

Coronaspection – Introspection VII

Interviews with

Archbishop Antje Jackelen, Sweden

Sri Sri Ravi Sankar, India

Ven. Norman Fischer, USA

This Introspection in the “*Coronaspection*” series, brings together three very different kinds of religious leaders. The first, Archbishop Antje Jackelen, is the head of the national Church of Sweden. 59% of Swedish population belong to that church, making it very representative and formal in nature. It also places the Church in a particular relationship with the government in terms of providing services, especially during Corona times. The second leader is one of India’s most popular gurus, Sri Sri Ravi Sankar of the Art of Living movement, a vast international network of followers, who engage in the spiritual life and in service activities. The third is Ven. Norman Fischer, former Abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center, who is now a private teacher, without official institutional responsibilities. More significant than the differences in the role that these leaders hold in their respective religions is the difference in their teaching. The differences in their religious approaches can be illustrated through examining their teachings on one of the questions that the Coronaspection series tackles: how to cope with fear and anxiety.

Archbishop Jackelen addresses the challenges through the practical realities of the church and society as well as through the lens of wisdom, which may be described as psychological insight grounded in scriptural and liturgical practice. The challenge of dealing with anxiety is appreciated within a particular situation, that of Swedish society which is not used to being in crisis. It is a stable society, and only immigrants have had to deal with such challenges. One must find strategies for coping. “Coping” seems to me an important term, inasmuch as it suggests a goal and an orientation for dealing with the challenge of fear. It suggests fear cannot be overcome, but we can learn to cope with it, that is to continue functioning even when there is fear within us. This is, indeed the approach proposed by her. On the institutional side a slogan has emerged: “stay on the side of courage”. If you have to adapt to difficult situations when you don’t see the end, it demands courage to say we are not closing down. I note with interest the appeal to courage as a quality that can be mustered within oneself. We shall see that another important religious leader, Mata Amritanandayi Ma, Amma, makes a similar call for courage. A different way to relate to this is by recognizing the need to cultivate spiritual resilience. The more you have cultivated it before the crisis, the better off you are. But sometimes the crisis also empowers and creates an enormous growth. This echoes the sentiment expressed by Patriarch Mashalian.

Still, one must utilize tools for cultivating courage, and for dealing with our own anxieties and worries. Jackelen mentions two ways of doing it that are extreme and not recommended. One is confronting it totally in order to defeat it. The other extreme is to get distracted. Neither will work. Rather, we must be able to go in and out of what is difficult, to enjoy the islands of normalcy that we can build in the midst of chaos. We must not feel guilty for having fun in the midst of the difficulties that are still there. Liturgy illustrates this. Our prayers are not just “kyrie eleison” (Lord have mercy) but also praise of God, even if the worst of things occurs. The Psalms are a mixture of these two drives. And that constitutes spiritual wisdom. We shall find in Archbishop Justin Welby’s interview a

similar appeal to the complexity of expression in the Psalms as a model for how to cope with fear and with complex emotional realities.

This approach contrasts starkly with the teachings shared by Sri Sri Ravi Sankar. Sankar too has as his goal the quest to reduce anxiety and fear. His path, however, is one of practical counsel and above all of technique. One practical recommendation concerns diet, recommending one avoid white sugar. But more importantly, and as illustrated in detail in the video, Sri Sri offers a series of breathing exercises to calm the mind and to help one overcome anxiety. These do not involve any conscious reflection and are considered efficacious, simply by virtue of practicing one of several techniques.

This contrasts with yet a third approach, that grows out of the Zen experience of Abbot Fischer, and possibly from his Jewish background as well, a religious orientation he seeks to integrate with his Zen practice. In some ways Fischer is close to Sankar. He too relies heavily on the use of breath. However, it is not by using breathing as a form of calming down. Rather, the breath is used in order to come to *conscious* terms with fear and anxiety. In this, his approach may be considered as a synthesis between the approaches of Archbishop Jackelen and Sri Sri Ravi Sankar.

Fischer begins with the recognition that fear has a very bad name. If you say "I'm afraid," the automatic response is to overcome the fear, given that it is uncomfortable. The first step should be to recognize that fear is a normal and important human response to difficult conditions. You have to be friends with your fear; accept your fear. In fearful times, fear is part of my spiritual practice. His guided meditation includes: You can turn within yourself and feel the impulse of fearfulness. And then noticing very intimately and closely where that impulse exists in you, likely in your stomach, you can notice something in you wanting to run away. So you go to that feeling and just take some breathing there. Get yourself to feel like one more breath you can be there. In that way you turn toward your fear and you come to the feeling of "I can breathe this fear in", and then I can exhale and let go. Letting go is distinct from running away from the fear. So, breath by breath I can be flush with my fear and process it. Another moment of fear will come, but I can become comfortable with it and recognize it. The fear motivates me to take care, which is good, but also makes me uncomfortable, so I seek to find comfort with it. Multiple times a day you stock yourself with breaths, and conceive of yourself as moving from turning away from the fear to slowly facing the fear. In that way you can be with your fear and overcome it. Consider: thank God I can think; I could be demented and would have no fear. Prefer to understand the world and be afraid. Ultimately when we have this kind of cultivation we transform fear into compassion. This exercise leads one to realise: "I am not the only one". We are all afraid. In my fear, I feel the fear of everyone. And that's compassion.

It is remarkable to consider these three approaches to a common spiritual challenge alongside one another. They represent an important range of the religious life, extending from technique and practical advice, through wise counsel based upon liturgical foundations to a process of self-conscious spiritual transformation. While it is not my job to evaluate and show preference, this particular moment does lead me to ask whom do I identify with more. I can see the value of all three approaches. If the goal is overcoming anxiety and being able to function, one might approach the situation from a results-oriented perspective, in which case all approaches are found. However, if one approaches the challenge from the perspective of spiritual growth, it seems to me the more comprehensive approach is also the one that is most growth producing. It is not without interest to note that this approach is represented in its fullest in this Introspection by a teacher who combines in his own practice the best of the meditative tradition and the best of the classical theological tradition.