Are Christians morally obligated to be vaccinated for COVID-19?

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Abstract
As the COVID-19 pandemic persists and new vaccine boosters targeting the latest subvariants have been approved, public debate concerning vaccines and vaccination mandates has not subsided. Such debate has been particularly acute among Roman Catholics and other Christians, with arguments having been put forth from scriptural and natural law bases in favor of vaccination against COVID-19, and counterarguments based on respecting individual conscience and concerns about moral complicity with abortion. In this article, I argue that principles of both secular public health and Christian social ethics justify vaccination mandates for COVID-19. I further show why certain objections Christians may have are ill-founded and conclude that no moral reason exists for a Christian to refuse to be vaccinated for COVID-19; rather, vaccination for COVID-19 is a moral obligation.

Keywords
abortion, conscience, COVID-19, moral complicity, Thomas Aquinas, vaccination

Introduction
As the COVID-19 pandemic persists and new vaccine boosters targeting the BA.4 and BA.5 subvariants were approved,1 public debate concerning vaccines and vaccination mandates has not subsided. Such debate has been particularly acute among Christians. For example, one study in June 2021 showed that 24% of White Evangelical Christians in the United States refuse to be vaccinated for COVID-19.2 Another study showed that a significant number of White Evangelical Christians who were open to vaccination before the vaccines were approved became resistant to

1. Brenda Goodman, “CDC Signs Off on Updated Covid-19 Boosters,” CNN, September 1, 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/01/health/acip-cdc-updated-covid-booster/index.html.
2. Ian Lovett, “White Evangelicals Resist Covid-19 Vaccine Most among Religious Groups,” The Wall Street Journal, July 28, 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/white-evangelicals-resist-covid-19-vaccine-most-among-religious-groups-11627464601.

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pro-vaccination messaging by the time the vaccines had become widely available.\(^3\) To counter hesi-
tancy and resistance to being vaccinated among Christians, the National Council of Churches has
argued from a scriptural basis in favor of vaccination against COVID-19:

As Christians, our faith tradition is clear and consistent about how we are to treat others. We are taught that
each person is made in the image and likeness of God and we are to be concerned about their well-being.
Christ, as our example, reminds us in both his words and his actions that how we treat the most vulnerable
matters to God. Indeed, there are different interpretations of scriptures and while some have tried to distort
our sacred texts to justify discouraging people from taking the vaccine, the ones highlighted below amplify
the importance of how taking a safe and proven vaccine that can save lives is not only an act of faith, it is
also a moral choice and the right thing to do.

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these. (Mark
12:31 NRSV)

Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:2 NRSV)

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:4 NRSV)

For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand
to be our way of life. (Ephesians 2:10 NRSV)

Do not be deceived, my beloved. Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above,
coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In
fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of
first fruits of his creatures. (James 1:13-18 NRSV)\(^4\)

In addition to Evangelical and mainline Protestant Christians, among Roman Catholics debate
concerning vaccination has been vociferous. On one side, the Catholic Medical Association (CMA),
a professional organization of Catholic health care providers, and the National Catholic Bioethics
Center (NCBC), an independent and influential “think tank,” argue for exemptions for those who
object to receiving a COVID-19 vaccine for religious or moral reasons.\(^5\) Yet, several Catholic bish-
ops have instructed their priests not to sign religious exemption requests or have mandated vaccina-
tions for diocesan employees, and Vatican City instituted a mandate without allowing non-medical
exemptions.\(^6\) In this article, I argue that principles of both secular public health and Christian social
ethics justify vaccination mandates for COVID-19. I further show why certain objections Christians
may have are ill-founded and conclude that no moral reason exists for a Christian to refuse to be
vaccinated for COVID-19; rather, vaccination for COVID-19 is a moral obligation.\(^7\)

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3. Scott E. Bokemper, Alan S. Gerber, Saad B. Omer, and Gregory A. Huber, “Persuading US White Evangelicals to Vaccinate for COVID-19: Testing Message Effectiveness in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021,” Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 118.49 (2021): e2114762118.
4. National Council of Churches, “Fact Sheet: Christian Approach to Vaccine Hesitancy,” December 22, 2021, https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Vaccine-Hesitancy-NCC-Fact-Sheet-FINAL-2021-.pdf.
5. See “Catholic Medical Association Opposes Vaccine Mandates without Conscience and Religious Exemptions,” CMA, July 28, 2021, https://www.cathmed.org/catholic-medical-association-opposes-vaccine-mandates-without-conscience-and-religious-exemptions/, and “NCBC Statement on COVID-19 Vaccine Mandates,” NCBC, August 23, 2021, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e3ada1a6a2e8d6a131d1dcd/t/618c1ec220b56b14410cb6/1636572867052/NCBC_Statement_on_COVID-19_Vaccine_Mandates.pdf.
6. See Carol Zimmermann, “NY Priests Urged Not to Give Religious Exemptions to COVID-19 Vaccines,” National Catholic Reporter, August 5, 2021, https://www.ncronline.org/news/coronavirus/
Ethical principles supporting COVID-19 vaccination mandates

