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Healing and Hope in a Time of COVID-19, Climate Calamity, and Broken Communities

Rita D. Sherma

ON May 25, 2020, George Floyd died while undergoing arrest, during which Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin kneeled on his neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds. Since then, protests have erupted in countless cities worldwide and in every state and territory of the United States, and in Washington, D.C. The protests have continued for four months as of this writing. Internationally, the protests began in solidarity with those in the US who were demonstrating against police violence. But they soon began to evolve into marches for justice in relation to particular issues of freedom from oppression faced by the peoples of diverse nations.

The protests asked for justice in the case of law enforcement interaction and use of force in encounters with black and brown persons; demilitarization of municipal police forces; and restorative justice for black communities. It reminded America and the world of the history not only of slavery, but of the indentured labor and the economic and political disenfranchisement that was Jim Crow. It brought awareness to almost a century of lynching of black men and women—the horrific legacy of extra-judicial killings. It taught a stunned populace about the economic and social success of Greenwood, a historic freedom colony in Tulsa, Oklahoma, known as Black Wall Street, which was completely destroyed in the Tulsa massacre of 1921, when hundreds of black residents were killed, many were injured, and thousands were left homeless as thirty blocks were burned to the ground by vigilantes. One of the worst riots in US history, it was ignited by a rumor that a black young man had raped a white woman. In the wake of the 2020 protests, black intellectuals such as Ta-Nehisi Paul Coates and Dr. Ibram X. Kendi called for restorative justice. While the nation was still paying attention, awareness grew about the historic and contemporary mass suffering and ethnic cleansing of indigenous nations across vast...
territories of the Americas. And the plight of captured undocumented children and adults terrified the imagination of many. As protests continued, violence broke out between supremacist groups and protesters; between police and rioters and looters; between groups of justice seekers and domestic groups of justice deniers; unnamed federal law enforcement officers in unmarked vehicles and those seeking to exercise their right of dissent. Many businesses remained shuttered and boarded across the nation.

If all of the above occurred in any other country, the world would watch in sadness and anger and, perhaps, some nations would try to send aid or attempt diplomatic interventions. But this took place in the United States of America, and the world experienced whiplash as it turned to watch in shock and horror. When a great power becomes unstable, all that depends on it becomes unbalanced and unsecured. Dependence seems like danger in a doomsday scenario.

In June 2020, Prof. Kerry San Chirico, in his capacity as President of the Society for Hindu Christian Studies (SHCS) posted a public statement, agreed upon and contributed to by members of the Society. The statement acknowledged the urgency of action: “George Floyd has precipitated sweeping protests in the United States and, in fact, the world...” and made a commitment to undertake efforts to “involve greater participation and representation that is diverse in terms of religion, race, ethnicity, gender, caste, and creed.... At the same time, we acknowledge the power imbalances existing in the interactions between Hindus and Christians, in the past and present. Thus, given the current context, we here commit to redouble our efforts against all forms of oppression. We shall do this by a critical and moral self-reflexive examination of our membership and our intellectual work, looking within and without.” I commend the SHCS and its president for the statement of solidarity with the marginalized.

However, beyond the critical need for justice highlighted by the events of 2020, the year has also brought us the worst global pandemic in a century—which had already been raging for several months by the time the protests were ignited by the death of Floyd. The pandemic brought a skewed curve of suffering and increased mortality in black and brown patients and offered economic devastation in its wake which has more strongly impacted those on the margins of the economy. In addition, the immediacy of climate calamity became undeniable in 2020. Thus far, we have witnessed the first double hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico; unprecedented wildfires that rendered large swathes of the West Coast of the US as charred wreckage; and Super Cyclone Amphan in Bengal and Bangladesh. We need to look at challenges beyond the symptomatic or even systematic. We must examine the interrelationships between social oppression, climate injustice, environmental racism, zoonotic viruses, and catastrophic climate change. All of these form a network of interconnected subjugations that cannot be resolved without a complete reversal of our extreme malrelationship with the ecosystems of the biosphere of which we are only one part.

Increasingly, contemporary scholars of religious studies, philosophers of religion, and theologians have articulated the ways in which religious thought and practice can reconceptualize our relationship with each other and the earth’s life support systems. In the meantime, religious groups across the globe have begun to work to develop forward-leaning
initiatives that support the wellbeing of communities. As religions become increasingly engaged with the problems of a degraded earth, the academic study of religion has not only to keep pace with such issues, but critically assess the impact of religion on best practices, or lack thereof, during a global pandemic. As scholars of Hindu and Christian traditions—two ancient traditions with strong resources for ethics and reflection—it behooves us to go deeper and explore how these resources may be applied towards the amelioration of the network of trauma that now reigns supreme.

Black Lives Matter (BLM), joined by allies including Latinx, indigenous communities, LGBTQI persons, those with disabilities, and justice-seekers in the U.S. and throughout the world, have not only focused attention on social and economic injustice. They have questioned everything considered normative. The worldviews, religious perspectives, rituals, and embodied praxes of socially disadvantaged or culturally disenfranchised peoples—which have historically been viewed as sites of inferiority and alienated otherness by power hegemonies—are now, instead, being foregrounded as sources of valid, and important epistemic experience.

The denial of the validity of the embodied epistemologies of non-hegemonic cultures, persons, and species is the denial of sentient experience. It is, indeed, the denial of life itself. Such denial leads easily and dangerously to the diminution of the right to life and liberty of sentient beings—human and other than human. Finally, in the struggle to make the world whole again, we cannot underestimate the power of contemplative activism either for the public scholar or for advocates working against incalculable and heart-wrenching challenges. Here again, the two traditions that we study have a plethora of contemplative practices and principles to repair a broken spirit, to restore hope. It is time for a deeper study. It is time to illuminate the resources within the traditions that can and do bring healing and wholeness into these troubled times and minds.