

VACCINES: FREEDOM AND THE COMMON GOOD

Much has been written, and publicized, by a sliver of the Catholic community saying that there should be an exemption from the current vaccines because the ones presently available in the United States have a connection with abortions that occurred decades ago.



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To evaluate this position, it helps to first recognize that freedom, in Catholic theology, is always connected with the common good. Individual freedom is not independent of the community in which we exist. Many may assume that a Catholic and American understanding of commonly used terms related to freedom are identical when they are not. As a contrast, let's look at Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Thomas Jefferson.

In his "I Have a Dream" speech, King used a central theme, the idea that the founders of the United States had issued a "promissory note," a debt to all its citizens, that "they have the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." He believed that "America has given the Negro people a bad check," and that the promises were unfulfilled. He thought that in calling out the injustice, that all persons of good conscience would "come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone." That was 58 years ago. He was mistaken — not for his dream or his vision, but about America and its ethics.

It is convenient to sanitize King and to manipulate his words to fit a person's own beliefs about freedom and justice. King was by vocation a Baptist minister. By training at Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University, he was also a theologian. He was a student of what has been called Boston Personalism, a Christian philosophical tradition associated with the Boston University School of Theology. King's understanding of freedom is the same as our Catholic sense.

To further explain variances in interpretation, we examine the phrase "unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" that comes

from the Declaration of Independence, principally authored by Jefferson. It is fair to say that Jefferson's understanding of this phrase would be very different than King's.

It is important to put that phrase in context. Jefferson's full text is that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Jefferson's claim was that these rights are "self-evident." Having been heavily influenced by Enlightenment thinkers, he thought that reason (self-evident) was superior to faith as a means of knowing truth.

In the centuries since Jefferson wrote those words and personally balanced the demands of faith and reason, it is now clear that his gamble on the two ways of knowing truth, faith and reason are no longer in balance. The aspirations of King's prophecy rested upon his understanding of freedom in a Christian context. American culture is firmly in an extreme Jeffersonian camp.

Freedom, and its companion, conscience, need definition to be operative principles. Like King, we use these words but are sometimes confused by disparate meanings that others will use to interpret what we say. To be fair to Jefferson, his understanding of freedom was that license — or an ability to worship as one wishes — should be the governmental stance with regards to religious matters. However, his context needs to be understood. He was against governmental religion, where a government demanded a particular piety. Jefferson was not against worship, per se, just the ability of a government to demand it. Similarly, he respected individual citizens' right to worship as they wanted. For Jefferson, conscience was to pursue your own liberty.

Unfortunately, the trajectory of Jefferson's compromise has been tilted from freedom "of" religious belief to freedom "from" religious belief.

His emphasis on reason has resulted in an abandonment of religious faith as a source of truth, except among the diminishing faithful community.

Contrast that with the Christian concept of freedom that King assumes in his “I Have a Dream” speech. It is not unrestrained liberty. Instead, freedom is the use of free will to be moral. We are never free when we choose evil. Conscience is our human faculty to perceive the truth and to act upon it. When we talk about conscience in a Christian context, we refer to our individual faculty to discern right from wrong. Again, this is not unrestrained. Truth itself is objective. We should seek out informed sources, discern and act. Willful ignorance is not an excuse, nor does it mitigate culpability.

So, these Jeffersonian and Christian definitions of freedom have resonance for us now as we consider our latest cultural conflict: vaccines. It seems futile to address those in our society who refuse vaccines based upon Jeffersonian principles of liberty at the cost of the community. Instead, I’d like to focus this discussion on the Catholic community, our responsibilities and our freedoms.

Therefore, to evaluate this perspective we focus first on the following question: What do we know now? The vaccines available in the U.S. are from Moderna, Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson. Do they have any connection to abortion?

The Charlotte Lozier Institute, a research institute that opposes abortion, said Pfizer and Moderna used HEK 293, which it calls an abortion-derived cell line, in their testing of the vaccine. The organization said Johnson & Johnson used another such cell line in the design, production and testing of its vaccine.¹ HEK 293 is also used for many processed food products available for sale in the U.S.² Where is the moral outrage about that?

So, if we look at this reality, is it moral to accept these vaccines given their history? The answer is unequivocally, yes. The abortions that produced these cell lines are incredibly distant from the vaccines that have been developed. The vaccine does not contain the cells of an aborted fetus.³

Given this information, how do we weigh the common good with our desire to be moral? One can still oppose the abortions that produced the vaccine so many years ago because of the remoteness of the act that created the cell line, while also accepting the vaccines that have been created.

A corollary instance that might help to clarify is the HeLa cell line that was developed at Johns Hopkins University. This cell line was cultured without consent from a patient diagnosed with cervical cancer, who died shortly thereafter. Her cells were used to study the effects of toxins, drugs, hormones and viruses on the growth of cancer cells without experimenting on humans. These cells have since been used to test the effects of radiation and poisons, to study the human genome, to learn more about how viruses work and played a crucial role in the development of the polio vaccine. One could object to the immorality of the creation of this cell line and still morally accept the fruits of this act.⁴

To choose not to get vaccinated to take a stand against abortions that occurred several decades ago, rather than choosing vaccination to protect oneself and the many people who could be infected and could die from this virulent virus, seems to be a calculation of Jeffersonian intent. It is certainly not about the common good.

Freedom, in a Christian context, means to choose what is good for oneself and for the community. So, here’s the choice: Take an effective vaccine to help thwart COVID-19 and to safeguard each other; or proclaim the immorality

of abortions from decades ago, and not take any of the vaccines, while allowing the pandemic to spread and people to die. Which is the pro-life choice?

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NOTES

1. David Prentice, “COVID-19 Vaccine Candidates and Abortion-Derived Cell Lines,” Charlotte Lozier Institute, June 2, 2021, <https://lozierinstitute.org/update-covid-19-vaccine-candidates-and-abortion-derived-cell-lines/>. It should be noted that Prof. Frank Graham, who established the cell line, says the exact origin of the HEK 293 fetal cells is unclear. Rev. Nicanor Pier Giorgio Austriaco, “Moral Guidance on Using COVID-19 Vaccines Developed with Human Fetal Cell Lines,” May 26, 2020, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2020/05/63752/>.
2. Matthew Herper, “Biotech’s Fear Factor,” *Forbes*, January 27, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/matthewherper/2012/01/27/fetal-cells-in-soda-not-quite-the-discomfort-behind-the-controversy>.
3. “Vaccine for All. 20 Points for a Fairer and Healthier World,” Pontifical Academy for Life, http://www.academyforlife.va/content/dam/pav/documenti%20pdf/2020/Covid_Accademia_IHD_22dicembre/28.12.20_ENG_VACCINE%20DPIHD%20PAL_Updated.pdf; “Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-COVID-19 Vaccines,” La Santa Sede, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20201221_nota-vaccini-anticovid_en.html.
4. Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (Sydney, Australia: Picador Australia, 2010); “The Legacy of Henrietta Lacks,” Johns Hopkins Medicine, <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/henrietalacks/immortal-life-of-henrietta-lacks.html>.

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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Reprinted from *Health Progress*, Fall 2021, Vol. 102, No. 4
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