The commonly held principles of biomedical ethics—respect for autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice—are primarily applicable in the clinical and research contexts in which the primary concern is the protection of individual patients or research participants. A complementary set of principles for the public health context primarily concerns the general welfare of society, which may be impacted by individuals’ choices. The first principle stipulates that one’s liberty may be restricted to prevent risk of harm to others, and ample evidence exists of the risks from lack of vaccination. If restriction of liberty is warranted, the least restrictive means should be used: one should start with education, then inducement, and, if such measures are not effective and
the public health threat is sufficiently significant, coercive or punitive measure may be employed. Society has witnessed each of these steps since the vaccines became available. *Reciprocity* demands that mandated vaccines be made freely available and also informs efforts to minimize the penalties for those who choose not to be vaccinated under a mandate, such as requiring regular testing or mask-wearing or reconfiguring one’s job (e.g., reassigning a nurse to perform non-patient-facing functions within a hospital). Finally, *transparency* requires that all stakeholders have a voice in the public deliberation and ultimate determination of public policy, which does not entail that all stakeholders will get their way.

These secular public health principles cohere with key principles of the natural law and Christian social ethics. Beginning with Thomas Aquinas’s exhortation to exercise proper *stewardship* over one’s body: “It is prescribed that a human being sustains [their] body, for otherwise [they] murder [them]self. . . . Therefore, one is bound to nourish [their] body, and we are bound likewise with respect to all other things without which the body cannot live.” There is both a personal moral obligation to safeguard one’s health and an obligation for public authorities to help cultivate this and other virtuous dispositions: “Legislators make men virtuous by habituating them to virtuous works by means of statutes, rewards, and punishments.” Aquinas defines civil laws as those made by appropriate authorities, utilizing prudential reason to craft ordinances that serve the *common good*. Vaccination mandates that have been made by public authorities, and within various health care, educational, and other institutions, having reasoned through the relevant epidemiological evidence, are licit expressions of civil law serving the common good and fostering a more virtuous citizenry.

Although Catholic ecclesial leaders are not recognized as magisterial authorities by all Christians, elucidating how they have articulated the notion of the “common good” and the appropriate role of civil authorities in promoting it may be helpful. According to the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council (1962-5), the common good is “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.” The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* further exhorts, “The dignity of the human person requires the pursuit of the common good. Everyone should be concerned to create and support institutions that improve the conditions of human life.” Concerning the proper function of public authorities, the *Catechism* concludes, “It is the role of the state to defend and promote the common good of civil society” and that “it is the proper function of authority to arbitrate, in the name of the common good, between various particular interests.”

Insofar as vaccination mandates help to create a social condition, namely, herd immunity, that allows people to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily and it is evident how the

13. Though such measures may be insufficiently effective against the newer variants. Vatican City’s vaccination mandate, for example, previously allowed for regular testing as an alternative, but it disallowed this alternative as the Omicron variant surged.

14. Thomas Aquinas, *Super secundam Epistolam ad Thessalonicenses lectura*, cap. III, lect. 2; my translation.

15. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. II, lect. 1, §251, trans. C. I. Litzinger (Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox Books, 1993).

16. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 95, trans. English Dominican Fathers (New York: Benziger, 1948).

17. Paul VI, *Gaudium et spes*, December 7, 1965, no. 26, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

18. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997), no. 1926, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

19. *Catechism*, no. 1927.

20. *Catechism*, no. 1908.

