

Religious Leaders and Social Media: Religious Communication during and post- Pandemic

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Leadership in the Face of Crisis

Good leadership is always needed in human society and is even more so during times of calamity and crisis. The future of a country or an organization greatly depends on the quality of its leadership, and a crisis can make or break a leader. The coronavirus pandemic presented opportunities and challenges for leaders of all types – political, religious, social, business – to demonstrate their ability to lead during one of the most devastating and widespread calamities in the last 100 years. One can see that many could not rise to the challenge as their wisdom, strength and other leadership skills were shown to be lacking, leading to tremendous tolls on their communities and countries.

Like many issues plaguing modern human society, the COVID-19 pandemic testified to the integrally interconnected and interdependent nature of human society, and artificial borders set up by national and international laws (even when not disputed among nations) could only go so far to prevent the novel coronavirus from traveling from one country to another, penetrating one population to another. Although the toll that it took on the different socio-economic and age groups varied, all fell victim to it regardless of ethnicity, gender, social status or religious background. As the world tried to overcome the pandemic, anyone with a cool head and a modicum of wisdom could easily realize that the only way that success in eliminating it could be achieved would be through a concerted interdisciplinary effort by all sectors of society – politics, science, public health, religion, economics, and so on. Those holding fast onto

their ideological axes, insisting on exclusion rather than cooperation, factionalism instead of mutual collaboration, could only serve to obfuscate progress made through the hard work of conscientious individuals and groups.

It was in context of this urgent need for mutual cooperation that religious leaders worldwide responded to the sign of the time by doing their part to combat the pandemic. This chapter examines one aspect of the contribution by religious leaders in the pandemic, namely, the use of social media to communicate spiritual messages, scientific information, and social exhortation to religious adherents in order to influence the thinking and behavior of their communities. We will look to see how religious leaders made use of social media and what kind of content was seen coming from their social media accounts, especially during the early months of the pandemic, which was arguably one of the most frightening and overwhelming periods of the global crisis. The examples cited in this chapter, however, are necessarily limited to only a number of prominent religious leaders from major religious traditions since it would not be possible to investigate content of religious leaders from all levels, traditions, languages, and cultures. However, it is believed that the examples presented in this chapter are indicative of the kind of messages that most mainstream religious leaders around the world have attempted to communicate to the faithful.

Religious Leaders and Social Media

It must be stated that many religious leaders regardless of religious tradition are far from being strangers to social media pre-pandemic. The Dalai Lama joined Twitter since February 2010 and amassed 55,000 followers during the first two days on the microblog.¹ The Dalai Lama's tweets, which aim to promote humanistic and spiritual values across cultures and religions, are well-received throughout the world and are often retweeted by his followers. One of the Dalai Lama's most popular tweets in 2020 (January 6) states:

As human beings, all 7 billion of us are born the same way and die the same way. Physically, mentally and emotionally we are the same. We all

¹ "Dalai Lama to "Tweet" on Tibet," *Dalai Lama*, February 23, 2020, <https://www.dalailama.com/news/2010/dalai-lama-to-tweet-on-tibet/amp>

want to live a happy life and avoid problems, but in a materialistic culture we overlook the importance of love and affection.²

This tweet, like the vast majority of his tweets, are non-religion specific, aimed at common human issues, concerns and aspirations, and therefore reverberates easily with readers throughout the world. The Dalai Lama's strategy of appealing to people of all religions (and non-religion) and cultures are highly conducive to promoting interculturality where people are inspired to relate to each other first and foremost as human beings with specific and profound similarities rather than based on superficial exterior differences.

Like the Dalai Lama, Pope Francis has been active on Twitter since the very first days of his papacy. In March 2013, Pope Francis started to tweet on a regular basis using the same account @Pontifex that was briefly used by his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, beginning in December 2012 (Narbona 2016, 97). Three years later, Pope Francis launched his Instagram account and broke the social media platform's record at that time by amassing one million followers in merely 12 hours (Cathnews 2016). The previous record was held by David Beckham who took twice as long as Pope Francis to reach the one million mark. Pope Francis is now a stable on numerous social media platforms in multiple languages, and also has a number of apps to his name, including the "Click to Pray" app launched in 2019 (Vatican News 2019).

On social media, there are also numerous popular and reputable Muslim religious leaders and scholars. The cleric from Zimbabwe Mufti Ismail Menk ranks among the list of Muslim leaders with a significant social media following – nearly 9 million on Twitter, nearly 5 million on Facebook, 4 million on Instagram, and 3.2 million YouTube subscribers (as of May 2022). His popularity on social media reflects the worldwide recognition for his work, especially his lecture series that are available on the YouTube platform. On his YouTube channel, Mufti Ismail Menk posts numerous short videos addressing many issues facing contemporary society including negative Tik Tok trends, revenge porn, and of course, the coronavirus pandemic.

While the Dalai Lama, Pope Francis, and Mufti Ismail Menk are some of the most prominent international religious leaders on social media, the platforms are filled with leaders from across religious traditions and of various levels of prominence. Some aim to speak to their fellow adherents, but many also speak to other groups. There are also many who are quietly present on one or two platforms, using them not so much as means for evangelization or

² <https://twitter.com/DalaiLama/status/1214132094646935552>

promoting religious values, but rather to share photos with family and friends, or to keep in touch with them. Admittedly, attitudes among religious leaders towards social media run the gamut of enthusiastic participation because of the evangelization potential of the technology to trepidation due to fear of overexposure.

