

## EDITOR'S COLUMN

### Religious Engagement in the Covid-19 Pandemic

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The Covid-19 pandemic has presented a particularly urgent need for religions to take an active role in addressing the crisis. Although the pandemic is a time in which religious institutions are as much victims of the crisis as they are agents of addressing the problem, the conditions of the pandemic oftentimes disrupt the ability of religious leaders to engage with their followers and to communicate with one another. When we speak of religious engagement, we are really speaking of three fronts: (1) within the tradition; (2) with secular institutions; and (3) with other religious traditions. Within each individual set of engagement, there are specific issues to focus on. Here, I would like to focus on three matters that religious engagement can help address when it comes the coronavirus pandemic or other similar dilemmas: (1) communicating an interreligious message to religious adherents within and across traditions; (2) communicating truthful, scientifically sound information to the public; and (3) communicating examples of proper behavior to the people.

#### *(1) Communicating an interreligious message*

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 religion is to present authoritative and 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 religion 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. 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.

In the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a need for religious leaders to communicate theological and spiritual wisdom to their communities because there exists not only an “infodemic” regarding the scientific aspects of the pandemic, but also religiously inspired ideas that are not helpful towards understanding and solving 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 believe. Religiously inspired thinking that drives people to drink cow urine and lick a religious shrine to prevent infection can instigate disdain and mockery from those who look for opportunities to belittle religious people as ignorant and superstitious. Religious sentiments that the pandemic is 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.

Religious leaders of various traditions in one way or another

has been addressing these issues for their adherents. In Pope Francis' livestreamed Masses, 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 15 March 2020, Pope Francis also reminded all those people listening to him through communications media to remain steadfastly united to Christ. Pope Francis told the faithful, "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."<sup>1</sup>

Like Pope Francis, the Dalai Lama continues to send out tweets on a regular basis during this time. On 30 March 2020, His Holiness linked to his Twitter account a statement published on his website regarding the crisis. In it, the religious leader urged his followers, "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."<sup>2</sup> In another statement published on 14 April 2020, the Dalai Lama succinctly put the pandemic into a wider perspective, encouraging his followers to see beyond present hardships and obstacles. He wrote, "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."

Besides speaking to adherents within one's tradition, global calamities like the pandemic also need interreligious messaging that is consistent and widely accessed. The present world is a diverse global community in which people tend to live among or near people of

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Strong in the Face of Tribulation: A Sure Support in Time of Trial* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), 99.

<sup>2</sup> Dalai Lama, "A special message from His Holiness the Dalai Lama," (30 March 2020), <https://www.dalailama.com/news/2020/a-special-message-from-his-holiness-the-dalai-lama>

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 and promote social, cultural and religious harmony in times of crisis.

The Dalai Lama is an excellent example of someone who conscientiously engages in interreligious messaging that can appeal to a plurality of people. For example, on 10 August 2020, he tweeted:

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.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, the pandemic, in light of the long and broad history and future of humankind in particular, and 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.

**(2) *Communicating truthful, scientifically sound information to the public***

Despite increasing secularization around the world, religion still holds a position of authority, not only in religious and spiritual matters, but also other spheres of life. Because religion is viewed by their adherents as having the best interests of the people in mind, voices from leaders of religion 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

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<sup>3</sup> Dalai Lama, <https://twitter.com/DalaiLama/status/1292755129410625538>.

as social and economic development, peace and justice work, and environmental conservation.

In reality, wise and capable religious leaders realize that while they have the trust and the loyalty of their adherents, 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 exert 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.”<sup>4</sup> 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

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<sup>4</sup> WHO, “Practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19,” <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/practical-considerations-and-recommendations-for-religious-leaders-and-faith-based-communities-in-the-context-of-covid-19>

leaders can access guidance in formats and lay language that their members can understand.<sup>5</sup>

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.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the need for religions to collaborate with local and international political, social and scientific institutions in order to communicate credible information to adherents is extremely important to addressing the issues surrounding any dilemma facing humanity. By doing so, religion not only helps to impart accurate information to the public, but also galvanize and encourage public participation in actions beneficial to self and the community. In an August 2020 YouTube post, Mufti Ismail Menk plainly spoke to his audience:

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 be...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.’<sup>7</sup>

The kind of exhortation such as that expressed by Mufti Ismail Menk has been a staple in the messaging effort of sensible religious

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> UN Secretary General Remarks, 13 May 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Mufti Ismail Menk, “He infected me with the virus! A new crisis,” YouTube (12 August 2020), <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=9nqhEUwfiL0>

leaders worldwide. When the pandemic broke out in 2020, 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.”<sup>8</sup>

### (3) *Communicating examples of proper behavior to the people*

During Vietnam’s first wave which took place in the months of March to May 2020, Catholic churches were closed down 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 who 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.