21. Mayo Clinic Staff, “Herd Immunity and COVID-19: What You Need to Know,” Mayo Clinic, April 20, 2022, https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/coronavirus/in-depth/herd-immunity-and-coronavirus/art-20486808.
pandemic, particularly when lockdowns and social distancing have been required, has inhibited such fulfillment in terms of the economy, education, and mental health, the state is fulfilling its proper role to promote the common good and respect the dignity of the human person. Furthermore, the common good requires considering the “sum total” of relevant social conditions while also keeping in the forefront Christ’s exhortation in Matt 25:31-46 to care especially for the poor and vulnerable, that is, “the least of these.” Hence, the vulnerability of persons who cannot be vaccinated for medical reasons, the economic impact of lockdowns and quarantines, the amelioration of politically created health disparities, and the particular vulnerabilities experienced by persons with disabilities should be taken into account.

Conscience-based objections to COVID-19 vaccination

The primary basis for refusals to be vaccinated on the part of Christians who are pro-life is its remote material causal link to abortion. The Johnson & Johnson/Janssen vaccine was manufactured using an immortalized cell line (PER.C6) developed from the retina of a fetus aborted in 1985; the Moderna and Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines were tested using a cell line (HEK 293) developed from the kidney of a fetus that either was aborted or had naturally miscarried in 1972. Catholic theologians working in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), the chief doctrinal office in the Vatican, analyzed whether receiving a vaccine that was materially connected to abortion constitutes illicit cooperation with moral evil. The CDF concluded that “it is morally acceptable to receive Covid-19 vaccines that have used cell lines from aborted fetuses in their research and production process.”

22. See ChaeWon Baek, Peter B. McCrory, Todd Messer, and Preston Mui, “Unemployment Effects of Stay-at-Home Orders: Evidence from High Frequency Claims Data,” IRLE Working Paper No. 101-20, July 10, 2020, https://irle.berkeley.edu/files/2020/07/Unemployment-Effects-of-Stay-at-Home-Orders.pdf; Office of Civil Rights, “Education in a Pandemic: The Disparate Impacts of COVID-19 on America’s Students,” U.S. Dept of Education, June 9, 2021, https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/20210608-impacts-of-covid19.pdf; Kevin Sikali, “The Dangers of Social Distancing: How COVID-19 Can Reshape Our Social Experience,” Journal of Community Psychology 48.8 (November 2020): 2435–38, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7461541/; Aaron Kheriaty, “The Other Pandemic: The Lockdown Mental Health Crisis,” Public Discourse, October 4, 2020, https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2020/10/71969/.

23. See Daniel E. Dawes, The Political Determinants of Health (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020).

24. See Nicole Baumer, “The Pandemic Isn’t Over—Particularly for People with Disabilities,” Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard Medical School, May 25, 2021, https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/the-pandemic- isnt-over-particularly-for-people-with-disabilities-202105252464; and Tom Shakespeare, Florence Ndagire, and Queen E. Seketi, “Triple Jeopardy: Disabled People and the COVID-19 Pandemic,” The Lancet 397.10282 (2021): 1331–33.

25. See https://theconversation.com/cells-from-human-foetuses-are-important-for-developing-vaccines-but-theyre-not-an-ingredient-157484. Worth noting is that these cell lines have been used to develop other pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, and processed food additives with no moral objections being voiced. Matthew P. Schneider, “Comparing COVID Vaccine to Other Vaccines,” Through Catholic Lenses, April 21, 2021, https://www.patheos.com/blogs/throughcatholiclenses/2021/04/comparing-covid-vaccine-to-other-vaccines/.

26. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), “Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-COVID-19 Vaccines,” (2020), no. 2, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20201221_notavaccini-anticovid_en.html (emphasis original). This position was recently reaffirmed by the Pontifical Academy for Life (PAL), an advisory body to the Vatican on pro-life issues. See Carol Glatz, “Vatican Academy for Life: COVID-19 Vaccines Present ‘No Ethical Problem,’” America: The Jesuit Review, December 22, 2021, https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2021/12/22/covid-vaccine-ethics-papal-academy-242110. Further support of the CDF’s position has been provided by a group of prominent Catholic pro-life scholars: “Statement from Pro-life Catholic Scholars on the Moral Acceptability of Receiving COVID-19 Vaccines,” Ethics and Public Policy Center, March 5, 2021, https://eppc.org/news/statement-from-pro-life-catholic-scholars-on-the-moral-acceptability-of-receiving-covid-19-vaccines/.
The starting point of the CDF’s analysis is the first precept of natural law, which demands that people do good and avoid evil. 27 In actuality, however, many human actions have more than one effect, and a single action may have both good and evil effects, leading to the formulation of the principle of double-effect. 28 Furthermore, a human being does not act in isolation from others and, in many instances, the actions of multiple agents are interconnected. When one agent’s action, which is good, intersects with another agent’s action, which is evil, one must carefully distinguish between licit and illicit cooperation in evil. The basis for this distinction rests in the intention of the first agent and the distance between the first agent’s good action and the other’s evil action.