Need Arising from the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a particularly urgent need for religious leaders to employ all available means of communication to address the crisis. In May 2020, the U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres spoke to international religious leaders at the high-level video conference on “The Role of Religious Leaders in Addressing the Multiple Challenges of COVID-19,” saying, “Religious leaders in my opinion can play a pivotal role to deliver solutions to not only address the pandemic, but to recover better.”³ In the speech, among other suggestions, Guterres also asked religious leaders to “leverage your networks and communication capacities to support Governments in promoting World Health Organization (WHO)- recommended public health measures — from physical distancing to good hygiene — and to ensure that faith-based activities, including worship, religious ceremonies and burial practices, comply with these measures.”⁴

In April 2020, prior to the UN Chief’s remarks, the WHO had already published a document entitled “Practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19.” In this document, the WHO recognized that religious leaders and faith communities “are a primary source of support, comfort, guidance, and direct health care and social service, for the communities they serve.” The WHO called on religious institutions to “promote helpful information, prevent and reduce fear and stigma, provide reassurance to people in their communities, and promote health-saving practices.”⁵

³ UN Secretary-General Remarks, May 13, 2020, <https://foreignaffairs.co.nz/2020/05/13/mil-osi-united-nations-shared-vulnerability-to-covid-19-reveals-common-humanity-secretary-general-tells-faith-leaders-stressing-their-key-role-in-fighting-intolerance-disinformation/>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ WHO, “Practical Considerations and Recommendations for Religious Leaders and Faith-Based Communities in the Context of COVID-19,” April 7, 2020.

The decision by political leaders and health organizations to actively engage religious leaders in the pandemic was prudent and necessary because in the age of social media, information shared online about COVID-19 often originated from dubious sources. In addition, misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories also had the megaphones of very prominent personalities in the political, entertainment and yes, even religious world. Simultaneously taking place with the pandemic was the ‘infodemic’ that saw the French Minister of Health, Olivier Véran tweeting on March 14, 2020: “The intake of anti-inflammatory drugs (ibuprofen, cortisone, ...) could be a factor in worsening the infection. If you have a fever, take acetaminophen. If you are already taking anti-inflammatory drugs or in doubt, ask your doctor for advice” (Orso et al. 2020, 327). In a few short days, this message was retweeted over 40,000 times and became a point of discussion and anxiety throughout the world. However, as the matter was later examined more closely by experts, it was discovered that there was no basis to such assertion.

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, in August 2020, Facebook had to remove a video from US President Donald Trump’s page for violating its content rules by erroneously claiming that children were “almost immune from COVID-19” in a Fox News interview (Wong 2020). According to medical experts, although there was evidence suggesting that in general children did not experience the symptoms as severely as adults, they were certainly not immune from infection. Children of all ages, even newborns have been infected with the coronavirus, and some have died from the disease. In the decision to remove the post, Facebook said, “This video includes false claims that a group of people is immune from COVID-19 which is a violation of our policies around harmful Covid misinformation” (Ibid). Despite the removal of the Trump video marking the first time that the social media platform took action against the US president for making false assertions about COVID-19 or any issue for that matter, this was hardly the first piece of misinformation about the disease coming from Trump. The US leader has been seen to make repeatedly incorrect and unsubstantiated claims on everything from methods of treatment for COVID-19 (Piller 2020) to the rate of mortality in the United States (Blake 2020). With over 85 million followers on Twitter alone (as of August 2020), one can imagine the kind of influence Trump could exert on his audience, especially his diehard fans.

However, it is not only misinformation from famous people that go viral. Posts that originated from unknown sources also get countless shares on the internet. It was these posts that get people to take preventative measures to

avoid being infected by the coronavirus by eating sweet potatoes and ingesting various vitamin supplements, and people all over the world gargling with salt in order to kill the virus as it appears in the throat (Powder 2020). On the religious front, misinformation and disinformation caused Hindus in India to drink cow urine (Siddiqui 2020), and Muslims in Iran to lick and kiss the gate of the Masumeh shrine in Qom (Sini and Shabhbazian 2020) in order to ward off the coronavirus. Misinformation and disinformation on social media were so rampant during the pandemic that it was reported that in April 2020 alone, Facebook flagged nearly 50 million pieces of COVID-19 related content with the warning label for disinformation. In the same month, Twitter challenged over 1.5 million users because of posts displaying erroneous information and “manipulative behaviors.” At the same time, Google was forced to block tens of millions of scam emails about COVID-19 (UNESCO 2020).

Parallel to the production of massive amount of misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19 on social media was the increase in the amount of time that people were spending on the internet due to lockdown in many localities. According to We Are Social (2020), in July 2020, global internet penetration reached 59 percent while active social media users reached 51 percent. The number of active social media users represented a 2 percent increase from just the beginning of the year, and over 10 percent compared to the previous year (We Are Social 2020b). It was estimated that in a period of 12 months, there were 12 new social media every second (Ibid). In the meantime, internet traffic increased by as much as 30 percent in 2020 as compared to the previous year (McKeay 2020). In July 2020, on average people used the internet a total of 6 hours and 42 minutes a day, nearly 2.5 hours of which was spent on social media (We Are Social 2020b). As the pandemic went on, the rate of internet penetration and use continued to increase as people turned to digital technology to carry out their life activities and to pass the time.

Religious Leaders as the Source of Authoritative Voice

In the face of rampant misinformation and disinformation from all nooks and crannies of society appearing on social media and affecting the thought and behavior of people, there was an indisputable need for authoritative and trustworthy voices coming from religious leaders – both local and international – in order to combat forces preventing effective and timely resolution of the pandemic. Enlisting religious leaders into this effort is not difficult to

understand. In reality, religious leaders through the use of social media can accomplish multiple tasks that are unique to their position in their respective communities. An examination of social media accounts of prominent religious leaders reveal that the message communicated to the public was multi-dimensional, representing the intricate and multi-faceted role of religious leaders in their relationship with religious adherents.

