

# God's Daily Briefings: Religious Leadership in a Global Pandemic

TILAK PAREKH

## The Voice of God

Religious leaders possess immense power and influence. Believers may listen to government ministers or public health officials, but, above all, they place their faith in the religious elite. For many religious people, their quotidian lives are determined almost entirely by their faith. From mundane, banal activities such as what they eat, drink and wear, to deeper decisions about career and key ethical choices – religious notions pull the strings.

For many a believer, religion is a matter of trusting and appealing to the all-encompassing authority that is known as God. How does that God concretely manifest for followers? The answer is in multivalent ways based on each tradition and indeed each individual person of faith. For some it can be scripture; for others a religious leader; for some a voice in their internal conscious; and for others their local clergy member – or indeed a multitude of these. What I seek to contend is simple: when a scripture or any person of spiritual authority speaks, it is redolent with, to some extent, the weight of the authority of God.

Within Hinduism, religious leaders are called gurus and their importance in Hinduism cannot be understated.<sup>i</sup> In various schools of Hindu theology, the guru is a divinised figure. In fact, a verse from the *Guru-Gītā*, described as “probably the most often-quoted hymn to the guru in the Indic world”, even declares the guru to be “*sākshāt Parabrahman*”, the very form of the supreme entity.<sup>ii</sup> To an external observer what may appear to be a normal human, or perhaps a charismatic person, to followers is the personification of divinity. This preamble is necessary to understand the influence religious leaders have over many across the globe.

## Public Health Information

In an era of fake news and misinformed WhatsApp forwards, the need for accurate and authentic information during this pandemic has never been greater. Some religious leaders have come under severe scrutiny for ignoring official government advice, and some have even died from being infected by Covid-19. In contrast, we also see many faith leaders urging followers to follow the advice of the government and international health agencies. As with my previous article, I focus on Hindu temples in the UK, which are the focus of my research.

The Neasden Temple, an iconic Hindu landmark in Europe, broadcasts the *arti* ritual every evening, with roughly 6,000-10,000 people tuning in every day.<sup>1</sup> After the daily broadcast, the head monk of the temple, Yogvivekdas Swami, gives a daily 10-minute briefing from the latest news and public health information, including a reminder for the Thursday ‘clap for carers’. The swami, unlike what one would perhaps expect, is what you could describe as an ‘urban monk’. Shaven-head and dressed in orange robes, he speaks fluent Gujarati and English (with a Midlands accent), is abreast with the latest news and developments, and quotes English poetry seamlessly alongside scriptural verses. Grounded in accurate government guidance and medical science – he was a practicing doctor in his pre-monastic life – he sprinkles his briefings with Hindu teachings and a dash of humour to adapt the important public health guidance to the circumstances and mentality of the congregation. He has become

---

<sup>1</sup> 3,000 to 5,000 devices tune in everyday, so assuming family members are watching, there would be at least double.



*Yogivekdas Swami gives his daily briefing from the main sanctum of the Neasden Temple on 30 April 2020.*

the equivalent of Huw Edwards or George Alagiah for this popular British Hindu community. Such a briefing is especially useful for the elderly Gujarati community who may not have English as their first language. He is clear in saying 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>iii</sup> It reveals the civic role being played by Hindu ascetics in the diaspora alongside the agency they hold in preaching accurate information during the pandemic.



*A screenshot of Narendra Modi's video call with the religious leaders of India.*



*A screenshot from the Bhaktivedanta Manor's website.*

#### Service

Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India, held a video conference on 30 March 2020 with various faith leaders of 16 religious organisations to seek their support in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic. It reflects, especially in the Indian landscape, the significant role religion plays in the functioning of society.

Even in the UK, religious leaders are responsible for initiating, mobilising and executing voluntary efforts. The Hare Krishna temple in Watford has set up a scheme called 'Krishna's Helpers', through which you can phone or email to request assistance.<sup>iv</sup> The Neasden Temple is daily calling hundreds of people offering help, delivering hot meals to key workers, the elderly and the vulnerable, and have set up a relief fund.<sup>v</sup> The Swaminarayan Dharma Bhakti Manor in Stanmore is preparing thousands of hot meals for hospital staff and the vulnerable as well as making donations for ventilators and pumps.<sup>vi</sup> Whilst the number of people in the UK who affiliate with organised religious groups dwindles, the pandemic shows the significant role religious organisations continue to play in society.<sup>vii</sup> Indeed, religious institutions and charities have long been an important resource of society in moments of crises. We see a similar pattern in this current climate.

