity + Change: Perspectives on Science and Religion”, June 3–7, 2006.

-style in order to avoid damaging the ecological environment or creating an unbalance between nature and man. Muslim scholars argue that the Quran, though an ancient text, predates modern science in providing ways to prevent the spreading of diseases, like SARS, that afflict many people. Such religious discourses made by Islamic religious people during the SARS crisis has not only contributed to the measures taken by Muslims in their own communities, but also has greatly helped non-Muslim Chinese people understand the correctness of Islamic teachings, the scientific wisdom of Islamic hygiene, and the compatibility of Islam or religion with modern sciences. The discourse has resulted in the mutual understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims in China, and also resulted in newly formed public opinions that religion is not anti-sciences, and religion is complementary in some degree to science, even that sciences are embodied in religion and can be guided by religion.

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Key words: SARS, Islam, Hygiene, Chinese Muslims

During the period of November 2002 to July 2003 an unprecedented panic grasped China gradually with the national media’s unfolded daily reports: the breaking and spreading of a pestilence entitled with SARS or so-called the “Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome” caused terror in the whole country and great nervousness of its growing casualty. In the highest tide of this plague almost all theaters and cinemas were ordered to close down, academic conferences and workshops were cancelled, the political study meetings were postponed, cultural entertainments were restricted or even banned in some heavily afflicted areas, school campus were sealed off, travelers were checked at railway station, airport, sea port and highway toll collection station etc., to see the possible fever. It seems that the whole country was halted and lost its dynamic force in that time.

In this ordeal trial of life and death for the people what is the reaction from the 25 millions of the Muslims in China with regard to this grave SARS crisis? What is their explanation for SARS? And what is their thinking of SARS? This paper on the basis of the Islamic discourse rendered by the Muslim clerics whose number is 50,000² and scholars, intellectuals published in their Islamic periodicals and magazines³ as well as several times of this author’s visiting to the mosques in Beijing displays the relation between Islam and science, especially the preventive measures against such as SARS pestilence taken by the Muslims in China. Although longer than ten years have passed since SARS broke out in China the attitude of the Muslims in China toward this event is worthwhile for us to study the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, the social context in which the Muslims in China live for their

² This figure was given by the Islamic Association of China in 2009 and they served in 40,000 mosques all over China.

³ According to the incomplete statistics, there are about 60 different titles of the private Islamic periodicals and magazines circled among the Muslims in China.

traditional cultural survival. It may have significant meaning for us since right now we face the new challenge of the new plagues such as bird-flu that may cause a new wave of panic in China which has faced many challenges in the coming future.

1. WHAT ARE THE COMMENTS FROM THE MUSLIMS IN CHINA CONCERNING THE SARS?

SARS started in November, 2002 and just in a few months it became a great threat in a form of acute communicable disease pervading to the most part of China. By the end of April, 2003 several thousands people had been affected by SARS and several hundreds had died in SARS in more than 30 countries around the world. In the SARS crisis China is the biggest victim. SARS spread so fast and developed so drastic that it really went beyond the people's imagination and out of the bearing capacity in the situation which they never met before.⁴

As the people in China heard the news of SARS and encountered this epidemic, many of them would ask the reason why this pestilence afflicted the country so severely. The Muslims also tried to answer the questions: "Why dose the pestilence take place in China?" "What are the main reasons?". The Muslims in China consider the following elements that have conduced to SARS and they explore the roots of this terrible plague: (1) The decline of the morality in today's world. The indecent materialistic life and egoism lead people to forget the existence of Allah and depart from Allah's teaching. (2) In present China non-Muslims indulge in material desire and in lavish life. The unbelievers consume all animals they can find, capture, slaughter and cook. This kind of behaviors is really an ugly habit, according to the teaching of Islam. The practice of eating civet meat in Guangdong, southern China, should be condemned by people. However, such kind of scandal has been neglected by the public opinion for so long a time. (3) The rich Han Chinese raise pets such as dog, cat and snake, fish. Even some of them sleep with a pet, kiss it and touch it physically. This kind of intimate relation between man and pet has corrupted the normal morality and ethics code. Therefore, the breaking out of the SARS is the divine punishment over human.⁵

Some Muslims at the same time discussed the ecological problems and the misdeeds done by human to nature in terms of the environmental destruction. A Muslim scholar pointed out: "Man abused the nature in the past, now it turns out he is gaining the bitter harvest". According to the statistics reported in 2002 that the air quality of the two thirds of big cities in China was so polluted that it was hazard for people's health. Also the water of the seven largest rivers in China was not cleaning and was not suitable for drinking.⁶

⁴ Yi Zhi: *Hygiene and SARS*, "Musilin Tongxun" (The Muslim Newsletter), June, 2003, p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Liu Baoguang (Akhond in a mosque of Xi'an): *Reflection after SARS*, "Musilin Tongxun" (The Muslim Newsletter), July, 2003, p. 3.

