

Coronaspection – Introspection X

Interviews with

Sri Shrivatsa Goswami, India

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, USA

Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg, England

The previous Introspection dealt with the question of God as author of COVID-19, how it might be understood in theological terms and, in line with different understandings, what the proper religious response ought to be. One of the themes that comes up time and again, both in the “*Coronaspection*” project and in opinion and thought pieces that are not necessarily of a religious nature, is the relationship between the Corona crisis and nature or the environmental crisis. The present Introspection focuses on some angles of this problem.

We begin with Shrivatsa Goswami, who associates the question of Corona in its relation to nature to the question of its possible divine origin. Let us consider the question of whether Corona is a divine act or a human creation (a current discussion at the time the interview was held). If, as some say, God is punishing us for our misdeeds, it is still on account of human misdeeds that God has to take action. Shrivatsa himself rejects the view of punishment, echoing the sentiments expressed in the previous Introspection by Metropolitan Ware. It must be a product of human folly in the human arena, because God is all loving and compassionate and is not a sadist. He cannot create Corona, because he loves his creation, for which he works. Corona cannot be created in God’s laboratory. This does not mean that the virus itself was humanly manufactured. Rather, some mistake in our lifestyle has made it manifest. A religious view points to assuming human responsibility, which would lead to viewing the pandemic as a result of human actions. In response, we must take the path of *dharmā*, namely of the various knowledge systems and values that sustain human lives, be they scientific, cultural, spiritual. What these point to is to human arrogance and the need for humility. A perspective of humility leads us to recognize the value of all forms of life, including bacteria. Within our eco-system we have to give away some of the arrogance of being supreme. We must learn to share our space on earth with all these other forms of being. This, then, leads us to imagine what might be a future ecological order. Corona is a shock treatment, that is intended to raise us from slumber and ignorance. Will it succeed? This depends on whether the forces greed will take over again, overriding our true need.

Undergirding Goswami’s views is a recognition of the centrality of the one earth as the common ground of all humanity. This earth provides the foundations on which we exist together in all our diversity - one common ground, a common home. The spiritual principle is *Sarvam sarvatmakam*, everything is connected throughout the universe. This interconnectedness extends to human relations, but also to relations with all living beings, hence the concern for the welfare of all and the need to reposition the human person in a proper ecological view. This is also the foundation for our sharing and pooling of resources in all domains for the good of humanity.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo also puts forth the view that closely associates our relationship with nature to our mutual human responsibility. While she does not engage the question of the roots and causes of COVID-19, how we deal with its consequences has significant consequences for both the wellbeing of nature and the wellbeing of humanity, once it is understood that

everything is interconnected. In a discussion of the suffering experienced during the pandemic, she reminds us that not only humans suffer. Animals too are suffering at present, as they are often confined without sufficient food to eat. The spiritual exercise she recommends for dealing with the challenges brought about by the pandemic – generating lovingkindness - should not be limited to humans only. We should also generate such lovingkindness towards animals.

Looking at the situation, she recognizes the following silver lining in present difficulties: the pandemic brings us together. How we are all related is important from an environmental perspective. If we are smart we will see that all decisions we make regarding recycling, use of plastic, use of resources etc., affect our planet. They bring life into an imbalance, which in turn causes infections. We have been creating an environment that is out of balance. This leads to a realization of our responsibility to one another. Our decision-making affects the earth and therefore all of humanity, our common home and our common future. If we think in a broader view beyond our personal wellbeing, this could be an amazing opportunity to free us from our self-concern. This is an opportunity to understand our mutual responsibility.

The result would be a simpler lifestyle based on the value of contentment. This is, of course, the flip side of greed that Goswami recognized as the great force that could undermine any lessons learned during the pandemic. We must learn to discover the blessing of a glass of water. We should also realize that many do not have clean water because of our consumer habits. A realization of interconnectedness can awaken our awareness and change the world.

Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg is at the forefront of Jewish environmental responses. Themes articulated during the interview echo those articulated from the Hindu and Buddhist perspectives. The present crisis is, at heart, an environmental crisis, concerning how we treat each other and God's world. While deprivation is not in and of itself a good thing, it does teach us important lessons. There is something to be learned about appreciating what we have, not asking too much, respecting all things, such as food, possessions, travel. That should be an enduring legacy of the present crisis and as such is timely in terms of the broader environmental crisis.

The question of the causality between environmental and COVID-19 crises is one regarding which Rabbi Wittenberg is uncertain. Causality is a word that has to be treated with some caution. There is a danger for religious figures to get close to saying that God has brought this upon us as deliberate punishment. Here we see, again, how the question of causality is related to theological considerations and how far we are willing to go in attributing the pandemic directly to God. Nevertheless, there could be a natural causality. How animals get treated and how this enters human life and then spreads through human contact are obvious points of interaction with nature that are associated with the pandemic. A similar situation exists in England, where disease is spreading through trees as well, such as ash and oak. These diseases too have come from elsewhere. This points to the problematics of international trade being carried out without sufficient respect for the particularity of each place.

There is a deeper lesson that can be learned from the situation and it relates both to human relations and to our relation to the earth. It points to a profound connection that is both moral and intellectual. We are one humanity. What happens to one will happen to all, and what happens to nature, will impact humans. Rabbi Wittenberg grounds this in a reading of Ecclesiastes 5,8 – even the king is subservient to the soil. This is the very point made above by Goswami. In Wittenberg's reading, then, we are all, even the most privileged among us, subservient and dependent upon our one common earth.

In order to deal with the environmental crisis we must cultivate a proper religious attitude. This world belongs to God and anyone who enjoys it without sufficient consideration, consciousness of what they are doing – expanding upon the rabbinic idea of blessing to be offered for food – is misusing the divine gift (in Hebrew: **מעל**). We misuse that which is sacred. We need to regard the world as sacred. Because the spirit of life is interconnected, we must be mindful of how we eat, heat our homes and more. We must end the throwaway culture of “it doesn’t matter”, “the world is my dustbin”.

When considering the implications of the Corona crisis upon nature and how COVID-19 relates to the environmental crisis, theology seems to matter much less than the cultivation of thoughtfulness, respect and proper attitudes. Morality and the expansion of consciousness play a much more important role than the particularity of religious belief. The most urgent question is not how Corona came about, whether God was or was not implicated in it happening, or whether it might have been a direct consequence of some form of abuse of nature. In all likelihood there is some connection, but causality is not the most important issue. What matters most are the lessons learned. These come through the three interviews as identical. Human interconnectivity must be seen as part of broader interconnectivity. We must cultivate sensitivity and thoughtfulness to all forms of life. We must expand our attitude beyond the self-serving view informed by greed. Care for the other requires care for our common earth. It is, no doubt, much enhanced by the sense of the sacred and how earth and nature are expressions of God and his gifts to us.