

Coronaspection – Introspection IV

Interviews with

Swami Atmapriyananda, India

Yahya Cholil Staquf, Indonesia

Rabbi Arthur Green, USA

The fourth “Introspection” may be best considered as complementary visions of interiority. The three individuals featured all have significant administrative and public responsibilities in their respective organizations. Swami Atmapriyananda is Vice Chancellor of the Vivekananda University, a vision of Swami Vivekananda that was nearly a century in the making, till Swamiji identified how it may be realized and made that vision a reality. Rabbi Arthur Green too is founder of a school, the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College. Pak Yahya, as he is known, is secretary general of the largest Muslim organization globally, Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama. All three men have clear visions for their religion and its future, and these visions are situated within a broader global context of the world, its needs and future direction. No less significantly, all three draw on resources of mysticism and spirituality in their personal spiritual lives and it is from the wellsprings of these resources that they discharge public and outward-facing activities. It is therefore of great interest to follow how similar dynamics find parallel articulations. While all of them would likely concur with one another not only in terms of the broader movement but also in terms of the specific visions, each one expresses what it means to turn inwards in his own particular way.

Swami Atmapriyananda grounds his vision of turning inwards in Hindu anthropology and recognition of different aspects of the person. Corona is giving us a lesson in deepening ourselves. Turning inwards, we must learn to love our own company. We must not depend on the company of others in order to define ourselves. Atma Arama is the process of the lighting of oneself. Swamiji takes us through a guided process of cultivating admiration and appreciation for the workings of the self, from the bodily level and upwards. The spiritual movement is also one of transcending our intellect and its limitations. We must go on our knees and ask God to lift us up beyond our mental limitations, granting us a wisdom that is higher than mere knowledge. The fruit of the interior movement is love. Waves of love, harmony and wisdom come forth from within. These, then, serve as foundations for truer relations between people.

Pak Yahya shares a parallel process. If, for Swami Atmapriyananda, the focus was upon the individual in relation to the world at large or society at large, Pak Yahya’s contribution is articulated in the context of identity development. There is a fundamental tension between group identity and personal spirituality. The point is being made specifically from within the context of how Islamic identity is formed. As I point out in conversation, based on the work of Prof. Vincent Cornell, one of the problems of contemporary Islamic identity is the way identity has become corporate, at the expense of personal spirituality. This is precisely the context within which to appreciate Pak Yahya’s statement. As he makes clear, interiority is the key to the spiritual life. Finding a personal relationship with God by going inwards (and going inwards is a process that is recommended even for those who do not believe in God) holds the key to addressing most contemporary challenges. It fortifies us against existential fears, such as produced by Coronavirus. It also helps us envision a new world, one in which boundaries vanish

and relationships are defined from the depth of personal spiritual engagement and not based upon conflicting group identities. Violence in relations between religions is traced back to identity construction and only personal spirituality can serve as its antidote. We are moving into a new civilizational reality, a more unified one, which is markedly different from patterns inherited from history. Spirituality equips us to better envision such a future global reality. Corona is an invitation to global solidarity.

The third vision of interiority is more specific, drawing on the mystical tradition of Judaism. Rabbi Arthur Green is himself a scholar of Jewish mysticism. He draws on the Kabbalistic notion of *Binah*, understanding. *Binah* is the great mother, from whom all emerges and to whom all returns. The spiritual state of *Binah* precedes divisions and is therefore a source of unity. It is also the point to which our minds and consciousness must be elevated, as we seek to rise above the challenges and difficulties of present day reality. Thus, fear is overcome by going to the root in the divine mother. Just as for Pak Yahya the movement of interiority occasioned by Coronavirus was also the driver for redefining inter-group relations, so for Green rising to *Binah* is an invitation to rise above the limitations of particularity. This is a vision of deep universalism. Everything is born of the cosmic womb and universal brotherhood is its consequence. I note an interesting correspondence between Rabbi Green and Swamiji. *Binah* is a place beyond knowing. We recall Swamiji's emphasis on gaining a wisdom that is beyond knowledge. Corona, then, as Swamiji states, is a teaching in humility. That humility, as we have seen already in the teaching of Rabbi Lazar (Introspection I) and as we see explicitly and implicitly in the contributions of the present Introspection, is born of our recognition of the limits of our knowledge. Knowledge can separate. Higher wisdom or understanding unifies. The spiritual path which we must take, as we deal with the consequences of the pandemic, points us to that higher place of a unified understanding that transcends difference. In so doing, it offers not only perspective and comfort from the pandemic, but also addresses some of the most pressing issues of humanity, its divisions and conflicts. In the same way that Pak Yahya relates to history, so does Rabbi Green relate to memory. This important component of the spiritual life must not drag us down. We must cultivate a personalized and spiritualized form of memory that opens us up to the future, within a broader vision of unity.

A spiritually-oriented vision of unity cannot be simply a philosophical reflection. It must be part of a spiritual quest and process. It is therefore important to note that all three contributors speak of meditation as part of their spiritual life. While all three come from highly ritualistic traditions and are serious practitioners of their faith, they all evoke meditation as a necessary complement to the objective expressions of ritual and law. Swami Atmapriyananda and Rabbi Green offer specific structures or processes for contemplation. Pak Yahya refers to interiority and going inwards more broadly. All share in the recognition that fulfillment of the spiritual life requires such an internal spiritual orientation. And all recognize in COVID-19 an opportunity for deepening spirituality and an invitation to a new way of practicing religion and for global conduct. Introspection IV demonstrates the profound similarities in vision, approach and practice that characterize spiritual thinkers of three diverse traditions. Each draws on the particular language and practice of his tradition. Together they point to a direction that humanity as a whole is invited to take, not only in response to Coronavirus but more fundamentally as part of its inevitable spiritual growth.