God warns the people that He knows all the misdeeds done by man, as the Quran says: “Yea, in their own (eyes) will become manifest what before they concealed. But if they were returned, they would certainly relapse to the things they were forbidden, for they are indeed liars”⁷, the message was stated by an Imam in an Islamic periodical in the wake of SARS.

Hence the Muslims blame those who are unbelievers having the responsibility for breaking the harmonious relation between mankind and nature and such an unbalance situation leads to the ecological disaster and scourge which make people suffer tremendously. A Muslim referred to SARS with such words: “Human should not invade, occupy and deprive the existent space of the other creatures including the microorganism. If human destroys the balance of the biological order in nature, the germs and virus will take revenge upon human. The earliest patients of SARS as a matter of fact were the hunters and slaughters of wild animals. Such an example is the best lesson with which Allah has punished those who killed life carelessly”.⁸

The virus of SARS comes from civet, a wild animal, according to the examination in the scientific experiments. Civet meat is regarded as one of the most delicious dishes in the restaurants of the big cities in the southern China. An Imam in Gansu gave us his argument that the Han Chinese regarded civet meat so delicious in taste and having a function of increasing positive strength for human body. So the non-Muslim cooked civet meat as a very favorable dish. Eventually the killing of this kind of wild animal and consuming its meat and other illegally slaughtered meats committed by people in the cruel ways indeed destroyed the ecological balance in the nature. Some Han Chinese even ate the baby’s afterbirth after woman delivered baby, and thought the baby’s afterbirth was very good for a strong body.⁹ This sort of the crime would certainly conduce to the ruthless ordeal imposed by Allah to mankind, said by the Gansu Imam.¹⁰

Talking about the relation between man and nature, Akhond, a Persian word for clergyman among the Chinese Muslims, usually quotes the verses from the Quran to denounce the crimes committed by the unbelievers: “Mischievous has appeared on land and sea because of (the deed) that the hands of men have earned, that (God) may give them a taste of some of their deeds: in order that they may turn back (from Evil)”.¹¹ God charges the indecent man that “When he turns his back, his aim everywhere is to spread mischief through the earth and destroy crops and cattle. But God loveth not

⁷ *The Glorious Quran* (6:28), translation and commentary by Abdallah Yousuf Ali, published by Libyan Arab Jamahiria, May 1973, pp. 295–296.

⁸ Liu Baoguang, *op. cit.*

⁹ Umma (Akhond in a mosque of Beijing): *Torture Animal and the Revealing from SARS Event*, Amin (Faith), No. 2, 2003, p. 46.

¹⁰ Ma Binwu, Akhond of Duanjiaping Mosque, Kangfeng Town, Kangle County of Gansu Province, *Talk about the Islamic Dietary Law from the SARS Point of View*, “Gansu Muslim” (Muslims in Gansu), No. 2, 2004, p. 18.

¹¹ *The Glorious Quran* (30:41), *op. cit.*, p. 1063.

mischief".¹² The Quran also teaches the people: "There is not an animal (that lives) on the earth, nor a being that flies on its wings, but (forms part of) communities like you. Nothing have we omitted from the Book, and they (all) shall be gathered to their Lord in the end".¹³

In the opinion of some Akhonds, Islam in its religious law emphasizes to protect nature and therefore prohibits torturing animals, killing them wantonly, catching them wrongly and confining animals in cages. Islam also regulates for people what are the permitted foods and what are the illegal foods. These facts show why the Islamic countries and the Muslim countries did not suffer from SARS during that period, because the people who worship Allah could receive the most merciful and the most compassionate from Lord, receive the bliss from Lord. "This has testified that the Muslims are the best, the most advantaged and the most faithful people in the world. The way of Islamic life and its dietary law have guaranteed the safety for the believers. All the measures taken to prevent SARS from breaking out are so similar with the hygiene customs which are able to keep the good health for the Muslims, hence, the greatness of Islam has been proved again in the event of the SARS catastrophe. We honestly believe in that the mankind will certainly defeat SARS by the helps of Allah, by the protection from our Lord, the Creator of the universal"¹⁴, the Akhonds convinced of such an argument.

While Muslims explain the SARS is a way for God to punish the ungrateful mankind for their mischief to the nature, they treat this pestilence as a destiny if Muslims are affected by this disease. A Muslim named Ibrahim in Shanghai recited a Quranic verse during the SARS time:

Verily the knowledge of the Hour is with God (alone). It is He Who sends down rain, and He Who knows what is in the wombs. Nor does any one know what it is that he will earn on the morrow: Nor does any one know in what land he is to die. Verily with God is full knowledge and He is acquainted (with all things).¹⁵

Another Quranic verse was used to advise people to strengthen themselves in overcoming SARS, the devastation in the sermon:

After (the excitement) of the distress, He sent down calm on a band of you overcome with slumber, while another band was stirred to anxiety by their own feelings, moved by wrong suspicions of God – suspicions due to Ignorance. They said: "What affairs is this of ours?" Say thou: "Indeed, this affair is wholly God's" ... But (all this was) that God might test what is in your breasts and purge what is in your hearts. For God knoweth well the secrets of your hearts.¹⁶

¹² *Ibid.*, (2:205), p. 81.

