

EMBRACING UNCERTAINTY IN LIFE & THE SHARIA



Dr. Osman Umarji

Embracing Uncertainty in Life & the Sharia

- Dr. Osman has his full paper on the topic here: <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/osman-umarji/embracing-uncertainty-how-to-feel-emotionally-stable-in-a-pandemic/>
- Life is full of decisions to make; it is a series of decisions. We have to decide what to do with our time, what to wear, how to spend wealth, whether or not to take a job offer. We are constantly evaluating and making decisions.
- Humans desire certainty. We want a guarantee we made the right decision. We want a sense of security that we have life under control. Decisions when uncertain actually use different parts of the brain.
- In Ayah 17:12, Allah SWT tells us there are high levels of the certainty in the universe. They are clarified in intense detail.

- In Ayah 30:48, Allah SWT tells us there are situations with less predictability, like clouds. We can measure when eclipses happen, but we cannot do so with the rain.
- In some ways, the universe is incredibly precise, yet also unpredictable. This unpredictable and predictability coexist in many systems, and the shariah. Even minor variations of something that could create something even bigger.
- There are five things unknown to us:
 1. **Day of Judgement**
 2. **Rainfall** Human civilization has depended on this for many things: produce, agriculture, when to travel, etc. Allah SWT only allows it to be known probabilistically
 3. **Children** We cannot predict what rizq they will have or their personality
 4. **Income** Most people like to choose jobs that are predictable, we try to forecast our budgets and income
 5. **Time and place of death**
- The important matters have uncertainty. "Uncertainty has been woven into the fabric of the universe through the will of Allah SWT."

Levels of Perception and Knowledge

- **Yaqeen** – 100% sure: Example: the existence of Allah SWT
- **High Probability:** There is a high probability that when you drive you won't get into a car accident. Although, there is a small chance you will. It does not stop you from driving.
- **Unsure (50-50):** We do not like to be in this position, so we try to move towards that which is slightly more probable. Improbable <50
- One of the reasons gambling is forbidden is that we should not act on something so improbable, which goes against basic logic.
- Uncertainty tolerance definition: a cognitive bias that affects how a person perceives, interprets, and responds to uncertain situations on a cognitive, emotional, and behavioral level.
- In laymen's terms, it manifests in how you think, feel and behave.
- What we find is that uncertainty tolerance is the main root of worry. It is not a good thing to have.
- A foundation hadith relating to this: "Where you to put your complete trust in Allah SWT, He would provide for you as He provides for the birds. They go out hungry in the morning and return filled in the evening."

- The bird operates in an uncertain world, but it does not stop it from going out.
- Another hadith: “Call upon Allah SWT with certainty that he will answer you. Know that Allah SWT will not answer the supplication of a heart that is negligent and distract.”
- The Prophetic Attitude is to take our difficulties to Allah SWT, and say, “I do not know, but you know” and Allah SWT will provide for you. It alleviates discomfort. The worry of the Prophet SAW was how to act within those circumstances, not examining the nature of them.
- For example: When the wind would blow, it might be good or bad. It may provide a comforting wind, or torment. The Prophet SAW would ask for joy from it, if it were good, or to protect him from it, if it were bad. The Prophet SAW was not focused on the nature of the incident, rather how to respond to it.

How does uncertainty tolerance predict mental health and perceptions in life?

- Dr. Omarji took a surveyed 1200 Muslims who had the following demographics:
 1. Ages 25-34 (36%)
 2. South Asian (over 70%)
 3. Female (73%)
 4. Prays five times a day (73%)

- About half were realistically optimistic and most had said their relationship with Allah SWT got better as a result.
- **Results:** High uncertainty intolerance leads to worse mental health (a high correlation). Poor mental health led to maladaptive coping methods (like watching TV shows or eating more). Good mental health led to more adaptive coping methods (like reading Quran or watching lectures).
- Two Pathways (Uncertainty Intolerance vs Uncertainty Tolerance)
- Uncertainty Intolerance leaves the person feeling more anxious, thinking negatively towards life, and behaving through more negative coping methods. Uncertainty tolerance leads people to be more calm, have a positive outlook, and have more positive coping methods.

The Role of the News

1. News is uncertain. By its nature it is sensational. It is not meant to give you calm. You are not going to find certainty and clarity through it.
2. The messengers of Allah SWT give us the news that matters and help us process the other news.

Allah SWT Put Uncertainty in the Quran

- Is the religion itself certain in everything?
- There are two types of verses in the Qur'an: those that are precise (clear-cut), and those that are ambiguous (mustabihat).
- There are verses that only Allah SWT knows the meaning of. Those who are firm in knowledge will leave it to Allah SWT.

Uncertainty in the Shariah

- There are foundational matters of aqeeda and fiqh that are certain.
- In aqeeda we are certain Allah SWT exists, that we will be held accountable on the Day of Judgement, the Prophet SAW is Allah's SWT Messenger, etc.
- In fiqh we are certain about things like prayer and zakat.
- There are secondary matters of aqeeda and fiqh that are uncertain. As mentioned, earlier we know about the Day of Judgement, but not when it will occur or in what sequence. In fiqh, we are not certain in which way we put our hands in salaah.

Why does this Uncertainty Exist?

- It is so we turn to Allah SWT for guidance. Ibn Taymiyyah (may Allah have mercy on him) before writing passages about tafseer would make so much dua that Allah guides him to that which is right.
- It is so we put effort into learning. If anyone could open up the Qur'an and understand it, what would be the difference between a random person and the person that strives for Allah SWT?
- The ambiguity (mushtabihat) always allows us to learn and grow.
- It allows us to understand differences exist. Allah SWT allows for differences of opinion to exist.
- It is important to understand that when we meet something that we do not understand right away, if it does not impact our aqeeda or daily behavior, it is okay to be unsure of it and we move on. Perhaps Allah SWT uncovers it in our lives, or maybe He doesn't, however, we always keep our trust in Him.

Consequences of Uncertainty Intolerance

- People with more uncertainty tolerance tended to have more issues with
 1. God letting bad things happen to good people.
 2. Find some of God's commands or religious rulings troubling.

The Prophet SAW advised us to take our anxieties of this life and channel it into the akhirah. Work on that station in the afterlife and Allah SWT will take care of you.

FAQs

- What are five things generally unknown to us?
- What are the four levels of perception and knowledge?
- What is uncertainty tolerance?
- What is the Prophetic Attitude when dealing with uncertainty?
- What is the role of the news in uncertainty?
- What are the two types of verses in the Qur'an?
- What are some reasons uncertainty exists?