Formal cooperation in evil occurs when an agent approves of another’s evil action and may be either explicit or implicit. In the former, an agent directly intends to cooperate in another’s evil action for the end of the act itself. In the latter, an agent intends to cooperate in evil, not for the end of the evil act, but rather for the end of some concurrent good. Both explicit and implicit formal cooperation are illicit because intending evil, either as means to an end or as an end in itself, is morally wrong. 29

Material cooperation occurs when an agent is instrumental in another’s evil action without approving of the action. Material cooperation can be licit, but only if sufficiently removed from the evil action. In particular, one must look at the causal chain of mediating agents between the acting agent and the commission of the evil act. If the material cooperation is immediate, meaning the agent is causally proximate to the commission of the evil action, then the cooperation is illicit. If the material cooperation is mediate, meaning the agent is causally remote from the commission of the evil action, then cooperation may be licit, provided a proportionate reason exists for the agent to cooperate in the commission of the act. Finally, cooperation, of any of the above types, may be either active or passive depending on whether the agent performs an action that causally contributes toward another’s evil action or refrains from acting in a way that would prevent another’s evil action from occurring.

Applying these categories, the CDF concluded that using one of the vaccines in question constitutes remote, passive material cooperation, the lowest degree of cooperation, and is proportionately justified by the “grave danger” posed by COVID-19:

The fundamental reason for considering the use of these vaccines morally licit is that the kind of cooperation in evil (passive material cooperation) in the procured abortion from which these cell lines originate is, on the part of those making use of the resulting vaccines, remote. The moral duty to avoid such passive material cooperation is not obligatory if there is a grave danger, such as the otherwise uncontrollable spread

27. Aquinas 1948, Ila-IIae, q. 94, a. 2.
28. Aquinas 1948, Ila-IIae, q. 64, a. 7. For further elucidation of the principle of double-effect, see P. A. Woodward, The Doctrine of Double Effect: Philosophers Debate a Controversial Moral Principle (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001); T. A. Cavanaugh, Double-Effect Reasoning: Doing Good and Avoiding Evil (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Lawrence Masek, Character, Intention, and Double Effect (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018).
29. Catechism, nos. 1752 and 1755. The locus classicus for the distinction between formal and material cooperation with moral evil is Alphonsus Liguori, Theologia Moralis, ed. L. Gaudé, 4 vols. (Rome: Ex Typographia Vaticana, 1905–1912). For a more contemporary formulation, see T. A. Cavanaugh, “Cooperation: Material and Formal,” in Encyclopedia of Catholic Social Thought, Social Science, and Social Policy, ed. M. Coulter, S. M. Krasin, R. S. Myers, and J. A. Varacalli (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2007); Kevin L. Flannery, Cooperation with Evil: Thomistic Tools of Analysis (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019); and Kevin L. Flannery, “Avoiding Illicit Cooperation with Evil: Alphonsus Liguori, Thomas Aquinas, and Contemporary Issues,” National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly 21.2 (2021): 231–46.
of a serious pathological agent— in this case, the pandemic spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes Covid-19. It must therefore be considered that, in such a case, all vaccinations recognized as clinically safe and effective can be used in good conscience with the certain knowledge that the use of such vaccines does not constitute formal cooperation with the abortion from which the cells used in production of the vaccines derive.

Another analytical lens through which one should examine the question of using vaccines derived from aborted fetal tissue is whether it constitutes illicit appropriation of a past evil. Since the known or suspected abortions from which the immortalized cell lines (PER.C6 and HEK 293) were developed occurred in the past, analyzing one’s moral complicity in terms of “cooperation,” as the CDF does, may not be conceptually accurate. Catholic moral theologian M. Cathleen Kaveny has devised the concept of “appropriation,” the parameters of which closely align with those of cooperation, to characterize more accurately what is occurring when a moral agent benefits from a past, completed evil action.

The first question to ask regarding appropriation of a past evil is whether doing so implies ratification of the action performed, analogous to formal cooperation. The next question is whether appropriation would have a corrosive effect on the character of the appropriating agent, which Kaveny identifies as potentially occurring via seepage and self-deception:

Seepage and self-deception are no less vivid possibilities in appropriation cases than cases of cooperation. If another agent’s evil acts contribute in some way to our own objectives, particularly in an ongoing manner, it is difficult not to view them in a more positive light than we otherwise would. Moreover, it is tempting so to accustom ourselves to the benefits that flow from appropriation that we would be inclined to decide against taking steps to eliminate the wrongdoing, if the opportunity presented itself.