1. Communicating Personal Presence

Personal presence with the faithful is one of the highest priorities of religious leadership. Active presence by leaders communicates care and concern for the community. Only through active presence will leaders be able to recognize important issues in the community needing to be addressed. Pope Francis used the metaphor of “shepherds living with the smell of the sheep” to describe Church leaders who are not absentee leaders but are intimately connected to their community and engaged in the daily happenings in their lives (Glatz 2013). Moreover, active presence by religious leaders provides the necessary motivation and directions needed for the community to take actions towards social advancement. Nonetheless, the presence of religious leaders not only carries emotional but also spiritual significance. For example, within a number of Hindu schools, the guru is seen as a divinized figure, or the personification of divinity. The Hindu scripture entitled *Guru-Gītā* (Song of the Guru) contains a verse that declares the guru to be ‘*sākshāt Parabrahman*,’ the very form of the supreme entity (Irons 2020). In this sense, the guru’s presence also signifies divine presence among the people. In the Catholic Church, the Pope is often referred to as the ‘Vicar of Christ’ because it is “expressive of his supreme headship of the Church on earth, which he bears in virtue of the commission of Christ and with vicarial power derived from Him” (New Advent 2021). More generally, the notion of the Vicar of Christ, is someone designated as Christ’s earthly representative on earth. Because of this special honor and responsibility, it is easy to see why the Pope’s personal presence to the faithful would carry profound meaning for the Church. In a similar vein, Catholic priests are often referred to as ‘*alter Christus*’ (another Christ), to emphasize that Christ is present in the priest in a unique way by virtue of his ordination. According to Catholic Church teaching,

In the ecclesial service of the ordained minister, it is Christ himself who is present to his Church as Head of his Body, Shepherd of his flock,

high priest of the redemptive sacrifice, Teacher of Truth. This is what the Church means by saying that the priest, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, acts *in persona Christi Capitis*: It is the same priest, Christ Jesus, whose sacred person his minister truly represents. Now the minister, by reason of the sacerdotal consecration which he has received, is truly made like to the high priest and possesses the authority to act in the power and place of the person of Christ himself (*virtute ac persona ipsius Christi*). (CCC, no. 1548)

As important as personal presence by the religious leader is in the life of the community, active presence in the form of physical presence is not always possible – as the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated very clearly. As the coronavirus was rapidly spreading, entire cities and countries went into lockdown forcing the closure of schools, businesses, entertainment venues and places for religious gathering. Religious leaders could no longer appear physically in front of a gathered congregation or visit them at their homes as such activities would violate local ordinances. In this situation, religious leaders taking to social media was a practical and safe way to communicate their ongoing personal presence in the midst of separation and isolation. This online presence attempts to communicate that neither God nor God’s representatives on earth have abandoned the people in time of trials and tribulations. This presence, while online, was not ‘virtual’ in the sense that it was somehow ‘inauthentic’ or not ‘real.’ Admittedly online presence mediated by social media has many limitations, but this presence could be considered real and personal in the sense that this communicative process was taking place between embodied individuals – both the one performing the communicative act and the one on the receiving end of the communication. This communicative process has the potential power to comfort, transform and motivate those who participate in it. The digital age with social media has enabled personal presence to be exercised in other effective ways beside physical presence. Although physical presence is irreplaceable in terms of leadership, no matter in the religious or secular spheres, digitally mediated presence during the pandemic was nonetheless a source of real comfort for people who desired to stay connected to their religious leaders.

2. Communicating Theology and Spiritual Wisdom

For people of religion, many questions arise during times of personal, communal, and global catastrophes and calamities. The specific questions will differ depending on one's religious background. However, the common questions may include: Is this happening because of my sins? Is God punishing the world for its wayward ways? How can God let this kind of suffering take place in the world? What is God telling us with these events happening? Where is God in all of this? Is this a sign of the apocalypse? Are the gods angry about something? Is this the manifestation of personal and collective karma that humanity must pay for?

One of the primary tasks of any religious leader is to present authoritative, orthodox theology and spiritual principles that can help the faithful make sense of the events taking place in their lives and in the world. This sense-making function is an ongoing responsibility of the religious leader because human life is filled with constant happenings, big and small, one after the other, all of which can bring joy and hope, or fear, bewilderment, panic, and despair. In this manner, this work by religious leaders did not simply arise with the pandemic; however, the scale of the crisis made these questions more urgent and widespread. The need to understand or have a grasp of the meaning of phenomenal events in human life and to find a way out of despair and suffering is fundamental to the religious quest.

Religious leaders engage in this endeavor both on their own behalf but also on the behalf of the suffering humanity. This is precisely why the Gautama Buddha, having discovered the path to enlightenment, which he himself achieved over 2,500 years ago, could not bear to escape *Samsara* (the cycle of rebirth) without first relating the Noble Truths to others so that they too could also be liberated. This is also the reason why *boddbhisattvas* (enlightened beings) in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition vow to delay their own "complete disappearance" from the world until all sentient beings in the universe are also saved (Nadeau 2014, 181). Religious leaders are not necessarily those who have achieved enlightenment, as abundant empirical evidence tells us; however, they are people who engage specifically in the process of spiritual quest and also lead and accompany fellow human beings on this journey. Whether through self-designation or being charged with the task, religious leaders have a following to whom they are responsible to serve.

