February 8, 2022

Mark Zuckerberg
Chief Executive Officer
Meta Platforms, Inc.
1601 Willow Road
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg,

As faith leaders of various religions, worldviews, and backgrounds that share a deep concern for the spiritual wellbeing of all children, we are writing this letter to ask you to cease all development of the newly proposed Instagram Kids platform for children under 13. We are glad you have paused this project in response to fierce public outcry, but are dismayed to hear that the head of Instagram intends to move forward with it. A pause is not enough. Instagram poses a danger to young children, as your own research indicates. Plans for Instagram Kids must end permanently.

In addition to the concerns expressed in the letter from a coalition led by Fairplay of over 100 organizations and experts, petition signatures from more than 200,000 people,[1] the letters from four members of Congress and 44 state attorneys general, and widespread public outrage, we believe that Instagram Kids would prove disastrous for children's spiritual development. This is an issue that transcends denominational divides, demanding our unity to examine deeper issues of stillness, presence, attention, empathy, and humility in the digital world.

It may be tempting to ride the wave of cultural commodification and optimistically tout social media as a useful "tool." But with 72% of teens on Instagram and 20% on social media for more than five hours a day, an exercise in spiritual discernment becomes necessary. After much meditation and prayer, we assert that social media platforms that target immature brains, practice unethical data mining, and are inspired by profit motives are *not* a tool for the greater good of children.

Indeed, from the secular side, it is already well established that social media use poses emotional, physical, and psychological harms to children. From increases in depression, anxiety, suicide, sexualization, narcissism, access to pornography, loneliness, and cyberbullying to disastrous impacts on attention, sleep, and healthy development, it is undeniable that social

[1] Note: The number of petition signatures to date is over 200,000, eclipsing those cited in the news report.

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media is irrevocably altering the landscape of childhood.[2] Despite publicly downplaying the issue, Facebook's own research – as revealed by the Wall Street Journal's Facebook Files and the recent testimony of Frances Haugen – proves Instagram's disastrous effects on youth mental health. In one 2019 presentation, Facebook even admitted that "we make body image issues worse for one in three teen girls." As we are instructed to *know any tree by its fruits* (Luke 6:44) and to expect that "the work of righteousness shall be peace" (Isaiah 32:17), these profound effects should immediately serve as a warning.

However, as "there are many signs in the heavens and the earth that they pass by and give no heed to" (Qur'an 12:105), we know that further examination of specific spiritual consequences of social media is needed. We have identified significant adverse impacts, outlined below, that directly influence our missions to serve families and promote their spiritual health, in turn affecting their total wellbeing and the welfare of our communities.

Primarily, the social media struggle is one against presence, attention, and stillness. Amidst Lao Tzu's proclamation that "In stillness all under heaven rests"[3] (Ch. 37) and the Psalms' beloved "Be still and know" (46:10), countless faith communities emphasize the importance of time spent without distraction. Be it Sabbath, silence, yoga, meditation, or prayer, these moments of reflection offer us a path to something deeper, serving as our foundation for love of a higher power and love of neighbor. Social media – with its intentionally addictive algorithms, incessant communication systems, and mass commodification of attention – explicitly counteracts these values. As the Sufi poet Rumi wrote,"silence is the language of god, all else is poor translation."[4] Mother Teresa, too, proclaimed that "We need to find God and He cannot be found in noise and restlessness. See how nature, the trees, the grass grow in perfect silence – see the stars, the moon and sun, how they move in silence…"[5] Children, with growing minds and bodies, need this time for reflection, unprompted encounters, and mindful, attentive play. If not now, then when?

We believe, too, that this essential childhood play is enhanced when experienced outdoors. Countless saints and seers have described the natural world as a place where the Divine speaks – a locus where we humbly recognize our smallness, our interconnection with the world, and our loving responsibility toward other forms of life. And unfortunately, when children devote hours to impersonal, impassive screens, they miss out on the joy of this natural awe and wonder. Catholic Priest Ivan Illich speaks to the effect: "The novice to the sacred liturgy and to mental

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[2] Fairplay. Letter to Mark Zuckerberg: Instagram for Kids. 15 April 2021. Retrieved from https://fairplayforkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/instagram_letter.pdf.