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<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Irons, “God’s daily briefings: Religious leadership in a global pandemic,” *Medical Anthropology at UCL* (19 May 2020), [https://medanthucl.com/2020/05/19/gods-daily-briefings-religious-leadership-in-a-global-pandemic/#\\_edn2](https://medanthucl.com/2020/05/19/gods-daily-briefings-religious-leadership-in-a-global-pandemic/#_edn2)

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 intentionally used this time to set an example for how to prevent the spread of the virus within the community. Indeed, having faith in God during a global health crisis is one thing, but taking proper preventative actions to protect self and others is quite another. 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 have also been appearing with masks both online and offline during the pandemic. Whether 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 regularly appear 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 help 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 deal with the issue of wearing masks, reflected in how they appear in public and even online, contrast greatly with certain world political leaders on the very same issue. Most notorious



are 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.

These actions by religious leaders communicate effectively what needs to be done by the people so that they can imitate. When religious leaders ignore public health recommendations, they send a message of non-cooperation to the people who look to them for examples. Thus, part of the engagement among religions and with secular institutions is for religious leaders and organizations to agree on various practical measures to take in order to address a particular issue. Scientific recommendations are effectively reinforced when they are implemented by religious leaders and organizations across traditions.

## **Recommendations**

In order for religious engagement in the various forms to be effective, the following points should be given due attention:

### ***(1) Consistent communication strategy***

Religious followers should know what to expect from their religious leaders in terms of content and messaging as to be able to rely on them 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.

***(2) Staying abreast on various dimensions of the issue with accurate information***

Religious leaders and organizations 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. In September 2020, Church authorities in the Archdiocese of Denver, Colorado of the United States launched an investigation of a priest, Fr. Daniel Nolan, 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.”<sup>9</sup> For Nolan, wearing mask was “contrary to your health, contrary to reason, and contrary to the common good.” This kind of ignorant religious leadership is extremely detrimental to the well-being of humanity.

***(3) Being active on social media and other internet platforms***

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a time in which the role of the internet in our lives is indispensable. If secular and religious leaders do not resort to the internet in order to communicate with one another and with the public, their messaging ability would virtually be crippled. Social media is especially important as a platform for communication. However, 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,

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<sup>9</sup> JD Flynn, “Church officials evaluating priest who told Catholics to ‘disobey’ bishop on mask wearing,” (2 September 2020), <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/denver-archdiocese-fssp-evaluating-priest-who-told-catholics-to-disobey-bishop-on-mask-wearing-59756>

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. Thus, digital literacy, wisdom and active utilization of information and communication technology is essential to engagement among religions and with the global public.

#### ***(4) Closing the digital divide***

Despite the fact that ICT has permeated a significant portion of the world, there is still nearly 40 percent of the global population that do not have access to the internet. The digital divide also exists between gender and age groups. This reality results in a situation where certain part of the population are left out of essential knowledge propagated by political, social and religious institutions via internet platforms. Religions can play an active part in engaging with each other and with government institutions to close the digital divide in order to promote better access to important information for social and spiritual well-being.

Whether it is before, during, or after the coronavirus pandemic, religious engagement both *ad intra* and *ad extra* is instrumental to helping resolve issues that impact the social and spiritual well-being of humanity. Religions are also essential in the promotion of human flourishing through providing sound spiritual principles and values that guide their adherents in their daily life, at the same time contribute to human progress through collaboration and dialogue with one another and with secular institutions established to serve the common good. Concrete manifestations of such dialogue and collaboration can take on countless forms, some of which have been discussed in a cursory manner in this essay. It is hoped that what has been briefly highlighted here affirms the fact that religious engagement must be ongoing, dialogical, interdisciplinary, and must be witnessed both in word and deed.