

Transcript of "COVID-19: Present and Future Implications for Religious Groups, Individuals, and Society"

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Well, thank you, Gary. A number of years ago, I was invited by a global corporation to participate in a daylong meeting. The subject was the future. It was attended by leading economists and futurists and a handful of corporate leaders. Candidly, I felt a little awkward even being there. The meeting was held on the top floor of a building overlooking New York Harbor. The Statue of Liberty was in the distance. The moderator started the meeting by describing a hypothetical scenario. Pretend, he said, that the year is 2015. This was 20 in 1999. He said, think as though you're looking back over the last 15 years. What would the most surprising thing be that happened during that period of time? One of the participants began to respond with some smart thoughts about the future. A banker spoke of the paperless currency systems that would begin to emerge. An oil executive talked about tensions in the Middle East. A technologist began to talk about faraway reaches of digitalization.

Well, I think you know the feeling, you can feel it getting closer and closer to you, I was feeling this growing pressure that I need something that was cogent to say. But in the final analysis, as it got closer, diversion seemed like the best strategy for me in that setting. So I said this: Since we're all reflecting on the future, I'm going to tell you who won the 2015 Nobel Prize in Economics. However, the big surprise isn't who won. The big surprise is that the Nobel Prize in Economics was won by an economist. It was not won by an economist, it was won by a sociologist who advanced a new economic theory called the economics of goodness. It's a simple but a powerful idea. Every nation or state has economic assets that produce wealth. It may be minerals, it may be a seaport. It could be a favorable climate. But there's a universal asset according to this economics of goodness, that has immense value, and it's inherent in any community that will use it. It's the power to simply do the right thing, voluntarily. Let me illustrate, I said. Imagine the economic heft of a nation or a state or a community that was free of drug or substance abuse. Healthcare costs would plummet, worker productivity would skyrocket, families that had been torn apart by abuse and financial hardship, wrought by substance abuse would remain together. Social welfare roles would fall, there would be fewer children that needed protective care, there'd be less violence, society would build and maintain fewer prisons. Imagine the power of a nation that was able to invest all of those resources in education or investment or in research. Such a place would prosper.

For a moment, there was silence. And then a surprise. One of the participants that I'll call Professor Cynical practically shouted at me. "What do you mean by goodness?" He said, "You're turning this into

some kind of religious discussion.” Before I could respond, a very well-known economist beat me to it. “Not true,” he said, “I’m an atheist. And this isn’t about religion. It’s about human behavior and the predictability of its consequences. People who work hard do better than slackers. Those that are honest get in less trouble than those who cheat. People who are kind have more friends than those who are cruel. Communities where people serve one another and care for each other are safer than those where that’s not true.” I have to say that maybe the first time I ever said amen to an atheist. But the economics of goodness applies to individuals as well as nations. People who work hard, those who are honest and reliable, have a better chance of success than those that don’t.

There’s an interesting postscript to the story. As I said, that happened in 1999. It got to be 2015. I got thinking, I wonder who is that actually won the Nobel Prize in 2015? Well, it turns out it wasn’t a sociologist. I got that wrong. Nor was it awarded for the economics of goodness. The prize was awarded to an esteemed Princeton economist Angus Deaton. However, his contribution is certainly in the neighborhood. Dr. Deaton was recognized with the Nobel for his analysis of consumption, poverty and welfare. In essence, Dr. Deaton was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics for demonstrating empirically, that human behavior and economics are linked.

The economics of goodness is not a new idea. And it is not simply about money. Willingly doing the right thing produces superior outcomes. Currently, communities throughout the world are struggling to prevail over COVID-19. We’re all learning about pandemic disease. It’s not so new to me. Unexpectedly in my life, the subject of pandemics played an important role in my career. About four months after my service as the Secretary of Health in the United States, I was invited to attend an emergency meeting with the Centers for Disease Control, the agency within the United States that tracks infectious disease. It was explained to me that scientists around the world were concerned about the emergence of an influenza virus with what they referred to as pandemic potential. The scientific name was H5N1. They explained that the virus was actually carried by birds, and that it had mutated sufficiently that this bird virus had now infected people. 60% of the people who got the virus died. The worry they had was that the virus might mutate further and begin to transmit itself from person to person instead of just bird to person. And when that happened, if it went person to person, it would qualify as a pandemic because it would clearly in its form, spread across the earth.

