

Overcoming doubt in vaccinations. The end justifies the means?

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Abstract Controversies and scepticism about vaccination have existed as vaccination itself. Today and yesterday, the authority of religious leaders has a fundamental role for convince members of their congregations to accept or reject vaccination. Our contribution tells of the stratagem used by the Italian doctor Luigi Sacco to make the faithful lean towards the vaccination using their faith as a means. The history of yesterday's end of today opens a current debate on the role and responsibility of religion around vaccination practice. As COVID-19 vaccine mandates grow, so are requests for religious exemptions. (www.actabiomedica.it)

Key words: Vaccine, religious and moral beliefs on vaccine, abortion, ethics, fetal tissue, COVID-19

Introduction

On July 30, 2021, the Archdiocese of New York issued a brief memorandum to priests regarding religious exemptions for COVID-19 vaccine mandates. The memorandum is a response to the increasing objections of some Catholics concerned about the moral acceptability of vaccines against the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which during research and production, employed cell lines drawn from tissue obtained from two abortions that occurred in the last century (1, 2).

Those who share the anti-abortion position believe that these cells are “infected” by the original evil of abortion. Using these products involves cooperation and complicity with this wickedness, even if it has already been implemented, making it legitimate to invoke forms of conscientious objection (3).

Indeed, two cell lines WI-38 and MRC-5, both derived from elective abortions performed in Europe in the early 1960s, have been successfully used to generate the attenuated viruses used in these immunizations for rubella (M-M-R-II), varicella (VARIVAX), hepatitis A (HAVRIX).

The *memorandum* reiterates a statement from Pope Francis, which says that acceptance of any of the COVID-19 vaccines is morally permissible and that Catholics have a moral responsibility to be vaccinated. However, not only the Catholics, even Muslims, Hindus and Jews have raised questions about the use of the Covid vaccine due to prohibited substances in its composition.

In response to concerns among Islam over the halal status of the Covid vaccine, the United Arab Emirates Fatwa Council has recently ruled that coronavirus vaccines are permissible for Muslims because of the higher need to “protect the human body” (1). In particular, the Fatwa Council, after highlighting the dire consequences of the pandemic, declared that even though the COVID-19 vaccine contains non-halal ingredients banned by Islam, it is permissible to use it in the implementation of the Islamic prescription that permits the use of such products in the case in which there is no alternative. There is a similar assessment by a broad consensus of religious leaders in the Orthodox Jewish community, who view the intention to save lives as a divine command. Therefore, the ban

on ingesting non-kosher foods does not apply to vaccines injected through the skin. Other religions are more attentive to the welfare of the animals used for experimentation; they are mostly Indian religions, of which Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism are the most important. However, the discriminating factor is that if getting vaccinated saves more lives, this is allowed.

These events, emblematic of concerns linked to the adherence to public health issues, make a historical reflection on the resistance and various strategies used to convince vaccine sceptics as timely as ever?

From its origins, the persuasion of the vaccination practice proved to be a key challenge.

Critics of the vaccination have taken a variety of positions. Opponents have alleged that the vaccine is not only useless and harmful but a violation of personal liberty that the State had no right to impose. Many criticisms arose from the fear that the inoculation of material removed from an animal was able to “deteriorate” the quality of man (4). Many satirical cartoons of the past depicted cases of vaccines developing bovine features. Some objectors believed that *smallpox* originated from decaying matter in the atmosphere (5). There was no lack of strong religious resistance with accusations that vaccination was “unchristian” and *contra* nature (4).

History shows the use of a cunning deception to persuade people to vaccination.

In north Italy, Luigi Sacco, an astute doctor (1769-1836), invented the homely of the *Bishop of Goldstat*, a fictional character of an imaginary city who illustrated the advantages of the smallpox vaccine. The Italian physician sent to the parishes a small volume entitled *Homily over the Gospel of the XIII Sunday after Pentecost*, in which the same Bishop told of the usefulness of the discovery of the graft of the smallpox vaccine. As we can read in one of the first copies: “If an Angel, a Prophet tells you, within a year, two, or three you will have a plague causing serious harm and death of many people, what terror would you not have? (...). But if the same Angel, if the same Prophet added you, to this great evil there is a very easy and very innocent remedy: what would you not do to know it, and protect the whole community from this disease? (...). Now for a special gift of Divine Providence, you have the very easy and very innocent remedy: you must embrace

it, you must follow it, and thank God. (...). *Qui non impedit malum, quod impedire potest, reus est.*” (6).

The Homily “translated from German” (of course, there was no German version) “into Italian” aimed to convince a good part of the faithful to the vaccination practice. Sacco knew that the suspicion of the peasants towards any new disposition introduced by the authorities made it more difficult to gain their trust. So, he used the voice of the priests, the only truly authoritative voice able to combat mistrust and contrary opinions in the rural populations.

The pioneer of smallpox vaccination, Luigi Sacco, was aware of the importance and need for the support of the clergy to overcome the resistance of opponents to the vaccine.

The reference to the responsibility and duty of protecting health as well as of the person, of the whole of society, pervades the entire Homily and constitutes an ethical warning also for the present.

Through an unconscious collaboration of the parish priests trusting in the *Bishop of Goldstat*, the astute Italian doctor achieved a result useful for public health, making vaccines accessible to as many people as possible.

Was it a reprehensible or good deception?

The answer to this question lies in the conscience of each one.

The Catholic Church’s position on abortion is very clear, “from the moment of conception, the life of every human being is to be respected in an absolute way, ... [therefore], no one can under any circumstance claim the right directly to destroy an innocent human being” (7).

Certainly, it is important to point out the possible positive medical benefits from the clear and firm declaration of the Vatican Statements to permit the temporary use of vaccines generated using aborted fetal tissue to protect the population subjected to significant health risks until alternative vaccines.

However, in the past, the Catholic Church declared that the “right to abstain from using these vaccines [produced using aborted fetal tissue]” should only be exercised if children and the population are not thereby subjected to significant health risks (3).

In recognizing the difficulty of shared solutions, it is inevitable to appreciate the sensitivity of the

Church to widely promote the health of the community through vaccination.

Now, as then, the collaboration of the Church constitutes a precious instrument for making a breach in the community and spreading a favorable attitude towards vaccination practice.

Now the question arises again: Does the end justify the means?

Conflict of Interest: We declare that we have no commercial associations that might pose a conflict of interest in connection with the submitted article

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Received: 11 May 2022

Accepted: 16 June 2022

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