A correlative question is whether the appropriation might have a similarly negative impact on the character of other moral agents, which would constitute scandal. Aquinas defines scandal as “something less rightly done or said, that occasions another’s spiritual [moral] downfall” and occurs when one person by “injunction, inducement or example, moves another to sin.” He further specifies two types of scandal. Active scandal occurs, when one either intends, by his evil word or deed, to lead [another] into sin, or, if [they do] not so intend, when [their] deed is of such a nature as to lead another into sin: for instance, when [one] publicly commits a sin or does something that has an appearance of sin.

Passive scandal occurs “when [one] neither intends to lead [another] into sin, nor does what is of a nature to lead [another] into sin, and yet this other one, through being ill-disposed, is led into sin.”

30. The CDF is drawing on conclusions reached by an earlier analysis of the moral liceity of using vaccines derived from aborted fetal tissue by the PAL: “Moral Reflections on Vaccines Prepared from Cells Derived from Aborted Human Foetuses,” (June 9, 2005), reprinted in The Linacre Quarterly 86.2–3 (2019): 182–87. These conclusions were affirmed in the CDF’s Instruction Dignitas personae on Certain Bioethical Questions (2008), nos. 34–5: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20081208_dignitas-personae_en.html.
31. CDF, “Note on the Morality,” no. 3 (emphasis original).
32. M. Cathleen Kaveny, “Appropriation of Evil: Cooperation’s Mirror Image,” Theological Studies 61 (2000): 280–313. The editor of this issue of Review & Expositor, Tobias Winright, was Kaveny’s research assistant for this article.
33. Kaveny, “Appropriation of Evil,” 307.
34. Aquinas 1948, Ila-IIae, q. 43, a. 1.
35. Aquinas 1948, Ila-IIae, q. 43, a. 1 ad 4.
36. Aquinas 1948, Ila-IIae, q. 43, a. 1 ad 4.
Aquinas contends that active scandal is always an occasion of moral wrongdoing on the part of the agent who scandalizes another, analogous to formal cooperation or ratification, while passive scandal may not entail moral wrongdoing on the agent’s part so long as the word or action that led to the other’s moral downfall was good in itself. A final condition of licit appropriation is that the risk of moral corrosion of either the appropriating agent or others must be proportionate to the benefits expected from the appropriating action.

Applying the appropriation framework to the question at hand, Melissa Moschella contends that the risk of seepage, self-deception, and scandal is low insofar as: (1) the COVID-19 vaccines developed from the PER.C6 and HEK 293 cell lines do not “rely on perpetuating the original injustice,” that is, no further abortions need be performed as these are immortalized (self-perpetuating) cell lines; (2) the vaccines “could have been developed without using any cell lines of illicit origin,” as demonstrated by the existence of COVID-19 vaccines that were not developed or tested using these cell lines; and (3) immortalized cell lines can be created “without any connection to abortion by using fetal tissue from a spontaneous miscarriage or nonviable preterm birth.” The latter two reasons, namely, the lack of need to use cell lines that have any material connection to abortion, create an expectation on the part of Christians and others who are morally opposed to abortion that they utilize vaccines not developed from these cell lines if possible. However, given the urgency of the COVID-19 crisis and the decisions made at various governmental and institutional levels regarding which vaccines to approve and make available, for most people choosing which vaccine they receive is not feasible.

Finally, some pro-life scholars have argued that not only ought the risk of scandal be avoided, but a positive witness to the value of unborn human life be exemplified by refusing to be vaccinated. At least one Christian scholar has gone so far as to call for civil disobedience to vaccination mandates. Moschella effectively rebuts these arguments by noting the “counter scandal” that would likely result:

Indeed, the widespread (or just highly publicized) refusal of pro-lifers to take the vaccine could actually lead to a sort of counter scandal in which the pro-life movement is seen as unreasonably thwarting the crucial effort to achieve herd immunity even though taking the vaccine is not actually immoral. Moreover, this scandal could be increased by the recognition that the vaccines have no greater connection to abortion than do countless other products (like common medications and processed foods) that pro-lifers use on a regular basis without complaint.