In the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an urgency for religious leaders to use social media to communicate theological and spiritual wisdom to their

communities because there was not only an ‘infodemic’ regarding the scientific aspects of the pandemic, but also religiously inspired ideas that were not helpful towards understanding and confronting the crisis. Ideas that the COVID-19 pandemic would bring to realization apocalyptic predictions in the Bible’s Book of Revelation can cause feelings of panic and despair among those who believed. Religiously inspired thinking that drove people to drink cow urine and lick a shrine can instigate disdain and mockery from those who look for opportunities to belittle religious people as ignorant and superstitious. Religious sentiments that the pandemic was God’s punishment on a particular society or culture can fan the flames of social and religious division. In the face of situations that present risk of extreme thinking and behavior, religious leaders can instill sensibility and hope in their constituents with sound theological and spiritual explanations to make sense of the events in order to maintain spiritual and emotional balance.

As the need for spiritual leadership was intensely high during the pandemic, religious leaders took to social media to respond to this need. Pope Francis’ daily Mass celebrations, which usually were private, began to be live streamed on social media. In the Mass, the Pope was able to call for prayer for various individuals such as the victims, doctors, nurses, and children, etc. In his homilies, he related the scripture readings to the events in human life and tried to keep the faithful grounded in the Christian virtues of faith, love, and hope. In the *Angelus* prayer on March 15, 2020, Pope Francis also reminded all those people listening to him through communications media to remain steadfastly united to Christ. He stated:

In this situation of pandemic, in which we find ourselves living more or less isolated, we are invited to rediscover and deepen the value of communion that unites all the members of the Church. United to Christ we are never alone, but we form one sole Body, of which He is the Head. It is a union that is nourished with prayer, and also with spiritual communion in the Eucharist, a practice that is highly recommended when it is not possible to receive the Sacrament. I say this for everyone, especially for those who live alone. (2020, 99)

In the homily on Palm Sunday April 5, 2020, Pope Francis exhorted the faithful to find courage and consolation in God’s love with the words:

In the tragedy of a pandemic, in the face of the many false securities that have now crumbled, in the face of so many hopes betrayed, in the sense of abandonment that weighs upon our hearts, Jesus says to each one of us: “Courage, open your heart to my love. You will feel the consolation of God who sustains you.” (Ibid, 162)

Thus, throughout the pandemic, Pope Francis was a fixture on social media giving words of spiritual wisdom and encouragement through his homilies and messages. Likewise, the Dalai Lama continued to send out tweets on a regular basis during this time. On March 30, 2020, His Holiness linked to his Twitter account a statement published on his website regarding the crisis. In it, the religious leader gave practical advice to all in the face of tribulations:

Faced with threats to our health and well-being, it is natural to feel anxiety and fear. Nevertheless, I take great solace in the following wise advice to examine the problems before us: If there is something to be done—do it, without any need to worry; if there’s nothing to be done, worrying about it further will not help.⁶

In another statement published on April 14, 2020, the Dalai Lama succinctly put the pandemic into a wider perspective, encouraging his followers to see beyond present hardships and obstacles. He writes: “As a Buddhist, I believe in the principle of impermanence. Eventually, this virus will pass, as I have seen wars and other terrible threats pass in my lifetime, and we will have the opportunity to rebuild our global community as we have done many times before.”

While only a small number of the Dalai Lama’s tweets since the beginning of the pandemic directly mention COVID-19 or pandemic, the spiritual wisdom contained in his messages to his nearly 20 million followers could be applied to any human situation, culture, and time. For example, the tweet on August 10, 2020 states: “As soon as I wake up in the morning, I remind myself that nothing exists as it appears. Then I think about sentient beings who want happiness, but experience suffering. I generate compassion for them, determined to help them as much as I can to eliminate their negative emotions.”⁷ Indeed, the pandemic, in light of the long and broad history and future of humankind in particular, and

⁶ Dalai Lama, “A special message from His Holiness the Dalai Lama,” March 30, 2020, <https://www.dalailama.com/news/2020/a-special-message-from-his-holiness-the-dalai-lama>

⁷ Dalai Lama, <https://twitter.com/DalaiLama/status/1292755129410625538>.

sentient beings in general, represents an episode in which human beings are presented with opportunities to demonstrate compassion to others. In reality, these opportunities exist with or without the pandemic.

While Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama represent leaders at the international level, there are also leaders at the local level who also have their smaller communities to serve. In suburban Grenoble, France, Imam Yassine Farhi reminded the Muslim faithful who gathered that the notion of the COVID-19 pandemic being God's punishment was a misunderstanding about God and about the crisis. The imam reminded worshippers that the companions of the Prophet Muhammad were "among the best believers who ever existed," but they themselves were affected by the plague that befell them at the time (Priol 2020). Farhi was responding to the sentiment in a number of Muslim circles who interpreted the pandemic as an act of punishment from God. Another Muslim leader, Omar Ricci, the chairperson of the Islamic Center of Southern California, one of the oldest and most prominent mosques in the US, used one of his Friday sermons to expound on the relationship of human beings to God in light of the pandemic. In his sermon which was uploaded onto YouTube, Ricci attempted to put the pandemic into a spiritual perspective, saying that the pandemic reminded the people that human beings were not in control but must be dependent on God. In these difficult times, they could be grateful to God for opportunities to pay greater attention to taking care of their bodies and health, to calm down and retreat from the hyperactivity of life. They could also be grateful to God for opportunities to form new bonds and relationships with others. And the empty groceries shelves at the supermarkets could also serve as a reminder to be grateful for the food that was once so easily obtainable (Ricci 2020).

