

Coronaspection – Introspection XII

Interviews with

Singh Sahib Giani Harpreet Singh, India

Imam Dr. Muhammad Suheyl Umar, Pakistan

Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum, Israel

“*Coronaspection*” is a project that profiles the action and the wisdom of religious leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. By its very definition, then, it is focused on religious leadership. One of the questions posed to participating leaders relates to their work during this time and how the pandemic has affected them. There are, then, dozens of descriptions of the work of religious leadership in the project. Being such a fundamental component of *Coronaspection*, the present “Introspection” focuses on the role and functioning of religious leadership during this period.

Religious leadership does one more than one thing and fulfills more than one purpose. If we review the full gamut of activities described in “*Coronaspection*”, we are likely to obtain a fairly comprehensive view of the scope of activities that are typical of religious leadership, in times of calm and in times of crisis. Moreover, we are likely to discover that the functioning of religious leadership is pretty much identical across religions, and that in terms of functionality there is little that separates what is demanded from religious leadership in one religion or another. This is precisely why the wisdom of religious leaders featured in this project can speak to a broader audience, consisting of members of other faiths, and is not limited to its own faithful. The universality of religious leadership was indeed the outcome of a research project undertaken by the Elijah Interfaith Institute, titled *The Future of Religious Leadership*, that resulted in a book publication by that name. Differences in emphasis may exist between leaders, but these different emphases exist also within a given religion and are not expressive of more fundamental differences between religions.

Against the background of a fundamental unity of purpose and responsibility that characterizes religious leadership across religions, the present Introspection profiles three dimensions of the activity of religious leadership. It is certain that the three leaders featured engage in the various dimensions, though the interviews allow us to profile one of these dimensions in relation to each of the leaders. The relationship of the three interviews is thus that of pieces of a puzzle. Their combination provides us with a vision of the whole.

We begin with Singh Sahib Giani Harpreet Singh, the highest ranking official of the Sikh religion. In response to our question regarding his activities during COVID-19, he states: “To provide food and shelter to migrant laborers was an enormous humanitarian crisis. An appeal was made to the Sikh institutions and organizations to come forward and help the Government in establishing health infrastructure, make proper arrangements to help the migrant workers, the poor and the needy in this time of crisis. Apart from providing food from the *langar* [free meals offered at temples], they were provided with suitable accommodation for doctors and nurses and quarantine centers in the *serais* attached to the Sikh Shrines. Mobilization of the community for the establishment of such provisions and support was a considerable challenge”. There is one term by means of which all this can be summed up – service. The community is at the service of others, in collaboration with governmental authorities. We have also seen this with reference to Parmarth Niketan, as we learned from Sadhvi Bhagawati. There is an important particularity to the Sikh

situation. There is an institutionalized form of service in the form of a free meal offered at Sikh temples, *langar*. This service is expanded to other forms of hospitality and support offered to those in need as a consequence of the pandemic. There is an important dimension to leadership that is often overlooked when we consider the functions of religious leaders and institutions – administration. Religious leaders are in charge of institutions and much of their time is spent in administration. Administrative needs shift during a pandemic, and religious leadership must be attentive to the forms of communal service that the situation calls forth.

A very different dimension of leadership is featured in the geographically proximate context of Pakistan. We learn from Dr. Suheyl Umar about his own efforts following the arrival of Coronavirus in Pakistan. These profile the role of the religious leader as teacher, repository of the memory of tradition and an instrument of wisdom who guides and elevates the community. When the virus arrived in Pakistan it was not taken as a health problem that related to the basic human right to live, but as a religious problem, affecting congregational worship. Furthermore, reactions were not free from political overtones, in a response against western countries. People forgot the prophetic model and how early Muslim leaders acted in similar situations. His challenge as a teacher was to convey these teachings, in opposition to popular responses. This related to the battle over closure of mosques as well as to the issue of social distancing, both of which have prophetic precedent. The leader as teacher also has responsibility for providing meaning and proper framing to contemporary events. Local responses to COVID-19 included falling into despair as the beginning of the apocalypse, or seeing God as breaking his wrath upon western civilization, comparing the present moment to the great calamities that overtook nations of old, when they transgressed against a prophet. His role as a teacher required using Quranic arguments to prove that this process had come to an end with the sealing of prophecy. As we already learned from Wahiduddin Khan, periodic warnings are meant to jolt humanity out of its neglectfulness. They are divine reminders, not apocalyptic expressions or punishment for collective transgressions. Coronavirus, then, functions as a mirror of religious understanding, exposing weaknesses and gaps in understanding and teaching. It points to the need for offering suitable, correct and timely teachings in the name of religion. This is the task of the religious leader.

Rabba Tamar Elad-Applebaum offers a perspective that in some way combines the previous two, but also introduces some important additional elements. Her perspective is not that of an entire religion or of large institutions. She is rabbi of a Jerusalem religious community and her attention is focused on serving the hundreds of members of her community. In that context relationship and closeness emerge as primary concerns. Following on the terminology of Ecclesiastes 3, the community has adopted four initiatives, all of which are intended to provide a sense of togetherness under the special circumstances of lockdown.

- A time to talk - a partner (buddy) with whom to talk.
- A time to heal – 3 times a day a broadcast that includes prayer, singing, yoga, meditation, and more.
- A time to embrace – the needs of every person are seen to – young people bring medicine, groceries etc (including to asylum seekers, who are also cared for).
- Time to love – words of wisdom every morning, prayers, including interfaith prayers.

A sense of togetherness extends also to rabbis, who come together twice a week for a support group, in view of the many challenges of the period.

If Sikh activities could be characterized as manifesting an ethos of service, Rabba Tamar's activities are characterized by an ethos of community, relationship and attentiveness. Beyond the various rich activities, there is an overall concern for relationship, care and attention that is deeply personal. That very attentiveness is a meeting point for individuals and for God, which is what makes it a religious moment. As she states, in the context of the pandemic we are recreating our ability to give attention to one other, thereby correcting much of the distance we had before. All this work is informed by a feeling that the attention of God and of human beings to each other are the remedy to what we are going through. Gentle attention to one another is holy attention.

Attention to God points us to one function of the religious leader that was not covered in the present Introspection, and that in fact does not occupy an important place in "*Coronaspection*". While prayer has occupied an important place in the project, it has not been central to the self-understanding of the leaders interviewed. Religious leaders interviewed certainly pray, and they may be models of prayer. However, when considering how religious leaders of all religions globally profiled in our project expressed their vocation as religious leaders, prayer for others (other than in contexts specifically defined along these lines, such as the performance of the mass, described by Bishop Sorrentino) does not emerge as a defining feature of their vocation. In COVID-19 religious leaders offered support by upholding their community, serving the needy, offering their teaching and above all by their caring personal attention.