

Coronaspection – Introspection VIII

Interviews with

Bishop Domenico Sorrentino, Italy

Prof. Marcia Hermansen, USA

Rabbi David Wolpe, USA

This Introspection in the “*Coronaspection*” series focuses on one theme that runs through the entire “*Coronaspection*” project and finds clear expression in the three interviews of the present Introspection. Coronavirus is not simply negative. There is a silver lining. It may even be considered a blessing. Good can come from it and it is up to us to uncover and discover that good. Each of the interviews in this Introspection profiles different dimensions of how Corona can bring about a positive development. This broad common denominator may be stated in ways that can readily be carried from one religion to another. Or it may find expressions that are culturally specific, as we shall see with reference to Islam and Ramadan.

The theme of the goodness of God and how it comes to expression during the pandemic is a central feature in the sharing of the Bishop of Assisi. His residence is in the same house in which the Bishop dwelt at the time of St. Francis and his home played an important role in notable stations in the saint’s life. One of these was when he lay there sick and close to death. It was there that he added some stanzas to his famous Canticle of Creation, notably his praise to God for “sister death”. This is a lesson in how goodness can be highlighted under any circumstance. One can sing God’s praises even on one’s deathbed. Even in the most difficult situation, when it is hard to understand how goodness reveals itself, we need to be confident of God and His goodness. This, then, leads the Bishop to a consideration of how God’s goodness can be found in the time of the pandemic and how grace can be found in the crisis.

One important dimension is the discovery of the home as a site of prayer, consciously following the Jewish example. It is an opportunity to go deeper into the prayers that are usually recited in Church, and to feel them inside. The home is then transformed into a sanctuary. We noted in Rabbi Lazar’s sharing that this is actually a lesson that is relevant for Jews as well. The emergence of the home as a site for the spiritual life will be featured presently also in the Muslim contribution and we recall Swami Chidanand’s reference to it in a Hindu context. It is thus one of the themes that runs across “*Coronaspection*”.

While being in one’s home, we also have the opening to expand our consciousness to the broader community. According to Christian teaching, the entire Church is present in every Eucharist. This is not usually experienced. Now, however, at a time of crisis, there is a sense of universal solidarity and conscious awareness of other parts of the broader church, indeed of all of humanity, all of whom are brought into one’s prayer and liturgical celebration.

In other ways the pandemic provides opportunities for deepening the religious life. Solitude is an opportunity to go within oneself, to study the Bible. It is also an opportunity for parents to be with their children. It is an opportunity for bringing back family prayer. It is a time to learn a different rhythm of life, as opposed to the previous stress and pace of life. It is a time for awareness of nature and the cosmos and an opportunity to discover a balance among all things and a global fraternity with nature.

If St. Francis were asked what he would tell us at this point in time, he would reply, suggests the Bishop, that we should sing the canticle of Creatures. And if St. Francis could speak of “sister death”, why can’t we speak of “brother Corona”?

The theme of opportunity also figures in the presentation by Prof. Marcia Hermansen. The interview with her took place during the first days of Ramadan and the question of how Ramadan would be celebrated under these particular circumstances was an important motif. Many of the usual celebrations are not possible, as one does not go to the mosque. Much like the consequences of the closure of churches, the closure of mosques too provides new spiritual opportunities. One of the main opportunities that emerges has to do with redressing gender balances. Much of Ramadan takes place in the mosque and much of it is in the domain of men. Shifting celebration to the home opens up new opportunities for women to partake of the home-based celebration in the same ways as men. Ramadan is a time for spiritual deepening. One asks of oneself – where is my soul this Ramadan? Celebrating Ramadan in conditions of COVID-19 is an opportunity to go deeper in celebration. Typically, the expectation for such deepening is mostly centered on men. It is they who go to the mosque and partake of circumstances of retreat, especially during the final 10 days of the holy month. This year, these days are celebrated in the home, making it theoretically possible for women too to benefit from the deepening that characterizes these days.

The analogy to Judaism’s emphasis on the home as sacred space comes up also in Prof. Hermansen’s contribution. It is a time to learn the value of home worship. Discussions in the community at this time regarding observance of Friday prayers and how these shift to the home ultimately point to the domestication of religious practices. These open up the space for women to play a more central role and to partake more fully of the prayers and rituals. Indeed, this leads to placing special emphasis on the performance of rituals in the family, such as the sacralization of the meal, which now receives more attention than it might otherwise.

Both for Sorrentino and for Hermansen there is distinct awareness of present circumstances coming from God. “We trust that God is speaking to us in this situation” (Sorrentino). “We see the face of God in this, because everything comes from God” (Hermansen). This provides a point of contrast with the third presentation, that of Rabbi David Wolpe. Wolpe’s theology is one of randomness, or as we jokingly state during the interview, of holy randomness. But even if we do not consider God as the author of all things, God is still a factor in how we deal with challenges such as COVID-19. God is our strength in the struggle. And the struggle is one of making the most out of the trials and hardships, regardless of how we consider their author or their source. Here Wolpe shares the feeling of the other two contributors that we have in COVID-19 an opportunity. Solitude is a pause or preparation that invites us to consider how we will be different following the pandemic. Tests are opportunities to explore what is within us. Even fear should be explored. What is it that we are afraid of? We must want to know who we are and this is a moment of self-discovery.

One important benefit and discovery of COVID-19 relates to a theme that has become prominent in current affairs since – racism. Wolpe approaches the theme of interconnectivity, one of the main themes of “*Coronaspection*”, through an exploration of racism. We must go to the roots of racism, and understand it, in order to discover the deeper understanding by means of which we can overcome it. Suspicion of other groups is evolutionary and biological. Other groups have viruses and diseases. Coronavirus occurs in an age in which we can no longer limit the harmful effects of viruses to one group. As he says to me in the course of the interview – “someone bites a bat in China and here we are talking on Zoom.” We are led to an understanding of our interconnectedness. We are at a point where we have the possibility of transcending our evolutionary limitation with a spiritual outreach. This is one important lesson/opportunity/blessing of Corona that has been noted time and

again throughout the project. In fact, it serves as the message of the “Coronaspection” trailer, suggesting its centrality. If the first two interviews surveyed above focus on the opportunities for interiorization and deepening of understanding, Rabbi Wolpe adds a further dimension, the opportunity for all of humanity to grow to a higher degree of spiritual evolution through the recognitions that emerge from the particular circumstances of COVID-19.

This is the first Introspection that brings together Jewish, Christian and Muslim voices. One might think that the basic similarity in approach and the common quest for finding the positive dimensions of hardship are simply features of the Abrahamic faiths. I do not think this is the case. The themes highlighted in this Introspection are raised also by Hindu and other leaders. I think it would be more appropriate to state that this Introspection teaches us something fundamental regarding the religious life. It is based on a deep spiritual-evolutionary drive for finding the good in all circumstances, for using them for growth and spiritual advancement. It is fundamentally shaped as an evolutionary drive of personal and communal growth. All religions are in the process of growing, either in and of themselves, with reference to their teachings or with regard to how well received, understood and practiced they are by their constituents. They are characterized by a fundamentally positive and optimistic outlook. This positive outlook informs the three contributions and the ways in which they find in the hardships of COVID-19 opportunities for growth and transformation for the individual for the community and for humanity.