As Moschella concludes, Christians and others who are morally opposed to abortion may receive the available COVID-19 vaccines in good conscience insofar as “using HEK 293 [or PER.C6] or

37. Aquinas 1948, Iia-IIae, q. 43, a. 2.
38. Melissa Moschella, “Dignitas Personae, HEK 293, and the COVID Vaccines,” National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly 21.1 (2021): 107–121 (115).
39. See Janet Smith, “The Morality of the COVID-19 Vaccines,” National Catholic Register, December 24, 2020, https://www.ncregister.com/commentaries/the-morality-of-the-covid-19-vaccines. Smith does contend that vaccination would be justified, perhaps even obligatory, for front-line workers and those at a high risk of dying from COVID-19 infection.
40. Douglas Farrow, “Whether There Is a Moral Obligation to Disobey the Coercive Mandates,” Catholic World Report, December 3, 2021, https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2021/12/03/opinion-whether-there-is-a-moral-obligation-to-disobey-the-coercive-mandates/. For a critical response to Farrow’s essay, see Jason T. Eberl, “What Would Aquinas Say in the Time of COVID-19?” Theopolis, March 3, 2022, https://theopolisinstitute.com/conversations/what-would-aquinas-say-in-the-time-of-covid-19%EF%BF%BC/.
41. Moschella, “Dignitas Personae,” 118–19.
its products involves no cooperation with current evil, facilitation of future evil, or ratification of past evil, and because the dangers to moral character and the risk of scandal are weak.

Catholics are called to give “religious assent” to their Church’s teaching authority and thus, as I have argued elsewhere, do not have an appropriate basis to refuse vaccination for COVID-19 for non-medical reasons. Other Christians, however, form their consciences without relying on hierarchical authorities, though most Christian denominations have some sort of leadership structure or pastors at various levels influencing the consciences of members of their flock. The following are some examples of what the leadership or other representative bodies of various Christian churches have said about COVID-19 vaccination:

**Executive Council of the Episcopal Church:** “The proper and responsible use of vaccines is a duty not only to our own selves and families but to our communities. Choosing to not vaccinate, when it is medically safe, threatens the lives of others.”

**Christian Science:** “For more than a century, our denomination has counseled respect for public health authorities and conscientious obedience to the laws of the land, including those requiring vaccination. Christian Scientists report suspected communicable disease, obey quarantines, and strive to cooperate with measures considered necessary by public health officials. We see this as a matter of basic Golden Rule ethics and New Testament love.”

**Global Anabaptist Health Network:** “As members of the health care community and as Christians, we recognize that vaccines offer great hope for ending this pandemic. They offer personal protection and build resilience into our community and health systems. Many of our brothers and sisters in Christ have been working to bring about these interventions. They vigorously advocate for vaccination and accept it for themselves. Honour their work and example. Vaccination is a benefit that comes to us most powerfully if it is accepted broadly. We should also expose falsehoods about the harm vaccination could bring. Though the world may seek self-protection out of selfishness, we embrace vaccination as a way forward in love, accepting in our own bodies the chance to protect our neighbours, brothers and sisters (Philippians 2:3).”

While the **Southern Baptist Convention** (SBC) has not formally passed any resolutions regarding vaccination for COVID-19, the SBC’s International Mission Board requires vaccination for COVID-19 for all missionaries. Furthermore, the Connectional Table of the **United Methodist Church** has declared increasing COVID-19 vaccination to be a denomination-wide “missional
priority.”50 Finally, the Executive Committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC) has called on “congregations and communities to consider vaccination not only as a matter of self-protection but also as an act of care and compassion for the ‘neighbour’, for the whole community and for the future of our young people”;51 the WCC has further appointed nine church leaders as “Vaccine Champions” in partnership with UNICEF.52

Conscience and public health mandates

Returning to the intra-Catholic debate, the CMA and NCBC have centered their call for religious exemptions to COVID-19 vaccination mandates on the requirement for authorities to respect the right to express one’s conscience, citing the Catechism:

[A human] has the right to act in conscience and in freedom so as personally to make moral decisions. “[They] must not be forced to act contrary to [their] conscience. Nor must [they] be prevented from acting according to [their] conscience, especially in religious matters.”53

This teaching on the nature of conscience, however, is nuanced in ways not explicitly appreciated by these organizations.54 For example, the above quotation is derived from Vatican II’s declaration on religious freedom, a document primarily concerned with totalitarian political regimes, primarily Nazism and Soviet-style communism, that inhibit the practice of religious faith, religious education, missionary outreach, and so on. The above assertion does not directly entail that public authorities have no role to play in restricting certain behaviors, conscientious though they may be, that threaten the common good:

The right to religious freedom is exercised in human society: hence its exercise is subject to certain regulatory norms. In the use of all freedoms the moral principle of personal and social responsibility is to be observed. In the exercise of their rights, individual[s] and social groups are bound by the moral law to have respect both for the rights of others and for their own duties toward others and for the common welfare of all. [Individuals] are to deal with their fellows in justice and civility. . . . Furthermore, society has the right to defend itself against possible abuses committed on the pretext of freedom of religion. It is the special duty of government to provide this protection.55

While obedience to civil authorities is not an absolute moral duty, neither is freedom to act on one’s conscience, especially if one’s appeal to conscience or religious freedom is a mere pretext:

Not a few can be found who seem inclined to use the name of freedom as the pretext for refusing to submit to authority and for making light of the duty of obedience. Wherefore this Vatican Council urges everyone, especially those who are charged with the task of educating others, to do their utmost to form [people] who,

50. Heather Hahn, “COVID 19 Vaccination Named Missional Priority,” United Methodist Church, October 1, 2021, https://www.umc.org/en/content/covid-19-vaccination-named-missional-priority-gaf.
51. Executive Committee, “Call to Overcome Global Injustice and Inequity, to Defeat the Global COVID-19 Pandemic,” World Council of Churches, May 17–20, 2021, https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/call-to-overcome-global-injustice-and-inequity-to-defeat-the-global-covid-19-pandemic.
52. “Vaccine Champions,” COVID-19 Resources, World Council of Churches, https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/covid-19-resources/vaccine-champions.
53. Catechism, no. 1782.
54. See M. Therese Lysaught, “Catholics Seeking ‘Religious’ Exemptions to Vaccines Must Follow True Church Teaching on Conscience,” National Catholic Reporter, September 21, 2021, https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/catholics-seeking-religious-exemptions-vaccines-must-follow-true-church-teaching.
55. Dignitatis humanae (1965), no. 7, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html.
on the one hand, will respect the moral order and be obedient to lawful authority, and on the other hand, will be lovers of true freedom—[people], in other words, who will come to decisions on their own judgment and in the light of truth, govern their activities with a sense of responsibility, and strive after what is true and right, willing always to join with others in cooperative effort. Religious freedom therefore ought to have this further purpose and aim, namely, that [people] may come to act with greater responsibility in fulfilling their duties in community life.56

This carefully balanced view eschews the subjectivism entailed by defending a right to conscience as an absolute and denying that just civil laws bind one’s conscience. 57 Pope John Paul II echoes this concern:

The individual conscience is accorded the status of a supreme tribunal of moral judgment which hands down categorical and infallible decisions about good and evil. To the affirmation that one has a duty to follow one’s conscience is unduly added the affirmation that one’s moral judgment is true merely by the fact that it has its origin in the conscience. But in this way the inescapable claims of truth disappear, yielding their place to a criterion of sincerity, authenticity and “being at peace with oneself,” so much so that some have come to adopt a radically subjectivistic conception of moral judgment.58

The Vatican II Fathers connect this concern regarding “individualistic morality” with safeguarding the common good, including “the protection of health”:

Profound and rapid changes make it more necessary that no one ignoring the trend of events or drugged by laziness, content [them]self with a merely individualistic morality. It grows increasingly true that the obligations of justice and love are fulfilled only if each person, contributing to the common good, according to [their] own abilities and the needs of others, also promotes and assists the public and private institutions dedicated to bettering the conditions of human life. Yet there are those who, while possessing grand and rather noble sentiments, nevertheless in reality live always as if they cared nothing for the needs of society. Many in various places even make light of social laws and precepts, and do not hesitate to resort to various frauds and deceptions in avoiding just taxes or other debts due to society. Others think little of certain norms of social life, for example those designed for the protection of health . . . they do not even avert to the fact that by such indifference they imperil their own life and that of others.59

Catholic lawyer and ethicist O. Carter Snead has rightly criticized the “expressive individualism” embodied by most public bioethics laws in the United States.60 Christians must also be careful not to utilize the same foundation of the expression of individual autonomy, recast in the name of “conscience,” above other moral concerns, such as public health insofar as it is partially constitutive of the common good.