¹³ *Ibid.*, (6:38), p. 298.

¹⁴ *Umma*, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ *The Glorious Kuran* (31:34), *op. cit.*, pp. 1089–1090.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, (3:154), pp. 162–163.

As Muslims face the cataclysm “they will think of Allah, only He is the Almighty, Omnipotence, Omnipresence, Omniscience, and only He decides any award and disaster, happy and miserable for people. Only Allah is the healer, and He cannot be weakened by ill, sleep and suffering”, Ibrahim told his fellows in an article of the Islamic discourse.¹⁷

Although as a faithful believer a Muslim should realize that SARS is the penalty and the trial enforced by Allah to the mankind, it is also the alarming-bell to warn human being for their mistakes. Man has to re-examine his conception by himself and has to criticize himself.¹⁸

Reacting with the general ethos in China that religion is a backward superstition and anti-science, a Muslim affirmed, based on the Quranic teaching, that the meat of the diseased cattle that usually died in pestilence could breed and foster the various viruses. And blood contains some excreta that are very harmful to human. As for pork meat, as it contains virus and germs because of its dirtiness, it could easily afflict the lives of human and poultry and lead into the new type of virus.¹⁹ So in the preaching of anti-SARS sermon the clerics of Islam again defended the reason why Muslims did not consume pork meat and blood in their way of life and refreshed the identity of Muslims’ abstinent pork, a major barrier in their relation with non-Muslims, especially the Han Chinese in China society. Taught by the clerics in the daily life Chinese Muslims usually think they are having a better and more righteous lifestyle than their neighbors Han Chinese who believe in materialism.

2. ISLAM A STRAIGHT WAY OF LIFE, KEEPING AWAY FROM GOING ASTRAY

In the event of SARS, the Muslim clerics and scholars wrote articles in their discourses to discuss the Islamic hygiene, nutriology and the way of keeping good health from the point of views that are frequently cited from the Quran, Hadith (the Prophet Muhammad’s speeches) and Sunna (examples of the Prophet Muhammad).

In the pre-Islamic time the Arabs had no restriction over their dietary habits. For example, they consumed the meats of snake, rat, monkey, scorpion and hedgehog or the meat of the diseased animal.²⁰ However, after entering the epoch of the Islamic times, the Muslims follow the regulations and the commands which are rectified in the Quran. For example, the Quran says: “Ye people! Eat of what is on earth, lawful and good; and do not follow the footsteps of the Evil One, for he is to you an avowed enemy”.²¹ The Quran also makes it explicit: “He has only forbidden you dead meat,

¹⁷ Ibrahim: *Notes Written in the Spring of SARS*, “Shanghai Musilin” (Muslims in Shanghai), No. 1–2, 2003, pp. 45–46.

¹⁸ Liu Baoguang (Xi’an): *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Cited in an article from the newspaper “Cankao xiaoxi” (Reference News), May 12, 2003, p. 13.

²⁰ Ma Binwu, *op. cit.*

²¹ *The Glorious Kuran* (2:168), *op. cit.*, p. 66.

and blood, and the flesh of swine, and any (food) over which the name of other than God has been invoked. But if one is forced by necessity, without willful disobedience, nor transgressing due limits, then God is oft-Forgiving, most Merciful".²² Nevertheless, the Chinese Muslims think that such an exclusion of certain food and meat reflects the scientific way to keep good health for man, and therefore, Islam rectifies this true way of life for Muslims and commands them to behave correctly with the guidance of God.

The dietary law legalized in the Quran was often cited by Muslims in the SARS crisis to demonstrate that the religion followed by Muslims really the highest faith and a true way, a straight road leading people toward happiness. Such a preaching indeed reminds Muslims that they are the true believers and their religion a supreme spiritual system excelling other spiritual traditions in the Chinese society.

After SARS broke out in China at the end of 2002, since then many people died of this pestilence. The Han Chinese became so scary and terrorized that they blindly purchased anything which they thought to prevent SARS from invading the body. Therefore, the price of a bottle of vinegar went up almost dozens times high because Han Chinese used it as disinfectant to spray the house for cleaning and wished to drive the evil spirits off. The prices of green onion, radish and turnip radish also increased many times than those in the normal days. People were so nervous and afraid in that period.²³

In contradiction with the Han Chinese's menacing in SARS, the Islamic clergymen were very proud of themselves and their fellows Muslims as the believers of Islam. They held that Muslims in China had the habits of keeping their residence and living environment clean and tidy, for example, they would take ritual ablution before prayer. In the sermons delivered by Imams in the SARS period they often cited the Quran, the holy text to fill the confident of the Muslims. The Quran says, "Remember He covered you with a sort of drowsiness, to give you calm as from Himself, and he caused rain to descend on you from heaven, to clean you therewith, to remove from you the stain of Satan, to strengthen your hearts, and to plant your feet firmly therewith".²⁴ The Quran also says: "Never stand thou forth therein. There is a mosque whose foundation was laid from the first day on piety; it is more worthy of thy standing forth (for prayer) therein. In it are men who love to be purified, and God loveth those who make themselves pure".²⁵ A Hadith read by Muslims says that the habit of keeping clean and spotless is part of the faith. The Muslims keep their dwells much neat, and often clean their courtyards, wash clothes, often take showers to wash body, and cut finger-nails and toenails. The ritual ablution includes brushing teeth, rinsing mouth, cleaning nostrils, washing private parts after using toilet, cut-

²² *Ibid.*, (16:115), p. 687.