[3] Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching: A Book About the Way and the Power of the Way.* Translated by Ursula K Le Guin, Shambhala, 1998. Retrieved from http://www.sfhunyuan.com/images/TAO_TE_CHING_-_LE_GUIN_edition.pdf.

[4] "Quotes by Maulana Rumi." *Sufinama*. Rekhta Foundation. Retrieved from https://www.sufinama.org/quotes/silence-is-the-language-of-god-maulana-rumi-quote.

[5] Mother Teresa of Calcutta. *In the Silence of the Heart,* comp. Kathryn Spink. SPCK, 1989, p 19.

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prayer has a historically new task. He is largely removed from those things – water, sunlight, soil, and weather – that were made to speak of God's presence."[6] Amin Aaser, practicing Muslim and founder of Noor Kids, echoes this sentiment: "Through getting outdoors, through reflection, we are hopefully able to build a stronger relationship with God. No doubt – if you are playing Angry Birds on your phone – you're not doing that."[7]

In addition, social media use undermines the sort of unitive consciousness and empathetic understanding that spiritual paths promote. Algorithms shuffle users into boxes and ideological echo chambers, inflaming a harmful "us vs. them" mentality that is incompatible with selfless love. In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis remarks that online, "Even as individuals maintain their comfortable consumerist isolation, they can choose a form of constant and febrile bonding that encourages remarkable hostility, insults, abuse, defamation and verbal violence destructive of others" (44).[8] When juxtaposed against the words of the Upanishads –"he who sees all beings in his Self and his Self in all beings, he never suffers; because when he sees all creatures within his true Self, then jealousy, grief and hatred vanish (*Isa Upanishad,* 35)"[9] –the discordance of these two experiences is stark. Children should not be taught to place people into categories, fighting outrage with outrage online. The path to peace is through patient dialogue, attentive listening, and intentional understanding –ideally in person.

Furthermore, Instagram culture is one of constant comparison, an image-based quest to measure up and shine beyond one's peers. This artificial stage keeps us at the level of our false self, inflaming ego, *nafs*, or stoking envy. Here, the Islamic emphasis on the dangers of *Hasad* [10] (jealousy) echo the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh: "Jealousy consumeth the body and anger doth burn the liver: avoid these two as you would a lion."[11] In addition, this culture of digital comparison is inextricably tied up with materialistic, consumptive values. Children, through repetitive exposure to online advertisements and influencers' images of wealth, beauty, and high fashion, will conflate this artificiality with "the good life." At eight years old, how will

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[6] Illich, Ivan. "Philosophy ... Artifacts ... Friendship." *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association,* 70:59-77 (1996). Retrieved from http://debate.uvm.edu/asnider/Ivan_Illich/1996_philo_arti_friends.PDF.

[7] Aaser, Crouch, and Shlain. "An Interfaith Conversation on Screen Time." Children's Screen Time Action Network. Fairplay, 22 July 2019. Online Seminar. Retrieved from https://screentimenetwork.org/resource/interfaith conversation-screen-time.

[8] Pope Francis. *Fratelli Tutti.* Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020. Retrieved from https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli tutti.html.

[9] *The Upanishads.* Translated by Swami Paramananda, The Vedanta Center, 1919. Retrieved from https://estudantedavedanta.net/The-Upanishads-Translated-by-Swami-Paramananda.pdf.

[10] "Beware of Jealousy." *Islaam.Net*, Radiant Drops Ltd, www.islaam.net/purification-of-the-soul/islamic manners/beware-of-jealousy-for-verily-it-destroys-good-deeds-the-way-fire-destroys-wood/?print=print.

[11] Bahá'u'lláh. *The Compilation of Compilations: Volume 1.* Compiled by Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Mona Vale: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991, p. 460. Retrieved from https://bahai library.com/compilation_compilations_1.

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a child discern between this alluring superficiality and deeper values of compassion, selflessness, vocation, and purpose? How will they ever believe that "life does not consist in an abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15)?

Indeed, faith leaders are nearly universally unified in their efforts to emphasize internal validation over external validation. Countless religious traditions insist that *we are already enough as we are*—a radical, unprofitable assertion that actively counteracts consumeristic values. As Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh wrote, "If you crave acceptance and recognition and try to change yourself to fit what other people want you to be, you will suffer all your life. True happiness and true power lie in understanding yourself, accepting yourself, having confidence in yourself."[12] We believe that the more children internalize this truth, the less they will tend to chase trends of fast fashion, post about expensive vacations, or anxiously compare themselves to pictures of their friends.

