

Coronaspection – Introspection IX

Interviews with

Patriarch Daniel, Romania

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, India

Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, England

This “Introspection” is built on three contributions, two of which are not based on the kind of interview that informs most of the “*Coronaspection*” series. The voices of Patriarch Daniel and of Maulana Wahiduddin Khan are better described as messages than as interviews and are accordingly shorter than most of the contributions to “*Coronaspection*”. It is precisely the fact that these contributions were formulated as messages for the project that leads to them addressing head-on a question that is fundamental to the project but in many instances remains unstated. What is Corona virus? In other words, what is the theological category by means of which we conceive of it and give it meaning? One of the main purposes served by religion is to provide meaning to life and to phenomena. How we cope with a pandemic, as is the case for how we cope with any major expression of suffering and hardship, requires a framework of religious interpretation, by means of which we find the meaning in the event and come to terms with it. In this sense, then, answering the question “Corona is....” and filling the blank with a religiously meaningful category is a fundamental religious activity that in some way informs all religious responses to the Corona virus. Indeed, throughout the interviews we have encountered theological reasonings by means of which meaning was brought to the situation. The present Introspection is devoted to this issue because of its importance and because these messages are clear instances of seeing this fundamental religious dynamic at work.

Patriarch Daniel opens his message with a clear statement of how he sees the Corona virus. The pandemic is understood as a test. The notion of test leaves open what it is that is being tested. For instance, Yahya Cholil Staquf applied the notion to faith. Our spiritual orientation is being tested and the pandemic is a time for growing in faith. A similar notion is voiced by Rabbi Lazar. As Imam Abdul Rauf claims, the purpose of creation is to be tested. Patriarch Daniel understands the test differently. It is a test of the intensity of love towards God and towards our fellow human being. In line with an emphasis that we find throughout our project by Christian leaders, love is profiled as the core value and that is what is being tested.

Understanding the purpose of the pandemic translates to a call to action. If our faith is being tested, prayer is an appropriate response, by means of which our faith is strengthened and we multiply love for God and for our fellow humans.

The 95 year old Indian Muslim teacher and theologian Wahiduddin Khan resorts to another category by means of which to understand COVID-19. He begins by ruling out a possibility. Corona virus is not a curse. In other words, one must approach it as something that is ultimately positive. God almighty witnessed that man is deviating from the right path of nature, so he has given a warning. It is positive in that it is a warning, however the fundamental framework for understanding the situation is one of judgement. Deviation from the path has consequences, whether these are understood as stemming from broken balances in nature or whether these are due to a direct judgement of God. Either way, a stern judgement is the framework for turning the moment into a positive one. This in turn also defines the response to the warning. We are

called to correct our ways. Gratitude to God is central to the return to the right way. We should look to a God oriented life. This will lead to a return of God's blessings. Ultimately, this heralds a new world to come.

For both voices God is the author of COVID-19. Not all participants are as confident. The dividing line between different positions is not a matter of the religion from which one speaks. Thus, Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury in a forthcoming Introspection rejects God as the author of the situation. Welby is uncomfortable with the view that Corona is sent by God, even for purposes of our own growth, though God does work for the good through the situation. We have seen the difference in these perspectives also in the previous Introspection. Welby's position is similar to that of Rabbi Wolpe, who actually developed a theology of randomness in terms of origins, though God is our strength in the battle. In terms of God as author of the pandemic, the third contribution to our Introspection is closer to these positions than it is to the first two contributions.

The third contribution to this Introspection is in the form of an interview with theologian and Orthodox Churchman Metropolitan Kalistos Ware. It is striking that Ware begins the interview with the affirmation that COVID-19 is not a punishment, because God is a God of love, who does not want us to suffer and who does not inflict pain on us. We notice once again the centrality of love for a Christian view and how this leads not only to rejection of the negativity of curse, but even to the possibility of punishment, a byproduct of judgement, which is certainly one possible modality of divine workings. Rather, God has given us freedom and he allows the world to work itself. God permits many things which are not his will. Hence, we cannot say the pandemic is his will; it is something he allows. The reason why punishment is out of question is because the innocent would be punished along with the guilty. In positive terms, Corona virus is a challenge to reflect on the meaning of our lives. It is an invitation to return to what matters most.

While God gives us freedom, God is watching over us and will not abandon us. This leads to the personal sharing of Metropolitan's process. The experience is a challenge to his faith: does he really believe in God. This, we note, is identical to Yahyah Staquf's understanding. Though they do not share the same theological grounds in terms of the pandemic as initiated by God as a test, in terms of how it is lived experientially, the two leaders arrive at the same point. Profiling faith raises the question of doubt and difficulties of making sense of the situation, especially in view of the overarching view of God as a God of love. Why is God allowing this? Such reflections are addressed not philosophically but by exercises for controlling the mind through prayer. Both Christian contributors to this Introspection tie prayer to the recognition of the God of love. For Patriarch Daniel, prayer is the response by means of which we pass through the test and grow in love. For Metropolitan Kalistos prayer is the means of controlling the mind in order to keep up the faith in the God of love. One noteworthy point that emerges in Metropolitan's contribution, and is in fact unique to him in this series of interviews, is the recognition of God as our co-sufferer.

There seem to be some broad commonalities that characterize fundamental approaches within each religion. The affirmation of God, in Christianity, as God of love is one. The notion of being tested, by Muslim thinkers, is another. Yet, how these are applied, the ways they speak to COVID-19, how much they serve as theoretical foundations and how they shape religious experience will vary from person to person, even within one religion. As the present Introspection shows, even within the Orthodox Christian tradition, despite its fundamental

common ground, we can find more than one approach to God's involvement in the present moment. I am struck by how, despite the common ground that religions and sub-traditions provide, there is much room for the individual leader and thinker to construct his or her worldview in different and at times conflicting ways. God is always in the picture, for all three figures surveyed here, as well as the others quoted. However, there is great divergence in understanding the nature of his involvement. This will in turn condition responses. Here we see great variety, from the call to repentance to the attempt to use prayer as a means of controlling the mind and avoiding the difficult questions that cannot be answered.