²³ My personal observation in East Suburb Market of Beijing as the news of SARS was acknowledged by the governmental officials and was broadcast by radio and TV in late March, 2003.

²⁴ *The Glorious Kuran* (8:11), *op. cit.*, p. 417.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, (9:108), p. 473.

ting nails. Since the Muslims like to keep clean much keener than that of Han Chinese in hygiene habits, therefore, their chance being afflicted by SARS is less than Han Chinese.²⁶

Several passages in the Quran were often chanted in those days of SARS crisis to be used as the weapons to tackle with the spreading of this plague. They include following: "This day are (all) things good and pure made lawful unto you. The food of the People of the Book is lawful unto you and yours is lawful unto them".²⁷ "O ye Children of Adam! We have bestowed raiment upon you to cover your shame, as well as to be an adornment to you. But the raiment of righteousness, that is the best. Such are among the Signs of God, that they may receive admonition".²⁸ "And thy garments keep free from stain! And all abomination shun!"²⁹ With these Quranic teachings Muslims encouraged themselves in the struggle against SARS: "Those who have no faith died in terror, those who have faith died in peace. The phenomenon we see today just a micro-level picture for society"³⁰, behind this statement the strong confidence rooted in the characters of the Muslims was reflected in the anti-SARS movement.

When facing SARS Mr. Jin Hongwei, the Imam of Huxi Mosque in Shanghai gave a sermon at a Friday congregation service as he recited the Quranic verses: "By (the Token of) time (through the Ages), Verily Man is in loss, except such as have Faith, and do righteous deeds, and (join together) in the mutual teaching of Truth, and of patience and Constancy".³¹ "Be sure we shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods or lives or the fruits (Of your toil), but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere".³²

The spread of SARS and the roots of SARS have indicated that the dietary law and the life style rectified by the Quran, Hadith and the scholars' views in the Islamic jurisprudence which more than thousand years ago already thoroughly fit with the modern scientific theory.³³ The Quran and the Hadith have regulated the most perfect dietary customs in the form of the Islamic law and Islamic life. Therefore, the Muslims prevented from the SARS spreading in many ways and in much degree, especially through their good practice for health and welfare in individual and community. The meats which are selected to be consumed in the Islamic law are such poultries as chicken, duck, goose, wild goose; such animals as bull, goat, deer, river deer, ox, sheep, camel, rabbit, and finally is the various fish in water. Beside those sanctioned

²⁶ Ma Zhongping (Director of Office of Secretaries, the Islamic Association of China): *The Hygiene Habits of the Muslims and Anti-SARS Campaign*, "Zhongguo Zongjiao" (China Religion), No. 6, 2003, p. 29.

²⁷ *The Glorious Kuran* (5:6), *op. cit.*, p. 241.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, (7:26), p. 346.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, (74:4-5), p. 1640.

³⁰ Ibrahim, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

³¹ *The Glorious Kuran* (103:1-3), *op. cit.*, p. 1783.

³² *Ibid.*, (2:155), p. 62; see Jin Hongwei: *Hygiene and Life of Man*, "Shanghai Musilin" (Muslims in Shanghai), a special edition on Sermon Collection, No. 1, 2004, p. 2.

³³ Ma Binwu, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

by the Quran, there are some animals and sea-production not to be consumed according to the Shari'a (the Islamic law), for example, eagle, vulture, wolf, leopard, bear, monkey, fox, dog, tortoise, snake, toad etc. The animals prohibited by Islamic law are actually the rare wild animals protected by state laws. So just one thousand years ago Shari'a has certified for us the scientific corrective methods in the Islamic dietary law,³⁴ the Akhonds always try to persuade their Muslim followers to practice the Islamic law in their daily life.

