

Coronaspection – Introspection XIII

Interviews with

Cardinal Cristoph Schonborn, Austria

Elder Jeffrey Holland, USA

Rabbi Dov Singer, Israel

The previous and penultimate Introspection in our series explored dimensions of religious leadership during COVID-19. It focused on ways that religious leaders served and upheld their communities and organizations. The present and final Introspection in the “*Coronaspection*” series also relates to religious leaders, but not in terms of their roles and service, but in terms of their personal experience and transformation, during COVID-19. All too often we lose sight of how religious leaders are also individuals who are in process and of the contribution of their personal experiences to their broader contribution as leaders. The final three interviews in our series place the light on processes and transformations of a more personal and intimate nature, shared by participating leaders. The significance of these processes is not limited to the individuals who share them with us. In each of the cases, lessons learned through personal processes find their way to teaching for others, or at least are considered as lessons in light of which they will practice their leadership. If the previous Introspection presented to us the religious leader as a repository of the wisdom of tradition, the final Introspection suggests that his or her ability to mediate tradition is balanced by personal experience, by means of which deeper understanding is gained. The deeper the experience, the more impact he can have upon others. Transformation of the leader as spiritual person is ultimately a precondition for his or her ability to impact and transform the broader community and the tradition itself.

We begin with the testimony of Vienna’s archbishop, Cardinal Schonborn. The cardinal admits, candidly, that he too, like others, has had moments of depression and fear. He does not hesitate to describe himself as not a strong believer, at least inasmuch as his faith does not prevent him from having moments of anxiety. In his 75 years, he never lived such a crisis. The remedy he finds for himself is also the basis of what he has to offer to others. For him, it is the old biblical experience that history has shown that He, namely God, does not abandon us. He will be the same now and in the future. Accordingly, his meditation is on what does it mean that He is the eternal one. *We* are in time, history is passing, and all of us will pass. So, what does it mean to turn to God and to say: “You are” “You are the one who is”. He admits that sometimes he can’t grasp it, but then again, who can? At the same time, this thought process leads to a kind of peace, because “You are”.

The pandemic leads to a deepening of attitude, even in relation to known truths. Accordingly, we can never take anything in life for granted; our pilgrimage on earth is a pilgrimage. The present situation leads to deeper appreciation for the life that God has given us as well as pushing us to look to the afterlife.

These personal reflections find expression in his preaching. On the eve of Easter, he shares with us the following sermon he is about to preach, that gives further expression to the feelings and thoughts described above, and brings them into the realm where they can be shared with others. We are in the night. This leads us to ask: what does this night teach us? Is God himself bringing us into this night? And the eternal question: why does such a beautiful creation have such terrible

beasts? Is it in God's plan to bring a plague over the whole world? Another question concerns nature. Is nature itself troubled because God has failed to do well, or does He simply allow it? And then there is the question of our betrayals. Have we brought ourselves into this night with our lifestyles, consumerism, forgetting the poor? These dark night questions come up.

Some of the questions that have been raised in the course of "*Coronaspection*" are featured as part of the night experience. Answers are not provided. The night is characterized by questions. His message, and it seems clear to me that this message grows out of Schonborn's personal experience, is that we must live the question and the uncertainty deeply, we must live the night deeply. We must look at what it brings up in us, at the questions it raises in us. We are invited to reflect on these. However, the answer is not the rational answers we give but the hope we look to in the future, the eventual light which is more powerful than the dark night, the coming of the Messiah.

The second revealing personal testimony is offered from a very different Christian context, that of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, by a member of its top tier leadership, Elder Jeffrey Holland. Living through COVID-19, and specifically through the situation of solitude that has been forced upon Holland, becomes a moment of spiritual deepening and even transformation. To begin, being in solitude is an opportunity to confront himself, to see what there is in him and to come to the recognition that "Some things I like about Jeff Holland and some other things need work". He has discovered in himself parts he didn't know previously and that were not visible to him due to the rush and hubbub of events and time.

One of the consequences of this period is that he has become very anxious about the wellbeing of other people. He is concerned about specific people, like his 90 year old neighbor, or his 96 year old President and Prophet of the church. The situation leads him to personalize his care for others a lot more than he was previously conscious. As this is a function of a newfound solitude, this brings him to the recognition that he must have more solitude and reflectivity in his life, beyond the degree of spiritual practice that a very busy public ministry has enabled him over the course of four decades. He hopes he will not lose the feelings he has gained during this kind of solitude.

All this has implications for others as well. As a member of the Church's highest body, he considers what he is going through also in terms of what it means for others. When this is over, and he returns to the context of leadership, he considers that in what he has experienced there is also a lesson for the Church itself. The balance of contemplative and active has to be rethought. This is a lesson for us all.

This solitude that he has not had in 40 years has affected him, with a determination to return to public congregational service and to be a better person in doing it, with more sympathy and more empathy for the people in that congregation. This leads to a more personal views of the grand congregation. Those aren't just nameless faceless people. Those are individual people with individual needs, hopes and dreams and joys and disappointments. While he has known it intellectually, this kind of event has underscored that individuality for him, making him more sensitive to the heartaches and burdens that others are carrying.

This new dimension of caring for others also leads to a broadening of horizons, in relation to whom one expresses these feelings of care. Unity of mankind is implicit in Church teachings, but attention has been mainly focused within. Some shift is occurring and he is recording a

broadening of awareness to a more universal view, even beyond the parameters of the Church. It may take something like this to lead to a shift for the Church and its leadership.

The final contribution by Rabbi Dov Singer is particularly personal, inasmuch as he is the only person being interviewed who had gone through being sick with Coronavirus. Accordingly, what he experienced and what he could share with others was not simply what he was going through during these times, but his actual experiences having contracted the virus. The obvious question one would, and I did, put to him is: What did Corona bring to you? In his reply, Rabbi Dov shuns the quick lessons. It is too soon to draw conclusions. If the illness already reached him, let the lesson be complete, let him remain in a state of listening. Certainly, he would not wish to use it in order to uphold his previous views, citing the Corona as a kind of “I told you so” with reference to its causes.

The basic experience is of weakness and a feeling of helplessness, and of surrender. This is something very powerful and therefore he feels he does not really know and hence prefers to remain silent and to try to listen to the lesson. We are in the midst of something, and you have to not just try to get through the physical feelings and the weakness, which is also a psychic weakness. Rather, the situation invites you to be in silence, and to accept reality, to agree to be weak and not immediately to reconstitute who you were previously. Herein is already a teaching for others, based on the leader’s personal experience.

Solitude during the time of illness was a conscious choice, and here too there is a lesson for others. He even put out a short video that suggests in four steps how to connect to your own intimacy on the basis of the verse “Come my people. Enter thou into thy chambers and shut thy doors about thee, hide thyself as it were for the moment. Until the indignation be past” (Isaiah 26.20). This is an important moment. The verse is part of common tradition, shared by all. The personal experience of the leader leads to discovery of new dimensions, bringing the verse alive in the life of the leader. This is then communicated back as a teaching to the community.

The leader is positioned between the tradition and community. He is a transmitter of tradition. However, his ability to transmit it is not only a function of his knowledge but also of the depth of understanding and wisdom he has gained. Personal experience is a condition for gaining such wisdom. Observing leadership in times of Corona allows us to identify those moments through which they are formed as finer instruments of the tradition for the sake of the community and for the sake of the religious tradition itself.