

Coronaspection – Introspection XI

Interviews with

Amritanandamayi Ma, India

Archbishop Justin Welby, England

Rabbi Yuval Cherlow, Israel

One of the recurring themes throughout “*Coronaspection*” is the need for and the power of prayer. The subject figures in almost all interviews. The questions posed to religious leaders touch on how to confront key challenges in the spiritual life and naturally prayer is seen as a potent tool for doing so. Almost all contributors have something to say about prayer and the greater majority of them also share a prayer. The current “Introspection” focuses on the approach to prayer of three leading religious personalities. Many of the project participants would resonate with what they have to say, though there is certainly a particularity to each of their contributions. Juxtaposing them alongside one another allows us to consider the breadth of prayer experience and to identify what matters most about it.

I begin with Amma, Amritanandamayi Ma, one of India’s greatest living saints. Her COVID-19 message relates to prayer in several ways. “Pray intensely, with a melting heart, for God’s grace. Our grandmothers used to say, ‘Take the medicine and chant the mantra at the same time.’ Similarly, in this circumstance, both our diligent effort and God’s grace are equally needed”. The call to prayer emphasizes intensity, and appeals to the melting heart. Prayer, then, is a total, committed experience, quite far from the mere recitation of texts. The form of prayer does not seem to matter. It is the intensity that counts. Grace is the purpose of prayer, drawing God’s grace to address the present difficulties. Prayer does not supplement required action, but complements it. This is analogous to the Hadith cited by Marcia Hermansen – “Trust in God and tie your camel”. Careful action and spiritual reliance on God go hand in hand. How prayer and grace are related for Amma is further explicated: “For anything to bear its intended result, the factor of grace is needed. A proper effort is needed first. But for it to succeed, we require Grace. Prayer is essential to receive this grace.” One final instruction in prayer concludes her brief message: “Know yourself and pray for the world with wakefulness, enthusiasm and peace. Each day sit in your room for some time and chant the mantra Om Lokah Samastah Sukhino Bhavantu.” We have here further attributes of the desired prayer – wakefulness, enthusiasm and peace. Clearly, the quality that accompanies prayer is of prime importance. But we are also given an example of a specific prayer, a mantra, whose meaning is “May all beings be happy”. Amma recommends this practice for present times, as a means of ameliorating the negative impact of the crisis, which she foresaw several years back. It is interesting to consider the recitation of a mantra as a form of prayer. It is brief, repetitive and by force of its repetition seems to allow for the deepening of intentionality, without entry into various ritual or linguistic complexities. Metropolitan Ware provided us with the Christian equivalent of this type of prayer, which he described as arrow prayers, and which he finds particularly useful during these times.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, introduces us to an entirely different way of prayer. It is based in part on recitation of the Psalms, but at its heart lies a process of personal opening up to God, which is made possible only by sincerity. To this end, one must apply prayer in its various modalities, including some that are not always practiced. Prayer is understood as

encounter with God, a different nuance than the seeking of God's grace. This requires engaging the different moods of prayer. These include lament, protest, praise, celebration, petition and other moods. For present purposes, lament and protest are crucial. We must be able to confront God and to share with Him just how bad and tragic present reality is. The Bible teaches us how to approach God with the needed audacity. Consider Ps. 44, where the psalmist throws various accusations at God, who is portrayed as incompetent, as being asleep and more. The ability to express oneself in such a direct way and to channel one's pain in this way gets one to the heart of prayer and expresses an intrinsic honesty that all is not well. Confrontation, then, is a modality of prayer and both Job and Abraham provide further examples. This honesty and sincerity are the means by which our heart is opened to be given comfort and strength. It is worth adding that this is not a one-time process, but a repetitive process, as we are confronted by wave after wave of reality and as we seek to break our hearts open in order to receive God's comfort. Integrity opens one's heart, rather than being turned in on itself. Integrity is the key by means of which protest takes us to the face of God. A space is opened up where one can hear God speak, receive the comfort of God and be drawn to a deeper sense of the comfort of God.