Gansu is a Northwestern province in China with a large Muslim population. The region also is one of the poorest places with poor hygiene condition. During the counter-SARS campaign Imam Su Guanglin, the member of the People's Congress of China, also the Akhond of Minjia Mosque pointed out that the Muslim nationality were the people who were keen on cleanness and hygiene. The hygiene habits and reasonable dietary customs advocated by Islam were the efficient means to prevent SARS from spreading. Those clergymen demanded that Muslims should not be afraid of this plague, and should be confident that they could defeat this pestilence. Akhond Bao Xuelin from Hepingtai Mosque, Imam Ye Jungang from Jinjilin Mosque, Imam Han Jianguo from Poshuxiang Central Mosque, Imam Ma Zhengyuan from Jiangouyan Mosque recited the Quranic verses in their sermons, emphasized that Muslims must be firm and show solidarity and not fear at this catastrophe. They requested Muslims to take their responsibility with scientific means to prevent SARS from transforming in public. They argued that Islamic sciences were able to play the crucial role due to their profound resource drawn from the advantage traditions in dietary customs, hygiene and health. Muslims must prepare in long term of view to keep SARS away and even prepare adequately for the possible next epidemic coming.³⁵

If Muslims become ill, they do not go to the idols and witch, sorcerer for prayer. Rather they pray to Allah in silence (*du'a'*, Arabic for prayer) for an early recovery as well as they receive the medical treatment from the doctor. If a Muslim is so ill and faces dying he will be taking the fate easily since he believes in pre-destiny, so he is not afraid of death, thus he will not be loaded heavily with psychological burden in mind,³⁶ taught the Akhonds.

Unlike Muslims who could submit their fate to Lord and accept what the fate falls to them, the Han Chinese, or the unbelievers regarded by Muslims, would feel a great loss in such a surprising infection. When a Han Chinese gets sick he is so scared and so sensitive to the disease that he does not want to mention his sickness, even the word of sick itself would not be spoken out. However, the Muslims are different from the Han Chinese, they know that it is not useful to be so anxious and worried. Muslims should seek *sabab* (Arabic for way, chance or measure) to heal

³⁴ Ma Binwu, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

³⁵ See the website of the Central Department of the United Front of the Communist Party of China: www.zyztb.org.cn

³⁶ "Yisilan wenhua yanjiu" (Research on Islamic Culture), No. 2, 2003, Xi'an Association of Islamic Culture, p. 24.

the virulent disease.³⁷ So the reactions from Muslims and Han Chinese in the crisis are quite different. Such a sharp contradiction is a reflection to their different attitudes toward religion. In comparison, the clerics in Islam attempted to show that the believers are more scientific-oriented than the unbelievers who always criticize the believers against sciences.

3. HOW MUSLIMS DEAL WITH SARS.

Muslims described the anti-SARS movement a war without smoke and gun-shots so Muslims needed to prepare the worst consequences and also to be ready to be rewarded the best. In their preaches Imams of the mosques often told their Muslim folks with the Quranic verses: “Nor can a soul die except by God’s leave, the term being fixed as by writing. If any do desire a reward in this life, we shall give it to him; and if any do desire a reward in the Hereafter, we shall give it to him. And swiftly shall we reward those that (serve us with) gratitude”.³⁸ “And ye have no good thing but is from God: and moreover, when ye are touched by distress, unto Him ye cry with groans”.³⁹

However, to overcome the terror and win over the calamity the Muslims must think of Allah, and remember His teaching: “O ye who believe! Save yourselves and your families from a Fire whose fuel is Men and Stones, over which are (appointed) angels stern (and) severe, who flinch not (from executing) the Commands they receive from God, but do (precisely) what they are commanded”.⁴⁰ “Mankind! Fear your Lord! For the convulsion of the Hour (of Judgment) will be a thing terrible! The Day ye shall see it, every mother shall forget her sucking-babe, and every pregnant female shall drop her load (unformed) thou shalt see mankind as in a drunken riot, yet not drunk: but dreadful will be the Wrath of God”.⁴¹ “O ye who believe! Shall I lead you to a bargain that will save you from a grievous Penalty? – That ye believe in God and His Apostle, and that ye strive (your utmost) in the Cause of God, with your property and your persons: that will be best for you, if you but knew! He will forgive you your sins, and admit you to Gardens beneath which rivers flow, and to beautiful mansions in Gardens of Eternity: that is indeed the supreme Achievement”.⁴² These are the verses in the Quran frequently chanted and recited by the Akhonds and Muslims in China in the time of SARS.

³⁷ Ma Mingliang: *Psychological Hygiene*, “Musilin Tongxun” (The Muslim Newsletter), p. 4, August, 2003.

³⁸ *The Glorious Kuran* (3:145), *op. cit.*, pp. 159–160.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, (16:53), p. 669.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, (66:6), p. 1571.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, (22:1–2), p. 850.

⁴² *Ibid.*, (61: 10–12), pp. 1541–1542; Lu Yunchang (Imam of a mosque in Hunan): *The Prevention Better than Healing in the Medical Work*, “Amin” (Faith), No. 2, 2003, p. 39.