3. Communicating Divine Presence through Religious Rituals

In many religious traditions, religious rituals play an important role in the life of the faithful. In the Hindu tradition, the devotional practice of *Puja* to offer reverence and honor to the divine is the most common form of worship among Hindu followers. Individuals or family groups go to temples to request this ritual from a priest in order to give thanks, ask for divine blessings, or simply out of pure devotion to a particular deity. The ritual can be performed any day as well as on special cultural and religious festivals. One of the key aspects of this devotional practice is the opportunity for mutual eye contact between the deity and the worshippers (*darshan*). Hindus believe that the *darshan* that takes

place confers on them the deity's energy and blessings. The religious rituals, if performed appropriately by the priest, effects authentic divine presence in the painted and sculpted images and facilitates the experience of *darshan* desired by the faithful (Khan Academy 2020).

If the *Puja* plays an essential role in the life of devoted Hindus, then the Mass plays a no less fundamental role in the life of Catholic Christians. According to Catholic teachings, Catholics are obligated to attend Mass on Sundays and other important days designated by the liturgical calendar. However, many Catholics also attend daily Mass in order to nourish their faith life. According to the Church's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (no. 7),

Christ is always present in the Church, especially in its Liturgical Celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of His minister, "the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross," but especially under the Eucharistic species... He is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church. He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings, for He promised: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20).

For Catholics, the presence of Christ in the Eucharistic species (bread and wine changed into the body and blood of Christ) becomes an intimate experience of communion with Christ when they are able to receive this food for their spiritual nourishment.

In the age of COVID-19, as temples, mosques, churches, and all types of worship places were shuttered in accordance with government restrictions, the faithful were not only kept away from religious gatherings, but they were also often confined to their homes when the city or country went into complete lockdown. To respond to the desire for divine connection facilitated by religious rituals, religious leaders often performed rituals either alone or with only a small number of participants and broadcasted them online either as video or as a live stream. In India, there was a huge leap in demand for online *pujas* while the country was in lockdown. Facilitated by a religious concierge service provider, people could request for *pujas* to be performed by a priest from his own *puja* room, while the clients watched the ritual live via Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp (Ganguly 2020). In addition to arranging the performance of the *puja*, the company also arranged for the *darshan* at temples online. The online

pujas are convenient not only for Hindus in India who could not get to the temple, but also for Hindus living overseas where there are no temples to go to – with or without lockdown. Thus, during the pandemic, where people were stricken by fear, anxiety and sickness, the online *pujas* helped Hindu faithful to seek divine intervention and presence.

Unlike *pujas* which are private events in that they are requested by individuals and groups and are only viewed by those who have made the request, Catholic Masses are usually public events that are organized daily in churches and chapels throughout the world. From the Vatican to the jungles of the Amazon, Masses are celebrated every day by the Pope, bishops, and priests. During the pandemic, in countries where lockdowns or restrictions on large group gatherings were enforced, many religious leaders broadcasted their Masses online. During the height of the pandemic in Italy, Pope Francis live streamed his Masses each morning from the chapel in Casa Santa Marta and could be viewed on multiple social media platforms. During Holy Week, the most important occasion on the Christian calendar, in those countries where the pandemic was serious, causing places of worship to close, bishops and priests had to celebrate all their liturgies either alone or with only a small number of people present. These liturgies would be viewed online either as a live streaming broadcast or as a video. Although the faithful could not receive communion as they normally would when attending Mass at church, they were encouraged to receive ‘spiritual communion,’ which St. Thomas Aquinas summed up as “the ardent desire to receive Jesus in the Holy Sacrament, and a loving embrace as though we had already received Him.” Thus, through digital technology and social media, church leaders attempted to communicate God’s presence through liturgies that people were able to view from the comfort and safety of their own homes. Maria Lee Albento, a Catholic living in Hong Kong expressed her experience of participating in Mass online as follows:

I feel happy attending Mass online and I still find it a blessing. As we all know God is everywhere and I feel his presence as like in a real Mass. The only sad thing is that we cannot receive the actual communion but only the spiritual communion. Being used to receive his body and blood every Sunday, I feel something lacking but we cannot do anything about it because of the present situation we are facing. I always watch Mass online every Sunday and it helps me keep my faith and to find a way to strengthen it more. Through our prayers we know that everything will

be restored to normal. We just need to ask God to heal our lands from this horrifying pandemic. (Sunday Examiner 2020)

Although the experience of participating in Mass online cannot replace the actual gathering, one of the unexpected effects of the many online Masses broadcasted during the pandemic was that they were also viewed by Catholics who otherwise may not regularly go to church.

4. Communicating Useful and Correct Information to the Public

Religious leaders as it is well-known, are not only in position of authority in religious and spiritual matters but are also respected in their communities when it comes to other spheres of life. Because religious leaders are viewed by their adherents as having the best interests of the people in mind, their voices are often heeded over those of political and social leaders, sometimes even scientists. Thus, religious leaders have long been involved in areas beyond the religious domain such as social and economic development, peace and justice work, and environmental conservation. Although religious leaders may not have direct expertise in such areas, what they command is respect and the loyalty of the faithful. As the prominent Muslim scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr states,

The fact remains that the vast majority of people in the world do not accept any ethics which does not have a religious foundation. This means in practical terms that if a religious figure, let us say, a *mulla* or a *brabmin* in India or Pakistan, goes to a village and tells the villagers that from the point of view of the *Shari'ah* (Islamic law) or the Law of Manu (Hindu law) they are forbidden to cut this tree, many people would accept. But if some graduate from the University of Delhi or Karachi, who is a government official, comes and says, for rational reasons, philosophical and scientific reasons, that it is better not to cut this tree, few would heed his advice. (2007, 31)

In reality, wise and capable religious leaders realize that while they have the trust and the loyalty of their congregations, they need to collaborate with experts who have the necessary knowledge in order to present sound scientific information and to help shape effective community policies and actions. This was clearly demonstrated in the Catholic encyclical *Laudato Si* of Pope Francis,

in which the first chapter of the document discussed the issue of ecological degradation solidly based on modern scientific consensus regarding the crisis.