*A poster tweeted by the Swaminarayan Dharma Bhakti Manor in Stanmore.*

#### Prayers and Spiritual Wellbeing

Though gurus occupy multifarious roles<sup>viii</sup>, their followers would perhaps ultimately see them as spiritual beings who provide them with religious instruction and guidance. They are for their millions of followers a source of solace and spirituality.

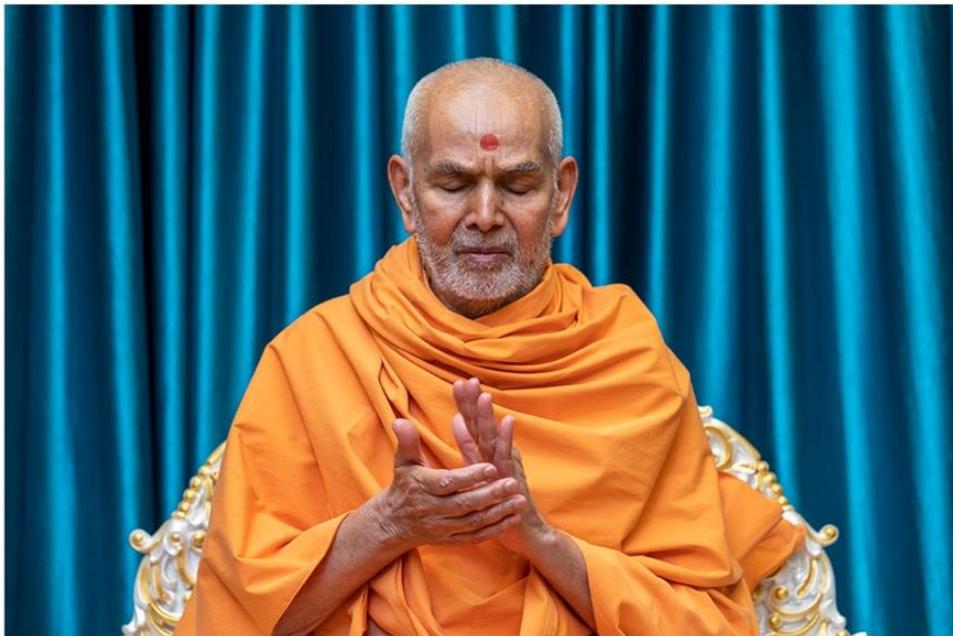
### Krishna's Helpers

Bhaktivedanta Manor is reaching out to provide practical and spiritual assistance. Please contact our "Krishna's Helpers" service and we'll endeavour to mobilise our volunteers to help in whatever way we can. Pass on the message to those in need.

**Email: [help@krishnatemple.com](mailto:help@krishnatemple.com)**

**phone / Whatsapp: 07579 776 925**

During this pandemic, we see many Hindu gurus spreading messages of peace, prayer, and spirituality. They all have their own explanatory frameworks as to why the virus has hit, but we do not have the space to discuss this



*My deepest prayers for each one of you.*

*Sadhu Keshavjivandas.*

Jai Swaminarayan from Sadhu Keshavjivandas  
(HH Mahant Swami Maharaj, Spiritual Head, BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha)

here. They have used their authority to make concessions and adjust how various rituals, including death rites, are conducted, marking unprecedented and radical changes in religious rituals and rites of passage.

A common thread amongst the messages of gurus is a call to prayer and unity. Hindu leaders are calling upon their followers to remember God, introspect, and engage in devotion or meditation. Mahant Swami, a global Hindu leader of the BAPS Swaminarayan Hindu tradition that heads the Neasden Temple, wrote a letter alongside recording an audio blessing for millions of followers and supporters. In it, he stresses the importance of staying at home, observing the lockdown, maintaining social distancing, and practicing good hygiene. He then imparts his spiritual message by saying that he himself is regularly praying and also encourages everyone to engage in devotion, maintain faith in God, and remain unified. Knowing that one's guru is praying and protecting their flock infuses a great deal of positivity amongst Hindus. Although being categorised as spiritual leaders, the reach and influence of gurus bleeds beyond the religious sphere. Their spiritual authority blends into an essential civic role and this pandemic has revealed that religious leaders are important agents, not only in spiritually reassuring followers, but also in the spreading of secular messages.

