

Coronaspection – Introspection II

Interviews with

Grand Mufti Mustafa Ceric, Bosnia

Geshe Tashi Tsering, India

Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati, India

The second “introspection” in the *Coronaspection* series brings together three religious voices that we do not often find in conversation with one another. The present reflection draws out themes that emerge from this three-way juxtaposition. Our Hindu and Buddhist voices represent the same geo-political reality of COVID-19, India, through two individuals, Geshe Tashi Tsering (Buddhist) and Sadhvi Bhagawati (Hindu), who have oversight and leadership roles in large monastic communities. The Muslim voice comes from Bosnia, in the person of Grand Mufti Emeritus Mustafa Ceric. The common thread that ties these three presentations is the process of going inwards, under situation of lockdown, and recovering the core spiritual insight that drives the spiritual life and the life of the community.

Sadhvi Bhagawati helps run the Parmarth Niketan Ashram in Rishikesh. The interview with Swami Chidanand, President of the Ashram, was featured in *Introspection I*. Sadhvi’s presentation is framed by awareness of the lockdown. On the one hand, lockdown is an opportunity for service, both inside and beyond the ashram; but more importantly, lockdown is a moment that requires interpretation. What is the message of the moment? “Mother nature has sent us to our rooms in order to learn a lesson.” This is a special and sacred time in which the invitation is issued to go within. Going within is necessary in order to reestablish a fundamental balance. We can only cope with external challenges by going deeper into our spiritual roots. Meditation holds the key to such deepening and the future calls for leaders and actors who serve the world precisely from the depths of their spiritual experience. Ultimately, what we discover within is what we discover on the outside, the reality of the one God who unites all and pervades all. Thus, COVID-19 is a moment of going inward in order to discover the most fundamental reality of divine presence and unity. In this unity action and contemplation, meditation and service come together to serve across all differences and boundaries.

Grand Mufti Ceric offers a parallel teaching. He too recognizes a tension between the outer and the inner, and the need to recover the inner dimension as a foundation for a properly functioning world. In fact, to him this is the very purpose, message and teaching of Corona virus. In picturesque language, he describes the virus itself as delivering a message to humanity regarding humanity’s priorities and habits. It invites a civilizational reset. To religious traditions it delivers a message regarding how religion is practiced. Closure of religious institutions is not simply a necessary precaution against the virus. It is part of the message. Religion must be authentic and too much of religion lacks such authenticity. Hence, we find our Churches, Mosques and Synagogues closed, a kind of symbolic divine initiative that points to what we need to learn. The lesson itself points inward, to the realm of the heart and the spirit. As Rumi states: God could not be found in places of worship; he could only be found in the heart. Citing Al-Ghazali, he affirms that what makes us truly human is spirit, soul, mind and heart. COVID-19 is therefore an invitation to go deeper into our true spiritual essence. In this essence we discover also the deeper commonality across religions. However, we must discover our unity not based

upon the kind of fear that the virus generates. We must discover our unity because it is grounded in the unity of God Himself.

Geshe Tashi Tsering, Abbot of Sera Mey Monastery in southern India, is responsible for 5,000 Tibetan monks. Caring for them under conditions of lockdown is particularly challenging. Alongside the challenges of how to maintain spiritual and ritual routines under these conditions, he offers us a vision of what it is we can turn to internally in order to find strength as we face present challenges. If the Hindu and Muslim perspectives pointed to God as the goal and source of the interior life, one may best describe Geshe's orientation in terms of wisdom. This is, of course, typical of the difference between Buddhist religious language that is fundamentally non-theistic and wisdom oriented, and the religious language of most other traditions, that speak of God. For Geshe Tashi, what guides us through this period is a vision of wisdom and understanding. A proper orientation equips us to deal with challenges. Such an orientation includes appreciation for the nature of reality itself. If we recognize the nature of impermanence, we are better equipped in dealing with our fears. If we understand how perishable the body is, we can accept changes that occur, whatever they may be. If we understand the nature of our interconnectedness, we are better equipped to face challenges in practical ways. It is this wisdom perspective that is expressed in a famous teaching of the 7th century Shantideva, a teaching oft quoted by the Dalai Lama – "If there is something to be done to solve the problem, what's the point of getting upset? If there is nothing to be done, what is the point of getting upset?" The changes that we hope Corona will bring about can also be captured in terms of wisdom – we should emerge from it more thoughtful, with more of a sense of reality, a global vision and a sense of interconnectedness.

One might think that with this focus on wisdom and understanding there would be no room or no need for ritual or prayer. This is of course not the case. Geshe Tashi shares with us specific rituals and mantras that have been used in situations of epidemics in the past. The Tara mantra, with which he concludes his interview, is a call for liberation from dissatisfaction. Dr. Ceric also concludes his interview with a prayer, seeking refuge in God from sorrow and grief and many of our vices and limitations. It is a call to God to help us overcome despair and find hope.

Considering all three interviews as a group, I am struck by the common movement that characterizes the spiritual life across different and even seemingly conflicting forms. An inward movement is fundamental to all three visions, and it is precisely under the circumstances of lockdown that such an inward movement is all the more necessary. In fact, the inward movement may be the very purpose and message of the time. We may discover God, wisdom or the spirit within. Regardless of these different emphases, all three contributors move to the realm of the heart. Through this movement they all emerge with a vision of a more unified humanity.