Thus, in enlisting the cooperation of religious leaders in the COVID-19 pandemic, both the WHO and UN Secretary General demonstrated that they appreciated the degree of influence that religious leaders exerted on their communities not only in matters of faith but also in areas pertaining to the secular sphere. Oftentimes, through the outreach work of the religious community, the larger community is also positively impacted. In its document addressing religious leaders, the WHO affirms that “religious leaders are a critical link in the safety net for vulnerable people within their faith community and wider communities.”⁸ Therefore, in the effort to present the public with accurate information,

Faith leaders also have a special responsibility to counter and address misinformation, misleading teachings, and rumors, which can spread rapidly and cause great damage. Sermons and messages can build on factual information provided by WHO and national or local public health authorities and is in line with doctrine/teaching and practice of their respective faith traditions. Religious leaders can access guidance in formats and lay language that their members can understand.⁹

UN Secretary General António Guterres, in addition to asking religious leaders to help fight against misinformation and disinformation, also called on them to “encourage all communities to promote non-violence and reject xenophobia, racism and all forms of intolerance.”¹⁰ In the same spirit as the WHO and Guterres, H.E. Tijjani Muhammad Bange (2020), President of the 74th Session of the UN General Assembly, expressed in a statement as follows:

With the unprecedented threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and its devastating impact on communities and nations across the globe, religious leaders and faith-based organisations will play even a greater role in saving lives and mitigating the spread of the disease. During this time, we look up to them to share credible information and stand up against rumours, violence, and the incitement of hate and advocate for the needs of vulnerable populations.

⁸ WHO, “Practical Considerations.”

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ UN Secretary General Remarks, 13 May 2020.

In response to the need for combating misinformation and disinformation, religious leaders resorted to social media to help them spread useful information in line with expert guidelines. Indeed, at a time when places of worship were closed down, the one place that religious leaders could be sure to find their community members was on social media. On the Dalai Lama's Twitter account, he linked a statement from his own website, part of which reminded people that "this crisis shows that we must all take responsibility where we can. We must combine the courage doctors and nurses are showing with empirical science to begin to turn this situation around and protect our future from more such threats."¹¹ Indeed, religious leaders worldwide understood well the seriousness of the pandemic and wished to remind people that overcoming the disease of the coronavirus did not depend merely on faith but needed actions consistent with solid scientific understanding. Thus, in a YouTube post, Mufti Ismail Menk (2020) plainly stated:

No one passes away except by the decree of Allah. That we know. At the same time, we're taught to be very, very careful. We're taught to take precautions. We're taught to be responsible, and we should ... take it seriously! Taking it seriously does not negate your faith in Allah... You take precautions then you rely on Allah. You can't just say, 'I rely on Allah' and then do as you please. That's foolish. That's ignorant. It's the height of ignorance even if bearded men are telling that to you. It's the height of ignorance to say, 'Don't do anything about it.'

The kind of exhortation such as that expressed by Mufti Ismail Menk was a staple in the messaging effort of sensible religious leaders worldwide. At the iconic Hindu Neasden Temple in Britain, the head monk Yogvivekdas Swami broadcasted religious rituals every evening. After the religious part of the broadcast was finished, the monk took an additional 10 minutes to brief the online audience (6,000-10,000 people) on news and public health information. Having been a practicing doctor before joining monastic life, the monk could move easily between technical medical science, public health guidance and Hindu teachings. In one of his briefings conducted in Gujarati, the religious leader reminded the people that "now is not the time to be overly philosophical or to falsely apply scriptural ideas; now is the time to follow the guidance of the government, as indeed that is wish of our guru and God" (Irons 2020).

¹¹ The Dalai Lama, "Why we need to fight the coronavirus with compassion."

Hindu religious leaders, not unlike their counterparts in other religious traditions, used their platforms to present a multi-pronged message consisting of calling for spiritual introspection, unity, mutual support, and proper behavior. HH Mahant Swami Maharaj (2020), a global leader in the BAPS Swaminarayan Hindu tradition, recorded a video uploaded on YouTube calling on Hindus to practice all the necessary things recommended by experts as well as engage in spiritual devotion, maintain steadfast faith in God, and stay unified. Thus, religious leaders often used their social media platforms to call for personal and civic responsibility as well as taking the opportunity to achieve spiritual growth during time of crisis.