*Mahant Swami, a global Hindu leader, engaged in prayer; appended with an extract from his letter.*

Gurus are also using social media to spread religious teachings that act as an anchor for believers amidst the chaos and uncertainty. Sri Ravi Shankar, leader of the international 'Art of Living Foundation', has begun an online series called 'Open up in Lockdown' to impart timely spiritual messages.<sup>ix</sup> The Neasden Temple has initiated a live web-series called 'Timeless Hindu Wisdom' that delivers relevant Hindu teachings befitting the current climate.<sup>x</sup> Chidanand Saraswatiji and Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati, popular Hindu gurus based in Rishikesh, have also been delivering regular online sermons and meditations.<sup>xi</sup> Common themes include 'going inward', prayer, and faith in God. Whilst being a source of information and providing voluntary service to the masses, for believers, their gurus quench their spiritual needs and play an essential role for their mental health.

The pandemic has illuminated different dimensions of religion. We see that God is still a rung of society and the power of this being continues to manifest through religious leaders. Religion is adjusting and faith leaders carry significant power which they can, if they choose, use to exercise immensely positive action. Hindus gurus, like many religious leaders, have not gone into hibernation; rather, they have, in most cases, risen to their social duty by initiating acts of service, stressing compliance of government guidelines, and imparting positive spiritual messages – all for the physical safety and mental wellbeing of millions. The pandemic has shown how religious leaders remain a vital force in the global village.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tilak is currently pursuing a MSc in Social and Cultural Anthropology at UCL. Prior to this, he completed a MPhil at Cambridge and a BA in Theology and Religion at Oxford. He will be starting a PhD at Cambridge this October. His research interests are in religious leadership, youth religiosity, sacred space, and theology. He specialises in Hinduism.

Tilak.parekh.19@ucl.ac.uk

## REFERENCES

- <sup>i</sup> Thomas A. Forsthoefel and Cynthia Ann Humes, eds., *Gurus in America*, SUNY Series in Hindu Studies (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), 3.
- <sup>ii</sup> Jeremy G. Morse, 'The Literary Guru. The Dual Emphasis on Bhakti and Vidhi in Western Indian Guru-Devotion', in C, ed. Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame (London: Routledge, 2012), 226.
- <sup>iii</sup> 'BAPS UK & Europe | Live Webcast from Neasden Temple', accessed 2 May 2020, <https://www.neasdentemple.org/>.
- <sup>iv</sup> 'Bhaktivedanta Manor – Hare Krishna Temple » Blog Archive » Krishna's Helpers', accessed 2 May 2020, <https://www.bhaktivedantamanor.co.uk/home/?p=13739>.
- <sup>v</sup> 'Neasden Temple (@NeasdenTemple) / Twitter', Twitter, accessed 2 May 2020, <https://twitter.com/neasdentemple>.
- <sup>vi</sup> 'Dharma Bhakti Manor (@StanmoreTemple) / Twitter', Twitter, accessed 2 May 2020, <https://twitter.com/stanmoretemple>.
- <sup>vii</sup> S. Collins-Mayo and P. Dandelion, *Religion and Youth*, Theology and Religion in Interdisciplinary Perspective Series in Association with the BSA Sociology of Religion Study Group (Ashgate, 2010), 2; Harriet Sherwood Religion correspondent, 'UK Secularism on Rise as More than Half Say They Have No Religion', *The Guardian*, 10 July 2019, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/11/uk-secularism-on-rise-as-more-than-half-say-they-have-no-religion>.
- <sup>viii</sup> Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame, *The Guru in South Asia: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Routledge, 2012).
- <sup>ix</sup> 'Open Up In Lockdown - YouTube', accessed 2 May 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLH-OHZ0SQ\\_PGmIANw1YwKz8o2CjkXjYzu](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLH-OHZ0SQ_PGmIANw1YwKz8o2CjkXjYzu).
- <sup>x</sup> "'Timeless Hindu Wisdom" Web Series - YouTube', accessed 2 May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTBshFmiHbaBYa0pfqnSpnaAdw57VfMOj>.
- <sup>xi</sup> 'Parmarth Niketan - YouTube', accessed 2 May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/user/parmarthniketan>.