

Coronaspection – Introspection VI

Interviews with

Rabbi Ephraim Kenig, Israel

Prof. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, USA

Prof. Nader Saeidi, USA

When I chose to feature the three interviews listed above as one Introspection, this was based on a clear sense of the complementarity of the spiritual worldview of the three contributors. Religious worldviews are diverse. Even if fundamental beliefs unite almost all believers across religious differences, still, there are many ways of being religious. The three voices featured in this Introspection feel to me, and I am sure would also feel the same to the speakers themselves, as growing out of the same spiritual matrix. I would characterize this matrix as mystical, contemplative, God-centered, with a strong sense of how everything in life and history contributes to spiritual evolution and to a God-centered reality. It is a matrix from which a view of the human person grows, one that ultimately privileges soul and conscious spiritual processes over intellect. It marshals humility in the presence of God over human technological and scientific achievements, even if these are carried out under a mandate from God. It is one in which spiritual experience is central, hence the need for meditation, contemplation and the integration of mysticism and a spiritual-philosophical understanding into an understanding of religion and its purposes. In a sense, then, this Introspection creates a conversation between three mystics, each growing from similar spiritual ground on different religious terrains – Jewish, Muslim and Bahai.

A sign of the deep commonality can be found even in the fact that similar statements are made by speakers, unaware of each other's contribution. Rabbi Kenig and Prof. Nasr both quote the notion of feeling from God to God as a characteristic of the spiritual life and a way of addressing fear that arises in the face of challenges such as presented by COVID-19. Both of them also quote a similar saying – “the good is in what occurs” (Nasr) or “If things don't go the way you want, you must learn to want them the way they go”. This similar sense of acceptance of purpose and intentionality of events as they unfold is another small sign of fundamentally similar spiritual approaches. Prof. Nasr and Prof. Saeidi, in turn, highlight an anthropology that seeks to go beyond human mind and effort. Consequently, COVID-19 is a moment of taking stock of the false trust we have placed in science. Humility emerges as a core virtue that we must acquire and it is necessary for bringing God back to the center-stage of our awareness and for making such a quest for divine reality the goal of our lives.

Given my appreciation of these three distinct contributions as expressive of one fundamental spiritual approach, I would like to present some common themes as a composite message that emerges from their joint contribution to this Introspection. Rather than profile theological differences, and there certainly are some important ones that I will not engage here, I prefer to draw the contours of the common spiritual view that emerges from the three contributions. Each of the speakers in his own way and within the parameters of his tradition articulates these elements. Considering the three interviews in tandem allows us a fuller appreciation of the worldview.

Divine intentionality and purpose are important common features of how this worldview addresses the Corona crisis. It is not simply something that has happened, nor is it a punishment, though it may be a call to spiritual awakening. It is a spiritual opportunity and it requires of us to take stock of our most fundamental positioning as humans and as a society, in relation to God. Balances have shifted and we have lost proper perspective. The loss that is brought about through the virus is an opportunity to remember what matters most and to return to spiritual basics. The forced interiority is an occasion for spiritual reflection and, once again, for taking stock of how we are positioned in relation to God and to true reality. Divine purposefulness is therefore appreciated in cognitive and educational terms. The pandemic forces us to think, reassess and reconsider our priorities and where we place our hope and trust. It also forces us to consider what is essential and how loss leads us back to the basics of the life and of the spirit. Our human reality is one of forgetfulness and, as Saeidi states, we forget our true identity. The message is that we must turn suffering into an opportunity to recall what we have forgotten.

The understanding that suffering is transformed into teaching conveys more than pedagogy. It also expresses a developmental and evolutionary view of life and history. All three contributors would subscribe to a spiritual evolutionary process whereby events unfold as part of a design to help humanity advance on its spiritual course. Even moments of loss are stages of potential growth. Nasr provides us with an example of this in how following the Mongolian decimation of Persian population there was a flourishing of spirituality. This leads us to reflect on what might be born from the present pandemic. Particularly, with the awareness of our interconnectedness, a fact brought home starkly by the spread of the pandemic, what might this spell out regarding growth in understanding between religions?

This leads to a view of the new consciousness that can emerge from the moment of crisis. It is one of humility, appreciation for others and one that affirms our own interconnectedness. This has strong consequences for the interreligious situation. Rabbi Kenig speaks of God waiting for a very long time for a time that people can share spiritually, in peace, across their religious differences, in a way that will produce spiritual growth for all. Prof. Nasr shares his perennial philosophy, that recognizes the fundamental similarity in religions and views them as parallel paths up a mountaintop. Prof. Saeidi shares with us Baha'ullah's understanding of glory. Glory is not in loving your own group; glory is in loving humankind. Honour used to be connected with hatred of others but, claims Baha'ullah, we need to redefine honour. Action based on this attitude is true freedom and places service at its center, leading us to true distinction.

A God-centered perspective redefines relations between groups and religions, and places them in a context defined by God, even as entry into the depths of the Self leads to the discovery of God, which is also a discovery of the fundamental identity of all humans. This vision of ultimate unity, purpose and evolution must translate itself into a vision of hope and optimism. All three contributors share in the fundamental vision, but it is Prof. Saeidi who articulates most clearly how all this spells out hope. If all hardships are lessons, if we are in the course of constant evolution and growth and if God is the source and goal of the entire process, then this composite spiritual worldview is perforce one characterized by hope and optimism. Different contributors to "*Coronaspection*" ground their understanding of hope in various ways. We recall Maria Voce grounding her fundamental optimism in God's love. Saeidi's grounding of hope in an entire worldview rings true not only for his presentation, but for all three contributors to this Introspection.