5. Communicating Examples of Proper Behavior

During Vietnam's first wave which took place in the months of March to May 2020, Catholic churches were closed nationwide as part of a concerted effort by the Vietnamese government to push back the coronavirus. Masses went online and were broadcasted mostly through social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. One noticed that in some of the online Masses, the celebrant, either a bishop or a priest, wore a mask even though he was not standing in close proximity to the few other people which were also present to perform their roles in the liturgy either as readers or servers. In some ways, it seemed odd and unnecessary to see the celebrant of a solemn religious rite covering half of his face with a piece of fabric since the celebrant did not seem to be in a position to be in danger of being infected by another person or himself infecting someone else. A number of people viewing this action online were curious as to why the Mass celebrant seemed to be overly cautious and discussions ensued on social media. Based on the discussion on social media, many Vietnamese Catholics perceived the reason for wearing a mask by the bishop or priest while celebrating Mass was not necessarily due to any immediate danger of infection. Many viewed the mask wearing as reflecting the religious leader's intentional attempt to communicate and model proper behavior for Catholics in their daily life, knowing that some people might be careless or averse to wearing face coverings, especially when going to church. By wearing the mask during the liturgy, the religious leaders set an example for how to prevent the spread of the virus within the community. As the bishops and priests who wore masks during the liturgy did not participate in or comment on these social media discussions, it is not certain what their true intentions were. However, what is evident is that many viewers interpreted their action

positively as communicating and modeling proper behavior to the faithful, when it came to wearing masks.

Not only in Vietnam, in Thailand religious leaders such as Buddhist monks also appeared with masks both online and offline. Whether it was leading a prayer session, giving a sermon, performing a ritual, or making their morning rounds around towns and villages collecting alms from Buddhist faithful, monks appeared in masks and even face shields. Online, one could even see photos of statues of the Buddha being covered with a face mask as well as drawings of monks and Buddhists wearing face masks as they engage with each other. These images helped communicate to the people the ‘normalcy’ of the practice of wearing masks and the necessity in taking recommended actions to prevent the spread of the virus. Indeed, the ease which religious leaders in Vietnam and Thailand dealt with the issue of wearing masks, reflected in how they appeared in public and even online, contrasted greatly with certain world political leaders on the very same issue. Most notorious were the presidents of two of the largest countries in the world—Donald Trump of the United States and Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil—who eschewed mask wearing even when they were appearing in public close to other people. Compared to political leaders like Trump and Bolsonaro, for religious leaders around the world, mask wearing was not a politicized issue. Thus, many were happy to wear them in different contexts not only for protecting themselves and others, but also to set a good example for their followers.

Religious leaders also took to social media to communicate examples in other ways. In the United States, Father Anthony Tam Pham, a Catholic priest who is also a medical doctor documented on his Facebook account his experience of volunteering in a New York hospital during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in that state.¹² Since then, he has also organized COVID-19 testing in the Houston, Texas community where he is based and where the pandemic hit hard in the summer months of 2020. By documenting these kinds of outreach activities on a personal level, Father Pham communicated and modeled the kind of engagement that Catholics could have in order to play their part in fighting the crisis. In the Philippines, Fr. John Mi Shen, a Chinese priest teaching at University of Santo Tomas in Manila began celebrating daily Mass online since January 2020 for a group of about 100 Catholics from Wuhan, China the original epicenter of the global pandemic. According to Fr. Mi Shen, he chose to celebrate the ‘private’ online Mass with this group instead of the ‘public’ Mass where anyone could tune in because he wanted to maintain a warm

¹² Anthony Tam Pham, Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/tam.pham.75098>

atmosphere where relationships could be built. As a result of this ongoing activity, Fr. Mi Shen said he got to know all the families in a personal way. “Many of them approached me for online consulting, so I was able to get to know most of them and their concerns,” he said. They also became Fr. Mi Shen’s mission partners to the poor in the Philippines because in addition to celebrating Mass online for the group of Wuhan Catholics, Fr. Mi Shen also used Chinese social media platforms to publicize about the hardship that Filipinos suffered during the pandemic. As a result of sharing such stories of pain and suffering, he received considerable donations from China, including from his ‘online Christian community,’ to help Filipino victims of COVID-19. Fr. Mi Shen said that many Chinese people displayed generosity because having gone through the crisis first, they were able to empathize with the hardships that Filipinos were going through.¹³ In reality, outreach activities organized and carried out by religious leaders of all levels, nationalities and traditions could easily be found on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Evaluating Religious Leaders’ Communication via Social Media

Presently, there has been no known effort to systematically evaluate the effectiveness of the communication which religious leaders carried out on social media regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is uncertain if there can be any accurate instrument to evaluate this kind of activity, especially when it involves countless religious leaders of different capacities, from different religious traditions and cultures. The intention of this examination, moreover, is not to try to accomplish any such task. What has been done thus far is an attempt to identify the content of the communication by religious leaders who made use of social media. The five types of content identified above demonstrate that the communication done by religious leaders included a complex set of information and images that went far beyond merely imparting practical information about the pandemic. Rather communication by religious leaders also addressed spiritual issues arising from the pandemic as well as affirming the ongoing personal presence of the religious leaders in the lives of their followers. In these ways, the nature of the communication by religious leaders can readily be seen as distinctly different from the communication done by secular leaders and scientists, which usually focused more on information

¹³ Direct personal communication, August 22, 2020.

aimed at understanding the science and the ways to control and combat the pandemic.

While it is not possible to determine the level of effectiveness of religious leaders' communication, it can be suggested that a greater degree of positive outcome would be achieved if in their communication on social media, religious leaders take into consideration the following issues:

1. *Consistent communication strategy:* Religious followers should know what to expect from their religious leader in terms of content and messaging as to be able to rely on him/her as a regular source of information. For example, the head monk Yogvivekdas Swami at the Neasden Temple consistently gave his daily 'briefing' following his religious rituals, helping his viewers to recognize the value of tuning in to his broadcasts, not only for spiritual nourishment, but also for useful knowledge that they might otherwise not have access to. This was especially true for the Hindu community in Britain, in which many older members did not have a strong grasp of English, and thus depended on the monk who could speak their native language for regular updates. The Dalai Lama's communication strategy of speaking to a cross-cultural, interreligious audience is evident in his tweets, and his audience could be sure that when turning to him for a dose of wisdom, they can appreciate the value of his words no matter what their religious affiliation might be. Mufti Menk's personable and plainspoken communication strategy helps make the teachings which he attempts to impart accessible to a large contemporary global audience, including the young generation.