Finally, since their inception, many faith traditions have recognized the need for distinct stages of spiritual development in childhood. Even the most ancient of religions taught that children could not immediately plunge into the complexity of adulthood; childhood is preserved as a sort of garden –even a desirable state of return (Matthew 18:3). Through such milestones or life cycle events as b'nai mitzvah, Native American vision quests, and religious quinceañeras, and through such concepts as Islam's three stages of life, Hinduism's 16 samskaras, and Christianity's distinct ages of accountability, our various religions work to preserve the innocence, holiness, and freedom of those precious years of childhood that precede adolescence – efforts that social platforms largely undermine.

Indeed, even psychology supports this assertion – in James Fowler's famous book *Stages of Faith,* he outlines the various phases in a child's spiritual development. From age 6-12, youth undergo the "Mythic-Literal Faith Stage" where "children's source of religious authority starts to expand past parents and trusted adults to others in their community like teachers and friends."[13] Here, the emphasis on *trusted* adults must be maintained. At this precious stage, children benefit from influences that have a vested interest in their wellbeing – addictive algorithms, self-absorbed influencers, and advertisers that capitalize on insecurity clearly do not.

Overall, it is important to remember that we are not alone in these sentiments: for example, Muslims are reducing smartphone use during Ramadan, some Catholic schools are banning screens as modes of education, monasteries are hosting tech-mindfulness meditation sessions, Jewish families are practicing a screen-free Tech Shabbat, and Pope Francis has officially warned the Church of the impacts of screen time. It is undeniable that our spiritual

[12] Thích Nhất Hạnh. *The Art of Power.* HarperCollins Publishers, 2008.
[13] "Handout 1: Stages of Faith Development." *Unitarian Universalist Association,* Unitarian Universalist Association. Retrieved from https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/youth/wholeness/workshop2/handout1-stages-faith development.

apprehensions represent heartfelt beliefs common broadly to communities of faith and must be duly considered.

It is from this place of intense concern for the spiritual welfare of children that we respectfully ask you to permanently cancel plans for Instagram Kids. The app will serve as a catalytic gateway for young children to the already-documented problems adversely impacting teens, as well as a vast array of unforeseen issues as commercial culture further encroaches on the sanctity of childhood. We find it hopeful that you have already made efforts to bridge the gap between Silicon Valley and communities of faith – from rediscovering your own religious roots to meeting with Pope Francis to listening to local pastors in Waco, Texas, it is clear that you value

dialogue between the spiritual and secular worlds. As both a parent and someone who believes that religion is "very important,"[14] we humbly ask you to continue working with religious communities and heed our concerns, even when corporate outcomes may suffer as a result. For this cannot be a question of profit. All children and their families deserve to have a safe space to explore their spiritual selves, should they choose to do so. And childhood should be all movement, play, messiness, and wriggle – life-affirming against the sleek, flat, rapacious world of screens.

Take our word: children's wellbeing must come first. We ask that you make this "pause" permanent and definitively end Instagram Kids.

Sincerely,

Najiba Akbar, Muslim Chaplain, Tufts University
Rev. Stacy Alan
Priya Amaresh, Hindu Chaplain, Duke University
John Bach, Quaker Chaplain, Harvard University
Rabbi Tiferet Berenbaum
Chaplain Kiki Burgdorf
Rabbi Nadav Caine
Dr. Kutter Callaway, Associate Professor of Theology and Culture, Fuller Theological Seminary
Rev. Jason Chesnut
Father Carl S. Chudy
Rev. Newton Daddow
Rev. Jerry Dehn
Carol Droege, Family Ministry Director

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[14] Price, Rob. "Mark Zuckerberg says he's become 'more religious' after becoming a father in rare public discussion about faith: 'The last few years have been really humbling for me'." *Business Insider,* Insider Inc, Jan 31 2020. Retrieved from https://www.businessinsider.com/mark-zuckerberg-more-religious-fatherhood-facebook-issues 2020-1

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