Conclusion: Moral obligation to be vaccinated for COVID-19

The CDF states that, while receiving any of the currently approved COVID-19 vaccines is permissible, “vaccination is not, as a rule, a moral obligation and that, therefore, it must be voluntary.”61 On this basis, the CMA and NCBC defend exemptions to vaccination mandates. Some key ambiguities

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56. Dignitatis humanae, no. 8.
57. Aquinas 1948, 1a, q. 96, a. 4.
58. John Paul II, Veritatis splendor (1993), no. 32, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html.
59. Paul VI, Gaudium et spes, no. 30.
60. O. Carter Snead, What It Means to Be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).
61. CDF, “Note on the Morality,” no. 5.
exist, however, in the language the CDF uses. First, something could be a “rule” in two ways: absolutely or prima facie. Understanding the CDF as asserting an absolute rule would contradict Pope Francis’s exhortation, “I believe that morally everyone must take the vaccine. It is the moral choice because it is about your life but also the lives of others.” The Pope and the CDF would be in alignment if one understands “as a rule” in a prima facie sense, meaning that, under ordinary circumstances, vaccination is not a moral obligation; the current pandemic has arguably created a “state of exception,” however, in which moral rules, though not abrogated, may be applied in different ways. In this case, another moral rule, the requirement to safeguard one’s health and promote the common good, overrides the prima facie rule against vaccination being a moral obligation. Second, the term “voluntary” is inherently ambiguous as it could mean either that one should not be coerced in any way to be vaccinated or that one should not be held down and jabbed against their will. While the currently implemented mandates could be construed as “coerce,” they are not forcing anyone to be vaccinated against their will; one could avoid vaccination by, for example, resigning from their job, refusing to dine in a restaurant, or traveling in a manner that does not require vaccination.

I conclude that a moral obligation to be vaccinated exists based on epidemiological evidence that vaccination, except for those with medical contraindications, is the most effective means of fulfilling one’s duty to safeguard their own health and promote the common good, which inherently respects the dignity of human persons, particularly those at higher risk of severe illness or death, including by attenuating the virus’s potential to mutate into more infectious and deadlier forms. Neither Christian nor secular critics of vaccination mandates have provided a countervailing moral reason of sufficient weight to forego vaccination.

Author biography

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62. For a similar interpretation of this statement, see Peter J. Cataldo, “Why the CDF ‘Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-Covid-19 Vaccines’ Suggests a Moral Obligation to Receive SARS-CoV-2 Vaccines,” Health Care Ethics USA (Fall 2021), https://www.chausa.org/docs/default-source/hceusa/why-the-cdf-note-on-the-morality-of-using-some-anti-covid-19-vaccines-suggests-a-moral-obligation-to-receive-sars-cov-2-vaccines.pdf?sfvrsn=0. For an argument in favor of vaccination in general (prior to the outbreak of COVID-19) based on Catholic social teaching, see Paul J. Carson and Anthony T. Flood, “Catholic Social Teaching and the Duty to Vaccinate,” American Journal of Bioethics 17.4 (2017): 36–43.

63. Joshua J. McElwee, “Pope Francis Suggests People Have Moral Obligation to Take Coronavirus Vaccine,” National Catholic Reporter, January 11, 2021, https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/pope-francis-suggests-people-have-moral-obligation-take-coronavirus-vaccine. The Pope continues, “There is a suicidal denialism that I would not know how to explain but today people must take the vaccine.” Francis reiterated his call to be vaccinated in a Spanish-language PSA with several other prelates: “Unity Across the Americas | COVID-19 Vaccine Education Series,” August 17, 2021, Public Service Announcement, The Ad Council, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rU0prPlbfZ8&t=2s. One could view this PSA as a form of public fraternal correction for the sake of the common good, which is a proper function of prelates; see Aquinas 1948, Ia-IIae, q. 33, a. 3.

64. Other examples of “states of exception” include just war and circumstances of dire material scarcity; see Jason T. Eberl, “Unilateral Withdrawal of Life-Sustaining Treatment within Crisis Standards of Care,” Health Care Ethics USA (Winter 2021): 8–10, https://www.chausa.org/docs/default-source/hceusa/unilateral-withdrawal-of-life-sustaining-treatment-within-crisis-standards-of-care.pdf?sfvrsn=4.

65. See Jacqueline Stenson, “As Mandates Roll Out, Some May Ask for Medical Exemptions. What’s Really Valid?” NBC News, September 2, 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/mandates-roll-out-some-may-ask-medical-exemptions-what-s-n1278264.