2. *Stay abreast on various dimensions of the issue with accurate information:* Religious leaders who do not carefully study contemporary issues and stay updated on the latest developments can easily become the source of misinformation and disinformation. This is even more dangerous considering the status of religious leaders within their respective communities. Unfortunately, from North America to Africa, many religious leaders have been found to be purveyors of misinformation both online and offline. For example, in Lagos, Nigeria, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome of LoveWorld Incorporated in a sermon on YouTube, preached that the coronavirus pandemic was caused by the introduction of 5G technology, and the vaccine will be used as part of a plot leading to a new world order led by the anti-Christ (Egbunike 2020). In September 2020, Church

authorities in the Archdiocese of Denver, Colorado of the United States launched an investigation of a priest, Fr. Daniel Noland, who appeared in a video on YouTube telling Catholics: “I encourage everybody not to wear a mask. And I am telling you: disobey your bishop, disobey your governor. That’s what I’m telling you” (Flynn 2020). For Nolan, wearing mask was “contrary to your health, contrary to reason, and contrary to the common good.” Needless to say, religious leaders serve a much more useful role when they are willing to heed scientific information and use their pulpit to impart accurate information to their adherents. In the case of imams, mosque megaphones during the pandemic not only can be used to call people to prayer but can also be used to disseminate necessary public health messages (UNICEF 2020). Social media, for imams, can play the same role as mosque megaphones that reach the ears of hundreds of millions of people on a daily basis. With such a massive audience, accurate information would go a long way to help combat the pandemic; on the other hand, misinformation and disinformation will do much damage.

3. *Be active on social media:* The world of social media is an extremely busy, ever changing, and competitive environment full of distractions. Religious leaders who occasionally go on social media to post a message or a video clip cannot expect a large viewership and engagement, unless they have a wide distribution network that can help accelerate the content’s reach. Inactivity or sporadic activity online ultimately reduces visibility, reach and influence. Just like businesses who do social media marketing, religious leaders who wish to attract a large and loyal audience must be willing to invest time and effort into their work. The chances of trending on social media, resulting in more social shares, highly depends on the level of activity of the individual or business. Although religious leaders may not feel the same pressure as businesses to outdo their competition or to succeed on social media, one should not forget that the aim of any social communication is to reach the target audience as much as possible. This goal will be better achieved if one is aware of the structure and dynamics governing social media and be willing to take certain actions that help ensure more positive results from participation in social media.

4. *Interreligious collaboration:* The present world is a diverse global community in which people tend to live among or near people of other faith traditions. Interreligious dialogue among religious leaders can help

shape a more pluralistic message that transcends ethnic and sectarian boundaries. Interreligious messaging strategies can help to reduce the tendency to scapegoat people from other religions and ethnicities in time of calamities. Religious divisiveness in the COVID-19 pandemic was seen in India where the Muslim minority were accused of intentionally spreading the virus in the country (Slater and Masih 2020). Similarly, in Daegu, South Korea, the Shincheonji Church of Jesus (SCJ) was excessively vilified by the government and the media for its role in causing the outbreak of the coronavirus in February 2020. Its leaders were also subjected to a lawsuit by the city of Daegu for “for murder, injury, and violation of prevention and management of infectious diseases” (Burke 2020). While it is undisputed that members of this small new religious movement were responsible for the outbreak in Daegu, the excessive misinformation about the events surrounding the outbreak led to many reports of church members being discriminated in their work and society (Ibid). The experiences of religious minority in India and South Korea demonstrate that interreligious dialogue and collaboration is essential to preventing religious communication that could lead to victimization of a particular religious or ethnic community. As messages broadcasted on social media have the chance of going viral, information that demonizes or scapegoats particular religious groups can be extremely damaging to interreligious relation and social stability.

Implications for post-Pandemic Religious Leadership

The way social media was used as a means of communication by religious leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals that this form of communication may not be a temporary method to hold religious leaders over until the world goes back to ‘normal.’ In reality, the world may not and most likely will not go back to exactly the way it was before with all the impact that this pandemic has exerted on the global economic, political, and social systems. The use of social media as a communication tool during the pandemic may very well be an essential method during the foreseeable future. Therefore, religious leaders who have recently become acquainted with social media should be motivated to make even deeper acquaintance with this new way of staying connected with their followers and the wider world. Once the pandemic has passed, there may never be going back to the way it was. Evidence suggests that

the habits that people acquired during the pandemic, including their internet habit, will continue even after all the lockdowns and restrictions have been lifted. It is reasonable to think that religious leaders who have befriended social media during the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to explore other ways to incorporate this digital technology skillfully and wisely into their work, in particular their communication with people inside and outside of their religious community. Thus, religious leaders will not only have to go on social media to make sense out of various phenomenal events happening in the world, but they will have to make sense out of this very vehicle of communication in their lives. In recent years, many scholars of religion and religious leaders have begun to reflect more systematically on the relationship between digital technology and religious life. No doubt, with the reality of the pandemic in which digital technology became not only an accessory but a necessity to religious work, people of religion had the chance to discover new dimensions about digital technology that will shape how religious leaders view and use digital technology, particularly social media in the future.

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