

Coronaspection – Introspection V

Interviews with

Maria Voce, Italy

Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, USA

Sister Jayanti, England

The fifth “Introspection” will feature one theme that is common to three very different interviews. The theme is love. It is central not only to these messages but also to many of the contributions to *Coronaspection*. The three interviews of Introspection V allow us to consider different ways in which this fundamental spiritual reality is thematized in different religions and in different settings. The first interview features Maria Voce, President of the Focolare movement. This lay Catholic movement has worldwide presence and draws its initial inspiration from the recognition of God’s love as the antidote to civil life crumbling in times of war. At its core is a vision of unity and brotherhood of humanity. Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf is a noted Sufi author and activist, who in his own way also seeks to realize a vision of unity across society and between religions. Sister Jayanti represents Brahma Kumaris, a global new religious movement that originated in India and that focuses on meditation and interiority as means of effecting change, along with service. Not only are the religions to which the three contributors belong different, but also the type of communal organization, the type of service and the kind of leadership role that each of the three contributors plays are distinct. Despite these differences, we can recognize the workings of a fundamental common principle in their respective spiritual lives – love.

For Maria Voce, we may consider love as the core driver of her work and that of her organization. Her decisions during COVID-19 crisis are informed by the principle of love, in light of which she sought to relate to people impacted by her decisions. Love is also the spiritual force by means of which one can deal with one of the main challenges posed by the COVID situation. The interviews with leaders posed the question of how to cope with fear and panic. Relying on the teachings of the Foundress of Focolare, Chiara Lubich, Voce returns to the fundamental teaching that only love casts out fear. Love is modelled as a mother’s love. The mother’s love for her children provides her with the courage to undertake exceptional feats, even if fear remains in her heart. Lockdown during COVID is seen through the lens of love. Living in close quarters and the ensuing challenges are opportunities and invitations to practice love. Love should be creative. Let love suggest “not hundreds but a thousand ways” we can be there for others, whether they are nearby or far away, also by using all the technical means available to us. Problems may arise in the future, even when this pandemic is over. These are encountered with the belief that there is Someone who brings history forward for our good. This Someone is God, Who is Love, Who loves everyone and Who therefore cannot fail to bring good out of all these situations. Clearly, the Christian view of God as love provides the foundation for the centrality of love as her core message and as the fundamental principle for coping with challenges, whether occasioned by COVID-19 or otherwise. Love is also the foundation of hope. Her view is fundamentally optimistic. This optimism comes from faith in God's love. God loves creation,

His creatures, all people and God is Love. This, then, becomes the basis for a view of life that is one of hope. While we remain in the world we must live out of love, so that we can leave the world a message of love that will continue into eternity.

If love is the central message for Maria Voce, it is also one of the important messages voiced by Imam Abdul Rauf. Rauf's message revolves around an attempt to obtain a God's-eye view of reality, what he calls a "theocentric perspective". This goes to the core of defining self-identity. We need to find the truly stable part of self-identity, which is the divine image and the divine breath in us. In reality we are all one. The drive for unity that informs the Focolare's quest is here affirmed as grounded in Islam's most important principle, more important than any specific observance – the unity of God. This in turn leads Abdul Rauf to love. Quoting Jesus, Imam Abdul Rauf quotes the two great commandments – the love of God and love of the neighbor. Loving God and loving others is dependent on loving ourselves. The greatest love of all is God's love of Himself, and He created us as an expression of His self-love. You love God by loving the other, and loving creation. Corona virus is testing our capacity to love each other. When you love God you also love solitude, itself one of the consequences of Corona virus. One therefore advances along two paths – love of God in solitude and love of the other, in action and good deeds. Like Voce, Abdul Rauf considers the work of health professionals as an expression of love. Whether in solitude and contemplation or in action and service, the community as a whole manifests one integrated vision of love in its dual interrelated manifestations, love of God and love of the other.

The third voice in this Introspection touches upon love from the perspective of subjective experience in meditation and the interior life. The core recommendation of Sr. Jayanti for a situation such as the lockdown of COVID-19 is to deepen one's experience of and contact with God. This takes place through the reading of scripture and through meditation. Wisdom and meditation are the two pillars. These raise the mind to the experience of God. Within that experience, we note some important references to love, though these do not occupy the same systemic position they did in either of the other two interviews. God is experienced as love, power and protection. Deep prayer is a form of meditation and is based on an engagement of love. The Divine grants infinite love, compassion, non-judgementalism. The analogy is to a mother's warmth and love. The emphasis on maternal love demonstrates how differently love can be conceptualized in different religious contexts. If for the Christian, love is an expression of the Father, for Brahma Kumaris, divine Father and Mother represent different aspects, and the love aspect is specifically associated with the Mother.

The differences and nuances in how love and unity are expressed in different religions can point to distinctions between religions and serve as points for mutual enrichment. But it is much more important to recognize the core spiritual reality that is shared across the religions. Love provides the drive and goal for our relationship with God and for our relationship with one another. It is one of the most potent drivers of the religious life, as we see from this sample of teachings, drawn from different traditions. And it is the foundation for unity, which is recognized by all three contributors not only as a desired social reality but as an expression of the true and ultimate reality.