Before that meeting, I have to say I’m not sure I’d given the idea of pandemic disease much thought. And my questions to them that day might have reflected that. Because the next morning, a young colleague of mine came in to my office, carrying a book named *The Great Influenza*, a history of pandemic disease and particularly the history of the pandemic of 1918. As he set it on my desk, he said, You need to understand this. The following weekend, I began to read the book. It detailed the history of the last pandemic that was anywhere near the scale of what we’re dealing with COVID-19. Reading the book generated in me an awareness of disease and what a profound shaper of history it is.

At that time, it was my job to assess the readiness of the United States in such a situation. And as I sought to understand that, it was clear to me that the United States was not prepared, nor were any other countries around the world. As this H5N1 virus continue to spread, our government appropriated billions of dollars. I spent much of the next three years leading a focused effort to develop a pandemic response plan. Fortunately, the H5N1 virus did not become a pandemic. But the experience caused me

to study pandemics throughout history. And I became intimately acquainted with the way pandemics unfold and the way they reshape the economies and the sociology and even the politics of the world. Something that we're now all experiencing firsthand.

While there were many similarities to COVID-19 and other world changing pandemics in the past, one difference that we should all recognize is the existence of the communication technology that we have today. In 1918, the last global pandemic of this proportion, the world did not have the capacity to communicate instantly, like we do today. Consequently, there has never been a civilization as capable of taking action during a pandemic as the one that we live in. For at least the last century, the idea that we would practice what we now all know to be social distancing, has been a well-established practice in preventing the spread of disease. But modern communication has allowed countries all over the world to deploy this social distancing at a scale that has never been undertaken before. Across the world countries have gone into a condition ranging from lockdown to simple isolation. Schools have been closed churches, businesses and governments have been shut down. Travel has been stopped, traditions have been aside, not just for a few days, but for months. What has occurred is unprecedented in health history. Nations did this, because history had taught them that if they allowed the spread of this virus to happen in an uninterrupted way, the virus would take hundreds of millions of lives across the globe.

And while there's hope and optimism that modern science will develop a vaccine or other medical solutions, right now, this social distancing that we're all practicing by virtue of our holding this meeting the way we are today, this is the only medical intervention that we have. Now, the good news is it appears that our social distancing tactics are effective. While still devastating, millions of lives have likely been saved by this quite remarkable and unprecedented action. The hard news is, the medical intervention as I refer to it, we call social distancing, is like most medical interventions. It has side effects. Most medical interventions have side effects. Like most of you, I know someone who has a chronic condition that creates a lot of pain. Their doctor has provided a medical intervention—medicine for the pain. But the medicine came with a with a warning: Use this too long, use too much of it, there can be side effects that have the potential to be equally harmful to the condition that we're treating. The cost could be just as high, but in a different way. In other words, there's a limit to how much of this you can use.

While COVID-19 is a chronic situation, social distancing, then is the equivalent of a medical intervention. And like other medical interventions, it has to come with a warning. You can only do this so long or you can only use it so much because the side effects can be harmful, just like the virus but in a different way. Well, we all are living the side effects of this social distancing that we're having now. Millions of jobs have been lost. Economies have plummeted. Months of isolation have started to take a psychological toll on people and their families. Food supplies in our just in time economy have begun to fray. And we all feel this. While we're grateful for the technology that allows us to come together like this, we're getting zoom fatigue. It's particularly true for those who are most vulnerable. I have parents who are squarely in the population that we all know now to be most at risk. My father's 91, my mother is 88. And while they both have health limitations, they're able to live a full and fulfilling life, very active lives. But as a family, we've done all we can to protect them. I've become what they refer to as the social distancing police. It's because I love them. It's because I want them to be safe but the side

effects are taking over. They're a little tired of this. My father called me on the phone. Mike, he said, I just want you to know I swam the moat. He didn't have to explain. I knew exactly what he meant. He couldn't take it anymore, and he had left the house. I knew exactly what he meant. It was okay because he was just going to the office, he wanted to just have a little bit change in scene. But it was a symbol to me. We're all feeling like we want to swim the moat. But this Coronavirus is still with us. And COVID-19 is still a grave threat. As countries all over the world open up, it's clear that biology is still going to play out and we're only at the beginning of this. It's very likely that we'll begin and continue to see flare ups and flare ups that will become hotspots. It's a reminder that most pandemics have a second or a third wave that is even more virulent than the first. So we have this dilemma. The medical intervention that we have, and have practiced before and worked, has side effects. And those side effects have been devastating. And most people just don't see how we can lock down like we did before.

