

Pandemics, Prayers, and Parables

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Phoenixes die and rise, the Orobouros serpent bites its own tail, Dionysus is re-membered, and Persephone leaves Hades...cyclically, new states have constantly emerged from death. There is an eschatology to every theology, where endings are believed to give birth to new beginnings and beginnings are cosmogonies coming from endings. As Mircea Eliade says, "Eschatology is only the prefiguration of a cosmogony to come" And, it is at times like these, when the world feels like an open-air Hollywood apocalypse, that we are beginning to feel both the nearing of the end and the advent of a .new beginning simultaneously

We find ourselves holding onto our faith and praying for the ideal new beginning, after we have failed in many ways. The pandemic has challenged all basic assumptions and shown our fragility and shortsightedness as a species that destroyed its own values, prioritized materialism, and metabolized hatred and prejudice. Before the great Fall, the original state of mankind according to all Abrahamic religions, was a paradisiacal one, and somewhere in the unconsciousness of our conscious world, there is a desire to return: the world wants to recapitulate man's perfect origins. As with every wake-up call, the pandemic offers the chance for repentance and rebuilding...Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is .(at hand (Matthew 4:17

Looking back a few decades, the Covid-19 pandemic, of course, was not the first time when people had felt the sense of impending doom threatening humanity and the world in general. Right before lockdown, we started stocking up on groceries; the high piles of water bottle packs reminded me of the Gulf War months during my childhood. That was the time when we started hearing about "the end of the world" from some of my classmates. I remember the surreality

of the situation; how I used to imagine that we were living inside a movie, as I watched my father covers the windows with masking tape and my mom sorts out the tuna cans from the corned beef tins before putting them in separate boxes. We learned that much more was expected, and we were beginning to understand new meanings behind biblical stories and verses that were read to us at bedtime; like "Nation will rise against .(8-nation, and kingdom against kingdom" (Mark 13: 7 At night, I fought my sleep, hoping that I would be able to catch a glimpse of the sky when Jesus made his return, his Second Coming, riding on a cloud: "And then shall they see the son of man coming in a cloud .(with power and great glory (Luke 21:27

I also remember how packed my local church was on the night of December 31st, 1999—it was not only filled with the usual elderly generation of worshippers, but there were more women, men, children, and teens than we would normally see during masses (excluding the ,Holy Week). I kept hearing the older women whisper more like: it can be a thousand,) "تؤلف و لا تؤلفان" (but not two thousand) as they nodded to each other in confirmation. There was no way I was able to convince any of them that this was not a genuine biblical phrase. For months, I tried searching for that particular verse in the Bible, but my search was in vain. That phrase did not seem to exist. I searched my hardcopy Bible. I surfed the newborn internet but found nothing. I consulted our priest, who also confirmed the absence of that phrase. My father kept quoting, "for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh (Matthew 25:13)"; and our Ethiopian helper told us that according to her calendar, we still had 7 years left before we needed to worry about the year 2000 and its woes Yet, it looked like those Sunday-women

knew something that we didn't—telling them about my certainty of this particular verse's absence would only be met by headshakes. Despite all that, though, the thought of the year 2000 still made me a little nervous. Maybe it was all the undeserved hype it got. Being in high school at the time, all what my peers and I spoke about during the weeks leading up to our Christmas break was the techno-apocalypse of "Y2k", the name of the notorious techno-digital problem that was predicted/rumored to strike all technology that involves digital programming (including airplanes, bombs, and everything computerized), causing apocalyptic damage around the globe. We all bid each other warmer-than-usual goodbyes before the holidays—just in case. The librarian was constantly being requested for that single copy of the book on Nostradamus (which I had secretly held hostage). And, our philosophy teacher was repeatedly trying to appease our panic levels by explaining to us that the actual anno domini year 2000 had already occurred seven years ago and we were actually on the brink of 2007

But, this time it feels different, and a lot crazier. Time is suspended. The world is suspended. It is not only the pandemic itself, but the concurrence of the Covid-19 with other phenomena that differentiates it from the other previous false alarms for the End Times. The pandemic era ticks several other biblical points, obviously the plague (Revelation. 16) being one of them. We witnessed the eclipses and asteroids prophesied, for example ("Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken" (Matthew 24: 29). Wars are still occurring. And, the planets are being aligned in unusual ways: "And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring" (Luke 21:25). The pandemic, therefore, has confirmed the

popular post-millennial visions of a dystopic future. And for many, the pandemic is an obvious sign of the .doomsday scenario

