



Manasa Akkineni
PharmD Candidate (2022), University of Findlay
akkinenis@findlay.edu

VACCINE HESITANCY AND RELIGION

It has been a challenging ride for all the individuals in the world since February 2020. We were hit by a virus that led to a global pandemic. COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by a type of corona virus. Coronaviruses are known to cause respiratory illness such as common cold, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS).¹ COVID-19 is caused by coronavirus 2 (or SARS-CoV-2), a virus that is believed to have broken out in China. World Health Organization (WHO) announced it as pandemic in March of 2020 several countries went into lockdown immediately to contain the viral infection that has been spreading.¹ As of August 30th, 2021, there has been over 200 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 globally and death toll caused due to this viral disease is heading closer to 5 million.² To top this off, the virus has taken a stroll to develop multiple variants such as Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Eta, etc.³ A variant is a change or modification in a viral particle from its original structure that can change the way it could affect. There are additional variants that are currently being investigated. Amongst these recognized variants, Alpha variant was one of the first variant that originated in the U.K. and that was found to be more contagious. The new delta variant is found to be even more contagious than alpha. This variant originated in India during the winter months and had quickly spread to the surrounding countries.³

Even though the Delta variant is known to transmit faster than other variants, an individual who completed a full series of available vaccines are protected against it. However, these vaccinated individuals can still carry the virus and transmit to those who are immunocompromised and unvaccinated population.⁴ Hence it is highly encouraged to be vaccinated if you are eligible and have no contraindications. This article will address vaccine hesitancies observed in certain communities that have different religious beliefs.

I understand you may have concerns regarding the COVID-19 vaccines, but immunization is important for two main reasons: one to protect yourself and second, to protect those around you (herd immunity). Herd immunity is achieved when a large population is immunized against a specific pathogen therefore inhibiting the spread of disease in a population. Through this we can drop overall infection rate (i.e., fewer high-risk people overall).⁶ This usually helps with those who cannot get vaccinated because they are immunocompromised as well as babies and children - who are not eligible to receive vaccine. Sometime vaccinations are the only defense available for infectious diseases especially those that do not currently have any available treatment and would cause life-threatening or serious complications, if infected. COVID-19 is one such viral infection - discovered in 2019 that is known to cause serious complications and even death in some cases.

According to the CDC, getting COVID-19 may offer some natural protection. Current evidence suggests that reinfection with the virus that causes COVID-19 is uncommon in the 90 days after initial infection. However, experts are unsure about how long this protection lasts. COVID-19 vaccination will help protect you by creating an antibody (immunity) response without having to experience sickness.⁷



Small segment of the population with impaired immunity may not be eligible for vaccination. Their only protection against certain diseases is for others to get vaccinated so the illnesses are less common.

There have been many religious groups with concerns regarding the development of vaccines. In Islam, The Quran obliges its followers seek protection from sickness regardless of who is providing it. They also believe the words of Prophet Mohammad said, “there is no disease that God has created for which He has not made a cure that is known by some people”. In fact, the founder of German BioNTech firm that partnered with Pfizer to develop COVID-19 vaccine is of Turkish Muslim heritage.⁸

In Catholicism, the Pope has taken a positive stance on COVID-19 immunization. The Offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had released statements, “Note of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith on morality of using some anti-COVID-19 vaccines, 21.12.2020” through the Vatican press release on moral reflections on vaccines prepared from “morally compromised” cell lines (i.e., aborted fetuses).⁹ It stated, “in organizations where cell lines of illicit origin are being utilized, the responsibility of those who make the decision to use them is not the same as that of those who have no voice in such a decision” explaining that when ethically faultless COVID-19 vaccine is not available, it is morally acceptable to get immunized that have used “morally compromised” cell lines. They tried to link that there was a “remote” connection for such and the moral duty to avoid such passive material is not obligatory. They also stated, “the morality of vaccination depends not only on the duty to protect one’s own health, but also on the duty to pursue the common good” and in this case to protect the vulnerable from the

most exposed.¹⁰ It is one’s own responsibility for those who refuse to take COVID-19 vaccine to avoid the weakest and at risk for developing this disease.

This was also quoted by the United States bishops’ conference and stated that “Catholics can take two of the three available COVID-19 vaccines”.¹¹ In the statement that was released by the chair of USCCB’s doctrine committee and Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City, it was stated that vaccines produced by Pfizer and Moderna are accepted with a remote connection to “morally compromised” cell lines compared to the one developed by AstraZeneca. They said vaccines developed from AstraZeneca “should be avoided if the alternatives are available”.¹¹

Another vaccine that FDA has recently authorized for emergency use only is by Johnson & Johnson which is the only single dose vaccine that is available at this time. There are several concerns regarding Johnson & Johnson Janssen COVID-19 vaccine from its efficacy data to how it is manufactured. It is believed that Johnson & Johnson used lab-grown cells that are clones of fetal tissue derived from abortions in 1980s. Even though Vatican City has released a statement “When ethically irreproachable COVID-19 vaccines are not available, it is morally acceptable to receive COVID-19 vaccine that have used cell line from aborted fetuses in their research and production process” some of the Bishops in the US comment that it is immoral. While this issue has been debated – as people have no option of which vaccine would be available to them, it is acceptable to take those vaccines that have remote relationship with aborted fetal cell lines during their research and development process - according to some prominent religious leaders as stated above.¹²

Similarly, in Judaism, several rabbis worldwide



have different opinions. Rabbi Hershel Schacheter, highly respected American Orthodox rabbi, a religious law authority and dean at Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS), part of Yeshiva University in New York, released a statement, “if a democratic government ultimately legislates that a COVID-19 vaccination is safe for the public or specific population, people must comply with this rule. Jews who refuse to abide by government-mandated vaccination endanger all of society.” He also commented on the measles outbreak in Hasidic communities in the US with low vaccination rates and it was a public disgust with “ultra-Orthodox Jews” illustrating the potential for desecrating God’s name.¹²

Another religious concern that is quite commonly observed in Orthodox Jews and Muslim community is that the vaccines may contain a pork-derived products.¹⁴ According to ABC news article that was published on December 20th, 2020, a spokesperson for Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca confirmed that their vaccines do not contain any pork-derived products.¹⁴ However, not all countries may have access to these gelatin-free certified vaccines.

Majority of the religious leaders from Orthodox communities believe and have commented on such situations like if a vaccine were to have pork-derived products it’s still debatable to receive vaccine. Some of the developing Dr. Harnour Rashid, an associate professor at the University of Sydney said, “from past debates over pork gelatin use in vaccines is that it is permissible under Islamic law, as “greater harm” would occur if the vaccines weren’t used”. Another statement was published in an article from ABC news that said, “according to Jewish law, the prohibition on eating pork or using pork is only forbidden when it’s a natural way of eating it”

by Rabbi David Stav, chairman of Tzogar, a rabbinical organization in Israel.¹⁴

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