

Coronaspection – Introspection III

Interviews with

Pope Francis, Vatican

Ven. Chan Khong, Vietnam

Chief Rabbi Ricardo Di Segni, Italy

The third “introspection” in the *Coronaspection* series raises the question of the universal and particular in the vocation of religious leaders. What message do religious leaders deliver that is of universal significance and when is or should their message be specific and addressed to their particular community only? The question comes to light in view of this *Introspection* featuring Pope Francis, who is in one way the leader of a particular community, but in another way the most universal leader, heading a Church that describes itself as universal (the meaning of “Catholic”). It is interesting to contrast the type of message offered by Pope Francis with the sharing with Rabbi Di Segni, Chief Rabbi of the community of Rome, located only a kilometer or so away from Pope Francis, making him his local Jewish counterpart. In contrast, we will be looking at a completely different kind of religious leader – Female, Buddhist, Asian – Sr. Chan Khong, interviewed from Vietnam.

The question of the universal and the particular underlies the entire *Coronaspection* project. What is the point of making available teachings and interviews of 40 religious leaders of 7 religions and 15 countries if their message does not speak beyond the particularity of their community and its situation? The underlying assumption of our project is that it does. However, the way in which it does varies, as does the way in which the teaching is delivered.

Of the three leaders presented here, Pope Francis’ contribution is not based on an interview held with him for the project. I reached out to Pope Francis via his close friend, Rabbi Abraham Skorka. Pope Francis was supportive of the idea of the project, but circumstances (linguistic, technological and organizational) did not permit a direct interview. Instead, we proposed to the Pope to receive his approval for a selection of teachings he had given, which we could recast in the form of an interview, along the lines of some of the key questions raised in the series. We obtained his blessings, as the opening slide indicates. I have also been able to share with him, via other intermediaries, the scope of the project as it finally took shape, its participants and graphics.

Pope Francis’ message is powerful, but it is cast in a different mode than most contributions to our project, as it is taken from his sermons and preaching around Easter time. Yet, this very fact allows us to pose with clarity the question of the universal and the particular. The head of the world’s biggest religious organization gives a teaching grounded in the Gospel narrative. His art as a preacher makes the biblical story come alive, but not only for Christian faithful. His message is cast in the most universal terms, such that can speak across religions. His message focuses on fear and hope. There is a right to hope, a new and living hope that comes from God, that is much more than mere optimism. Francis moves to the realm of religious phenomenology and experience and in so doing opens up a vision of a dimension of faith that is itself universal.

Other messages, too, are of universal significance: “We were put in this world to love Him and our neighbours. Everything else passes away, only this remains. The tragedy we are experiencing

at this time summons us to take seriously the things that are serious, and not to be caught up in those that matter less, to rediscover that life is of no use if not used to serve others. For life is measured by love.”

Some of these messages are strongly marked by a Christian ethos, notably the emphasis on love, which will be repeated time and again by Christian participants in *Coronaspection*. Yet, this emphasis, as well as the call to focus on what is essential will be sounded by teachers of other faiths (Abdul Rauf in a Muslim dialogue and Norman Fischer in a Buddhist context, are two that immediately come to mind).

Venerable Chan Khong speaks to us from Vietnam, but her perspective too is universal. She has travelled the world extensively as the closest disciple and collaborator of the Vietnamese/French Zen teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh. She has disciples worldwide. But above all, the core message she shares is a universal one. I found the interview with her, in some ways, to be the most charming of all interviews. The interview with this endearing 82 year-old (you wouldn't know it watching the interview) nun started like no other. As soon as the video connection was established, she began singing: “we are all stars of one sky; we are all leaves of one tree.” She felt the urge to return to singing later on in the interview. This disarming entrée into the interview led to my having to catch up with “trivialities” such as introducing her later on in the interview. While offering a view from Vietnam, with the particularities of how the authorities cope with COVID-19 and how this impacts life in the monastery, her message is universal. As the opening song suggests, the core of her message is the universal unity of being of all. Significantly, the different theology she espouses as a Buddhist teacher is not an obstacle to common understanding, as she conveniently (Buddhists would say: skillfully) uses God language interchangeably, allowing her message to resonate also with practitioners of most religions. As she teaches us, a superficial view of reality leads to wars and conflict. A deep view of reality uncovers our fundamental unity. The particularity of the Vietnamese context is also a teaching in forgiveness and peacemaking, drawing on local tradition and its universal significance.

The interview with Rabbi Di Segni presents a different balance between the universal and the particular. Coronavirus struck very hard at the Jewish community in Italy in general and in Rome in particular. Of the two purposes of the *Coronaspection* project – understanding how religious communities coped with the crisis and the timeless wisdom that emerges from the situation – this interview leans more towards an understanding of the real-time difficulties brought upon the community by COVID-19. In inviting Rabbi Di Segni to take part in the project, I had sought to feature the day to day challenges of local leadership, as I did with other interviews that similarly gave the view from Italy (Bishop Sorrentino and Maria Voce). The tension between the universal and the particular plays itself out also in relations of majority-minority. The Jewish community is a minority community, struggling for its survival and for maintaining its community life and ritual life, in line with the particularity of religious observance, typical of Jewish Orthodox life. The contrast with the broader Christian context emerges throughout the interview, as we are made aware of the challenges of maintaining Jewish ritual observance. While churches are open for private prayer, synagogues are closed. Fundamental differences between the Jewish and Christian practices of prayer are brought to light. If the Pope could broadcast his mass daily, held down the road, the halachic observances that Rabbi Di Segni follows prevent holding services online. This leads the Rabbi to reflect on religious authenticity and its contemporary challenges.

Against the background of the very particular challenges encountered by the Jewish community, it is interesting to note the high degree of universality that emerges from the Rabbi's sharing. The basic existential reality of fear, solitude and financial struggles is one shared with broader society. Consequently, teachings offered by the Jewish community internally have been picked up by society at large. Messages shared on Facebook, such as relying on the metaphor of Noah's ark for these times, receive broad circulation.

The role of the religious leader is a concern that emerges out of Rabbi Di Segni's interview and is relevant to all three contributions in the present introspection, as well as to the project in its entirety. One dimension of the "job description" of the rabbi is particular to the Jewish tradition – ruling on matters of Jewish law, the halacha. Other dimensions are more universal – pastoral responsibilities as such are universal, especially the need to provide comfort and support to those who are suffering. The same holds true for the rabbi's role as someone who dispenses material support and charity. Indeed, Rabbi Di Segni features this as an area of common concern and an area for learning across religions.

Perhaps the most universal message that comes through in different ways in the three interviews is the message of love. Featured most prominently in the Pope's addresses, it provides one of the points of orientation of life in Corona times as presented by Venerable, and is one of the conditions for relationships, hence a core responsibility of the religious leader, in the Rabbi's teaching.

Considering these three presentations in their diversity, I am struck by how religion can never be a purely inner-group affair. Even if we seek to profile the immediate and burning concerns of a religious community in distress, these are ultimately informed by broader concerns of a universal nature. The three contributions to this Introspection feature different emphases of the universal and the particular. But they also remind us that no matter how particular the language, the celebration or the situation, a deeper look at the religious life of a community will always reveal fundamental principles that speak to all, beyond the boundaries of a given community.