Besides using the Quran and Hadith as the spiritual weapon to strengthen the confidence dealing with the epidemic infection, the Muslims also took substantial measures trying to eliminate SARS. After SARS broke out and spread in haste the Islamic Association of China promptly sent a letter to all local branches of the Islamic associations in the country, requested them to take all the necessary determinants to prevent SARS from spreading. One of the measures was to shorten the time of Friday congregation in order to avoid the large group of people being contaminated by SARS. In the region where SARS afflicted the life of the people so severely the mosques and religious sites were ordered to be closed temporarily in order to stop the widespreading of SARS virus. The letter also advised the Muslims to cremate the corpse of the deceased who was afflicted by SARS virus and did not need to perform the Islamic funeral ritual service and burial service which would be further afflicting the participants. The letter issued by the Islamic Association of China explained that such kind of conduct was entirely in accordance with the Islamic doctrine and Islamic law.⁴³

The biggest fear for man is the time of dying, therefore the death always awakens people with their religious sentiment and their perception of destiny. That is particularly the case of SARS, viewed by the Chinese Muslims. Akhond Yang Huiying cited a verse from the Quran: "For each (such person) there are (angels) in succession, before and behind him: they guard him by command of God. Verily never will God change the condition of a people until they change it themselves (with their own souls). But when (once) God willeth a people's punishment, there can be no turning in back; nor will they find, besides Him, any to protect".⁴⁴ A piece of Hadith was also recited: "Pestilence is a punishment to the previous generation. As you hear that somewhere an epidemic disease is erupted, you must not go to that place. If the plague occurs in your inhabitant area, you do not need to run away in scaring".⁴⁵

The Islamic *Madradas* (Arabic for religious educational institution, or college) in Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu Province formulated six regulations to prevent the SARS from spreading into Gansu. The measures include the blockading the *madrassa* campus and segregating the religious students from outside society, cleaning the student dormitories frequently; besides, students should not participate in all the cross-regional religious activities on a temporary basis.⁴⁶

The clergymen of the mosques in Linxia, the so-called "Small Mecca" or the center of Islam in China, and the Akhonds in Jishishan County, Linxia County all agreed that the special measures could be initiated to prevent SARS, for example, that spraying disinfectant in mosque, temporarily canceling the daily prayer services

⁴³ Qin Fei: *With Love Heart in the Anti-SARS Campaign, Emphasizing Reality to Promote the Accommodation*, "Zhongguo Zongjiao", *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁴⁴ *The Glorious Kuran* (13:11), *op. cit.*, pp. 605–606.

⁴⁵ *Shengxun Zhuji* (The Pearl of Hadith Collection), Passage 1433.

⁴⁶ See the website of the Central Department of the Communist Party of China: www.zytzb.org.cn/zongjiao.gansu.

and Friday congregation in mosque and if necessary to cremate the corpses of the deceased Muslims who died in SARS. Of course, such a burial practice definitely does not fit to the Muslim's customs in their Islamic way for the funeral services. However, the Muslims in Linxia supported these staunch measures.⁴⁷ Akhonds even used the Quranic verse to try to gain the agreement from their fellows: "Never stand thou forth therein. There is a mosque whose foundation was laid from the first day on piety; it is more worthy of thy standing forth (for prayer) therein. In it are men who love to be purified; and God loveth those who make themselves pure".⁴⁸

On June 5th, 2003 the Akhonds or clerics from the mosques in Lanzhou acknowledged in the seminar organized by the Islamic Association of Gansu Province that the so steadfastly erupted SARS catastrophe had brought a tremendous challenge to China and had afflicted a great loss to the lives of people and their properties.⁴⁹ Akhond Hei and Imam Ma made it explicit of the way of Islamic life in their mosque service sermons in Linxia. The way of Islamic life, in their words, was very effective as the preventive measures taken against SARS.⁵⁰

According to the report given by Mr. Li Mutang, the chairman of the Islamic Association of Anhui Province, also the member of China Political Consultation Committee, there are 430,000 Muslims and 200 mosques in Anhui Province, located close to the Yangtze Delta, the most developed economic region in China. In reacting to SARS and anti-SARS movement, the Islamic Association of Anhui Province demanded all mosques in the province to take measures to separate the SARS patients from the others. The Imams told their followers that to cremate the corpses of the Muslim SARS patients who passed away in hospital is legal for Muslims and Islam. The Imams of various mosques spread the scientific knowledge of healing the SARS in their sermons and preaches afterwards, and the Muslims followed their religious leaders' teachings.⁵¹

Mr. Sha Pengcheng, a Muslim and the executive manager of a private enterprise, ordered his company factory to manufacture the herb medicine for healing the diseases of throat and lung, and to distribute the traditional medicine freely in mosques and Muslim communities of Xi'an city.⁵² In Beijing many mosques were ordered to close down for the religious services during the high time of SARS crisis and the Imams advised their Muslim fellows just staying at home to perform the prayer and other religious services.⁵³ Such kind of the segregation imposed upon the Muslim

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, www.zyztzb.org.cn/zongjiao.gansu.

⁴⁸ *The Glorious Kuran* (9:108), *op. cit.*, p. 473.

⁴⁹ See the website of the Central Department of the Communist Party of China: www.zyztzb.org.cn.

⁵⁰ Ibrahim, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

⁵¹ See the website of the Political Consultation Committee of Anhui Province: www.ahzx.gov.cn/2005-04-20.