This is one of the most original teachings on prayer that I have heard. One typically considers some forms of Jewish prayer as uniquely addressing God in the argumentative mode or the mode of complaint. I find it fascinating to hear this teaching in a Christian context, based upon biblical precedent. I also note that for all its difference, compared to Amma's instruction, there is one fundamental commonality, and it goes to the heart of the prayer experience – the depth of sincerity and the intensity of prayer itself.

The third contribution by Rabbi Yuval Cherlow illustrates the particularity of how prayer is thematized and practiced in the Jewish community. We have already heard from Rome's Chief Rabbi how distinct Jewish prayer is in comparison with Christian prayer. It is, fundamentally, a group practice of collective recitation of a common, and quite lengthy, prayer text. This contrasts with the more personal and spontaneous forms of prayer in Christianity. The difference between how prayer is experienced in both religions led to significant practical differences, with Churches remaining open for private prayer, while synagogues were shut, because what mattered most was the public performance of prayers. Rabbi Cherlow is aware of this issue and describes the person who is bereft of well-known communal prayers as standing naked. Nevertheless, there are also ways in which prayer experience has been deepened in Corona times. There is now the opportunity for more personal prayers. The tempo follows one's feelings and not group rhythms, suggesting greater depth and sincerity.

Alongside deepening there is also an expansion of the reach of prayer and its intention. COVID-19 is not the affair of any one group. It is everyone's concern. Even though nationality is still very important, there is something in the situation that reminds us of our common being created in God's image and of the fact that we are all in the same situation. Consequently, we can no longer speak to God only about ourselves, our family, congregation or nation. Something international is happening. This is a new reality. Even if you are very selfish, you can no longer approach God with a limited perspective. We are praying for the whole world. Cherlow recognizes that this change brought about by the virus is a big change that could be significant for the long run.

For a tradition that places much emphasis on set prayers, the question arises how this new recognition finds verbal expression. The answer is twofold. New prayers are composed and shared across dedicated online groups by men, *and women*. The new circumstances lead to gender

shifts where leadership, or prayer composition, is no longer purely the affair of a men's club. Thus, we see a flourishing of personal prayers, composed for the situation. Perhaps even more important are the new meanings that are affixed to old texts. Texts live by interpretation and the words of prayer are always capable of bearing new meaning. The meaning of traditional words of prayer is opened up and universalized, as a consequence of the present recognition of how global the new reality is.

There is a continuum between how prayer is practiced in the three religions presented here. Beginning with the minimal structure provided by a mantra, supplemented by intensity of heart, we move to the full engaging of the heart by appeal to prior structures, that are freely combined, either by appeal to earlier texts such as the Psalms or are expressed spontaneously, and that express a range of prayer modalities. The modalities, rather than the text, are what counts, and these are put in the service of the opening of the heart. From here we move to the dynamics of fixed liturgy and prayer texts and how these too are made to come alive in the present situation. Intentionality plays a key role. Intentional performance of set prayer gives it its depth. Intentions redefine the meanings of set prayers under novel circumstances. These are further complemented by emerging private prayers that give expression to the deeper needs of the heart and to novel understandings.

Positioning these three presentations alongside one another teaches us several things. It makes us aware of some fundamental differences in forms and means of performing prayer. But beyond those differences lies the fundamental commonality that what counts in prayer is sincerity, intentionality, integrity and the intensity of the melting heart. For all the differences in form, all speakers and all contributors to "*Coronaspection*" would concur that herein lies the heart of prayer, as we come face to face with God, asking for his grace. As forms of prayer evolve, there is room to consider how the forms of one religion might serve as inspiration and example for another, as the surprising discovery of confrontational prayer in a Christian context suggests. But more than anything, in the new reality described by Cherlow, where we are all in it together, we may be inspired by that power of sincerity and heart through expressions of prayer in all religions.