Undoubtedly, however, one cannot but see that the coronavirus pandemic has a spiritual as well as a material dimension to it. Currently, with the widespread of the virus (and all the bi-products of woes and throes it's bringing upon people globally), we find believers around the world who are fixated on recapitulating the paradisiacal ab origine state to be reached and realized upon the arrival of a better future—one that carries with it salvation and a reunion with the divine. At times like this, I often find images of parables and biblical prophecies arise alive in the pandemic-stricken world. I see Christ on the cross and wait I for the resurrection. Lent this year was a profound experience; culminated by the joy of Easter, accompanied by the strengthened hope and wish for resurrection and eternal life. I also see the parable of the prodigal son, in me, as I feel the distance away from home, while I pine for it, know its value, and envision my way back to it. And most clearly, like so many others around me, quite often, I find myself allowing the convergence of eschatology, cosmogony and the divine in a vision replete with images of John's revelation—the final book of the New Testament, and the testament to the new world. It is at times like this when we see the beginning in the end, mentally replaying the words of Jesus, hearing: "I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the .(first and the last" (Rev. 22:13

The status of infinity is given to finality, since every person stands in relation to his or her end (infinite). So, while many minds are focusing on the end, they are also zeroing in on the question of purpose. The state of mind, or rather, state of the world during the pandemic is akin to the state of being at war: With adrenaline levels shooting up, people are found to be in fight or flight modes more frequently than ever, mobilized to take certain actions: zooming in on the scene, we

see that the mind is quite focused on the enemy and on things that it would probably have ignored under “normal” circumstances: Wear a mask, wash your hands, keep a physical distance, etc.. we do what it takes to ward off all threatening danger, and we put aside any secondary, less important concerns. Life has become a matter of priorities, placing the most essential staples at the base of the pyramid: life and death. There has become a need to put a limit to our time—and make the most of it

Much uncertainty prevails, and questions are not answered no matter how hard we look and scry into the hazy crystal ball of the future. People are praying for clarity and hope, as they hold onto their faith and chime in together, via TV screens and social media, united through the live streaming of masses. Letting go and letting God, the mind replays this troparion in the 6th tone: Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us: since we have no defense, we sinners offer this supplication to you, our Master; have mercy on us. As a matter of fact, the Arabic translation of this troparion ارحمنا لأننا متحيرون عن كل جواب. :“uses the word “answer” instead of “defense No answers, no defense. .If only the antidote to uncertainty was found

The heightened spirituality witnessed during these current times of the pandemic is not only about prophecies, but in a numinous, surreal state of being, people are trying to fathom their overwhelming experience—hence, the resort to religion, which provides a channel to experience some of the numinosity. Because of the virus, there is much disconnection, much entrapment, with so many people thousands of miles away from homes, and even those in their hometowns are far and isolated from their own families and friends. Especially under lockdown, we found that the sense of confinement and aloneness is capable of causing depression, snigger indoor spaces may trigger impatience and anger; however, attempts at reversing this negativity can also have a positive effect.

There is a need for contemplation and connection, hence the therapy offered by religion. With more time to reflect, there is more time to explore the inner world, which serves as a gateway towards a stronger sense of spirituality. The term “religion” thus serves its etymological roots, the Latin Re-Ligare meaning to .“reconnect,” or “re-unite

With re-unity comes the hope for rebuilding, knowing that the world is in for a relatively long time of struggle. Perhaps after a long while in a “priorities” and reflective mindset, humanity might rise up to the wake up call; the post-pandemic world might be a better place, with people being more appreciative of blessings, and more sensitive to natural resources, the community, and core life values. Through the pandemic, God has sent numerous indicators of things to come if humans do not get ready to live differently—many concepts, lifestyles, and systems have fallen or have to fall. The ego, in all of its manifestations, needs to be dethroned and recast. We are beginning to realize how fragile some structures are, as we watch them fall apart and hear the voice of Jesus: “Destroy this temple, and in .(three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19

Hence, by resorting to religion, to the connection in the re-ligare, the wound becomes a womb...and to descend into the depth of one’s ‘woundedness’ is to rise to the height of the spirit, for, in quoting Goethe’s Faust: ‘Then to the depths!/I could as well say height:/ It’s all the same.’ The pain of the wound is also the darkness of the womb, as the world, overnight, entered an endarkenment phase, literally with eclipses, and metaphorically with uncertainty and fear. We can call it chaos theory, we can liken it to a cosmogony, but darkness is not forbidding, and technically, it is a source for conception and creation: the world will always remake itself from chaos. With many people finding prayer to be the only recourse in such a plight, we embark on a journey from water to wine, we wait for the return of the dove, with the olive branch in its .beak...in hope of resurrection and eternal life