⁵² "Yisilan wenhua yanjiu" (Research on Islamic Culture), No. 2, 2003, Xi'an Association of Islamic Culture, p. 26.

⁵³ My personal observation as I twice visited Balizhuang Mosque in the eastern suburbs of Beijing and talked with Imam of the mosque in late May, 2003. Eventually the visitation of mosque in

communities was as a preventive measure to blockade SARS virus spreading from one place to another.

One Muslim summarized three ways to keep away SARS done by God's believers: (1) Allah likes those who are pure (clean in hygiene). Keep good habits in hygiene. (2) Keep good habits in dietary custom, i.e., abstain from pork, blood and the meat of the deceased animal, unlawful food. (3) Cultivate the health in mentality and have a righteous mind.⁵⁴ Another Muslim discussed his experience to fight against SARS. If one wonders how did Muslims react to SARS and deal with this calamity, he would like to answer it: "A. Muslims should ask themselves by heart: whether or not do we break the prohibition and law which Allah set aside in the Quran for us? Do we totally forget the teaching of Allah, the achievement that Lord has created the world for us? Do we follow the road guided by the Prophet Muhammad? Do we observe the law regulated by the authorities? B. Do not fear! We must believe in the power and almighty Allah and He decides the fate of everyone. We must believe in the destiny set by Allah. C. We must rely on Allah and look for the chance (Arabic *sabab*) to gain the medical treatment if we are afflicted by virus. D. We need the distinguished view of the world for death and life and obey the regulation made by the regime on such a disease. For Muslims it is very difficult to accept the cremation of the diseased corpse without any Islamic ritual performance. However, we must take any measures to prevent SARS breaking out".⁵⁵ The truth for Muslims is that God can protect the faithful persons and that God has the pretty means to overpower the evil. Hence, the faith plays the important role in encountering the natural disaster.

4. RELATION OF ISLAM WITH SCIENCES

The general mentality of the public opinions in China toward religion is that it is definitely "backward, anti-science, connected with superstition". Even the country has embarked its ambitious opening and reform program for more than twenty years, and in spite of its religious freedom in practices being guaranteed at least by the national constitution. Such a paradoxical phenomenon is due to and also is obviously rooted in the long time's communist propaganda and its atheistic ideological education. Lot of Chinese people, particularly the young people, regard religion totally negative and thoroughly opposite to science. The majority of Chinese also think religion absolutely

this period was not allowed according to the regulations made by the city governmental authorities, however, the Imam of the mosque anyhow friendly received me and engaged in a long conversation with me. This Imam told me that all mosques in Beijing had to take such a staunch measure to prevent SARS transmitting further.

⁵⁴ Ma Liqiang (deputy editor-in-chief) of the magazine "Zhongguo Musilin" (Muslims in China), the Islamic Association of China: *Lesson and Reflection from the Pandemic*, "Zhongguo Zongjiao", *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁵⁵ Yi Zhi, *op. cit.*

blocked China's marching road toward its modernization and social advancement. However, such kind of hypothesis has been proved as an entirely flawed through the evident SARS incident in 2003.

Many clerics in Islam regarded their religion as having no contradiction with science. They thought that Islam had never taken any stand against science anytime in history. According to the view of Imam Bai Runsheng, the chairman of the Islamic Association in Shanghai and the member of Shanghai People's Congress, Islam always esteems sciences and shows great respect to scientists. There is no case like Christianity that scientists were persecuted and sciences were vehemently opposed in a certain period of history such as the Middle Ages' Inquisition. Throughout the Islamic history since it was founded in the 7th century, many Muslims have contributed their wisdom and talents to sciences and have developed the glorious Islamic civilization. Muslims hold that there is no boundary between Islam and science. In Islamic culture it contains many scientific elements and scientific truths. The text of the Quran includes many scientific teaching and instructions.⁵⁶ In the Quran and the Hadith there are quite a lot of scientific illustrations such as cosmology, the correct explanation to the universal law and natural phenomena, good methods in hygiene, the honey's function in healing of fever and illness, the biological knowledge, the astrological theory and others.⁵⁷

An Imam recited a Hadith in the period of SARS: the Prophet Muhammad said that "Allah assigns prescription for every disease, you do not be afraid of the medical treatment". The Prophet Muhammad also said that "whatever the ill imposed by Allah, He must also give you any kind of medical treatment". "As every disease has a way to be healed we must rely on Allah to treat the ill and we believe that the ill can be healed thoroughly".⁵⁸

On the other hand, Muslims positively used the scientific ways and the modern medical sciences to involve in the campaign struggling with SARS. Two female Muslim university students who studied in two different military medical universities were sent to Xiaotangshan Hospital of Beijing for emergent diagnosis to the SARS patients. These two female Muslims coincidentally were the sisters coming from a Muslim family in Xianyang City of Shaanxi Province. They used their medical knowledge they had learnt during their high educational period to treat the SARS patients at that time. The Muslims all over China prayed for the two sisters' safety as the news was broadcast.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ My interview with Imam Bai Runsheng as he came to Shanghai Normal University for a guest lecture on Islam and Modern Sciences, in the afternoon of Oct. 12, 2005.