So we're in this period where we're trying to rebalance how much of this group behavior that we practiced, can continue. We're trying to learn what we can do safely and what we can't. I've had the experience of trying to walk across a frozen lake. I recall having stepped onto the ice not knowing how thin or thick the ice was, walked a few steps and listened for cracking sounds. When I couldn't hear it, I moved forward. We're all going through the health equivalent of that right now. A political debate has emerged between those who support opening up and those that would be more restrained. It's happening in every jurisdiction, in every country throughout the world in one form or another. People see this differently. They have different priorities. They have different circumstances; they have different tolerance for risk. A person who's 90 and has a lung condition sees it much differently than a 25 year old. This demonstrates why it is difficult in many jurisdictions, for this to simply be a one size fits all approach. And brings some question as to the degree to which governments can practice these large group behaviors that we have in the past, in the future.

So we're at an inflection point in this pandemic. Up to this point, our medical countermeasures have been group behaviors to a large degree orchestrated by government action. Businesses, schools and churches, as I've said, have closed. Travels been stopped, events have been canceled. These are all group behaviors. We're moving rapidly now into a period where these group behaviors are going to be less possible to sustain. A combination of economic limits and human impatience as I've spoken of will begin to limit them. We're now beginning to rely less on group behaviors to combat this, and more on individual behaviors. I'm talking about whether people are willing to comport to a handful of very simple behaviors that we've all learned before. Behaviors very simple like washing our hands, etc. These are simple things that will create an ability for us to be safe, and we have the ability to communicate them widely and ubiquitously. A capacity that wasn't there before. So will we wash our hands frequently? Are we willing to stand at a distance and limit our interactions as much as possible? We now know much more about the way the virus is spread. Are we willing to wear a face covering in certain situations? Will we individually and collectively begin to govern our activities in ways that will produce good outcomes? That's the question—will we? So it's clear that individuals and families and kids entities in nations that succeed at these practices will have better outcomes than those that don't. These outcomes will be reflected in their health, with their happiness, and yes, in their economic wellbeing. The economics of goodness will play out here too.

This conference is a review of the status of religious freedom around the world. It would be important for me to provide a reminder that governments are designed in a way as to compel group behaviors. Whether in the case of a pandemic or any other human endeavor, the use of secular laws to change individual behaviors will always have side effects, unintended consequences. Governments change behavior by edict. As a friend of mine recently reminded me, behind every law, there's a person with a gun. Communities of faith, however, attempt to change behavior by changing hearts. When a heart changes, nations change. While a nation may be defined by geographic borders, it is measured by the aggregation of what's in people's hearts.

The COVID-19 pandemic, like other pandemics, has revealed some of our civilizations greatest flaws. It's created an awareness of social inequities that exist. The suffering and death that's disproportionately been present is based often on economic status or on race. This is not a physiological phenomenon. It's a sociological phenomenon. COVID-19 is affecting these cohorts differently because they have less availability to health care and nutrition. In recent days, we've seen sad examples where the force of law has been used in ways that are simply wrong. Once again, there are evident racial minorities that are falling victim in vast disproportion. We see inequities and hardship inflicted upon LGBT communities. These are events that simply reflect on us as a society. We have to ask, are these events that are simply a reflection of institutions that have gone wrong? Or does it reflect a flaw in our collective character? These events have caused me to reflect on the status of my heart, and I suspect it has yours as well. How do we fix these things? Is there a need for government action? Yes, but governments have not proven particularly good at repairing character or changing individual behaviors. Reshaping character is about changing hearts. As a public official, it became very clear to me that people respond more rapidly to requests and suggestions from those who to whom they pay devotion, tithes and offerings than entities who demand their taxes. Governments are increasingly willing to adopt laws that either deliberately limit religious freedom or create a side effect with the same outcome. The economics of goodness will exact a profound price when this occurs. Those who attend this meeting are guardians of religious freedom around the world. And I thank you for that. May I say in conclusion, let us all keep that stewardship. Our aspiration for a healthy and prosperous society depends on it. Thank you.