⁵⁷ See Nasr, S. H.: *Islamic Science: An Illustrated Study*. World of Islam Festival Publishing Co. Ltd., 1976.

⁵⁸ Ibrahim, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

⁵⁹ Su Meng: *Two Flowers in Anti-SARS Campaign of Xiaotangshan*, "Musilin Tongxun" (The Muslim Newsletter), July, 2003, p. 7.

For ordinary Muslim people sciences are embodied in Islam and if they follow Islam they actually follow the way of science. For instance, Islam teaches people not to consume impure meats such as pork or dead cattle, and Islam prohibits stuffs such as blood, dog meat, meats of strange poultries and animals that may trigger pestilence, i.e., eating civet meat causes the virus of SARS. Muslims also say that the Quran advises people to eat moderate meal or not to keep a big stomach and live in extravagance. Islam also teaches Muslims not to be greedy and being lavish in living habits and style. Islam emphasizes the importance of keeping health condition, ritual purifying and ablutions. Muslim scholars argue that eventually, the Quran is much earlier than the modern sciences to find the ways to prevent the spreading of the pestilence that afflicted the people. The Quran eventually has paved the way for the scientific development and its measures in hygiene are the successful guarantee for the public health.

Many Quranic verses and Hadith quoted by Muslim clerics in China during the spring of 2003 when SARS was rampant became the scientific epigrams and maxims for Muslims in their struggle against this plague. In the sermons given by Akhonds and Imams the lengthy explanation of the Quranic verses mixed with scientific knowledge and medical knowledge consisting of interesting religious discourses. Such religious discourses made by Islamic religious personals during SARS crises have not only contributed to the efforts through the forms of the measures launched by the Muslims in their communities of China for SARS prevention, but have also greatly helped the non-Muslim Chinese people understand the correctness of the Islamic teachings, the scientific truths in the Islamic hygiene habits and the compatibility of Islam or religion to the modern sciences. The discourses have resulted in some degrees of the mutual understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims in China, and also have resulted in the new formed public opinions that religion is not anti-sciences, and rather religion is complementary to sciences, and even sciences are embodied in religion, are guided by religion. Such a view has been expressed in the public opinions in recent years through the role of the elites who both serve in the studies of religion and in the administration departments in the China society.⁶⁰

5. CONCLUSION

The SARS, the grave disease plunged China into a calamity, with a span of less than a year has drawn people a bitter lesson: it was not the religion causing this virus, rather it was the consequence of not believing in any faiths and spiritual traditions including religions to have caused this epidemic. Actually, religion such as Islam

⁶⁰ See website of the Institute for Research on World Religions, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, led by Prof. Zhuo Xinping who has sponsored several forums on the role of religion and its contribution to the civilization: xxx.cass.org.cn.

takes a very positive role to have prevented from SARS' spreading and Islam has promoted a scientific, healthy way of life for Muslim communities. Many Muslims concluded with such a remark: SARS revealed a truth that Islam was a scientific way and a straight way guiding people's life to a happy end.

Eventually, the SARS event has displayed that the catastrophe such as disease of SARS cannot shake the foundation of Islam and the Muslim communities in China. Islam in China has its own independent faith system which is regarded by the majority Muslims as a science and truth. Islam known by the Muslims in China is compatible and also flexible in its teaching and implementing to handle with the issue such as the SARS crisis. SARS has illustrated the continuant encountering between the faith (science) and superstition, the encountering between the believers and non-believers, between spiritual and material, the struggle between the righteous way of life and the corrupted life style, the clashes between justice and evil. The SARS crisis has not weakened the faith of the Chinese Muslims, rather it has strengthened spiritual determination of the Muslims in the maintenance of their Islamic tradition and their Muslim identity. It has greatly refreshed their awareness of Islamic supremacy in a dominant atheistic and materialistic oriented country. The Muslims in China again have clearly realized through SARS event that no force and no power can defeat their faith in Islam because they regard it as a scientific religion. Finally, the SARS event marks the fundamental divergence between the Muslim communities and the atheism regime over the issues of the nature of religion, its function and its way of life in a drastic change of the China society, which Muslims think is gravely hurting both morality and environmental set. The Quranic discourse among the Akhonds and Imams in Islam of China could convince the argument that religion has a strong stand in the contemporary China society even in a crucial time.

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Bookshop, 1996), and *Glossary of Chinese Islamic Terms* (London: Curzon Press, 2001). His Chinese publications include *Islam in Contemporary Central Asia and Its External Connections* (Beijing: Institute of World Religion, CASS, 2000). He has participated in several international conferences and read papers on the subject of Islam in China. He is one of the co-founders of Shanghai Workshop of Science and Religion's Dialogue in the Urban Society, an LSI Program of the Metanexus Institute.