

Three further perspectives on Christian Science and vaccination

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Christian Scientists' views on the topic of vaccination and public health often don't fit society's preconceptions, and can't always be fully conveyed in a 200 or 300 word letter-to-the-editor. Here we've compiled three recent responses provided by Committees on Publication in the United States where further perspective was needed in regard to various published comments about our church's views. While each answer is unique, they share the same ethics and underlying spirit—the desire to be responsible citizens and good neighbors even while remaining deeply committed to a spiritual practice of Christian healing.

Christian Scientists' perspective on vaccination

Sent to the *Boston Herald*

Christian Scientists would agree with the basic ethical principle voiced in Michael Graham's May 2 column on vaccination — that religious freedom, important as it is, doesn't extend to putting our fellow citizens at risk.

In the past, because of the small number requesting religious exemptions from vaccination, public health authorities haven't necessarily seen these exemptions as putting others at risk. For many decades, as the Massachusetts Department of Public Health wrote in a column on "Christian Science and Community Medicine," Christian Scientists have recognized "what society may reasonably expect [them] to do for the general good" (The New England Journal of Medicine 2/14/1974).

The ethic of our faith requires respect for the rights of others. Writing in this newspaper back in 1900, our church's founder, Mary Baker Eddy, strongly counseled Christian Scientists to obey the laws of the land, including those requiring

vaccination. She went on to cite Jesus' counsel to "render to Caesar what is Caesar's" and "to God what is God's."

The practice of spiritual healing remains deeply meaningful to Christian Scientists. We value the longstanding religious exemption in the law when it is responsibly used. We also understand the public health concerns raised in recent years by the rising number seeking exemptions on a variety of grounds, and we trust to wisdom and "common justice" — Eddy's phrase in the Herald — to guide in determining what is best for all.

Kevin E. Ness, Manager, Christian Science Committees on Publication, Boston, MA, USA

A further perspective on Christian Science and vaccinations

Published by *The Oregonian*

Christian Scientists are a diverse group. Our congregations are democratic, and the church doesn't dictate to members what to think on important public issues. We don't always see eye to eye among ourselves, but even when we differ, we do our best to love and respect each other, and to keep in mind the deeper values we share — not only with others in our churches, but also with our neighbors of other faiths and backgrounds.

In this same spirit, I thought it might be helpful to add a word of further perspective to a fellow church member's recent letter on vaccination ("Vaccine bill is medical tyranny," March 27), particularly to make clear Christian Scientists' longstanding tradition regarding public health.

The debates happening in Oregon and across the country today about vaccination were happening just as passionately more than a century ago when the founder of the denomination, Mary Baker Eddy, advised Christian Scientists not to "quarrel"

with society over this issue, but to “submit to this process” where the law requires. Eddy’s counsel reflected the simple Golden Rule ethic and a deep biblical sense of civic obligation and care for others in the community.

In a 1974 column on “Christian Science and Community Medicine” in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, the state Department of Public Health in Massachusetts, where the church is headquartered, acknowledged this relation of “mutual tolerance” and diversity, noting that the denomination has historically recognized “what society may reasonably expect [church members] to do for the general good.”

As my fellow church member brought out in her letter, the practice of spiritual healing has meant a great deal in Christian Scientists’ lives, and Christian Scientists are grateful for the religious exemptions that legislatures and public health authorities have granted for vaccination over the years. We aren’t indifferent to the well-being of our neighbors, however, and we understand the concerns raised in recent years as exemptions have been claimed by larger numbers.

Countercultural as Christian Scientists’ practice may be in a technological society, it isn’t based on rejection of science and education or on fear, whether of vaccines or medicine in general. We appreciate the love and humanity expressed by medical caregivers, and we share the same underlying purpose of healing.

As a recent statement on vaccination posted on the church website summarizes: “Whatever the right legislative answer may be for our state at this time, Christian Scientists hope that their long experience as a religious minority working in cooperation with society’s majority might point to the possibility of a resolution based on mutual respect and understanding in the best interest of all.”

Karla Hackney, Christian Science Committee on Publication for Oregon, USA

What Christian Science says about vaccinations

Published by the *Frederick News-Post*

I appreciated the *News-Post's* good-faith effort to convey the viewpoints of different churches and religious groups on vaccination (“What different religions say about vaccinations,” 3-17-19). Might I offer a little more background to clarify Christian Scientists’ perspective? It’s unusual, but doesn’t fit the stereotypes people often assume.

Christian Scientists’ views on this issue are rooted in the ethics of the Golden Rule as Christ Jesus taught it. We take to heart the basic Christian commitment to be good neighbors and citizens and to respect the rights and concerns of others in our communities, including in Frederick County.

Though our spiritual practice of healing through prayer differs from the norm in today’s world, it has nothing to do with sticking to religious dogmas from the past. The motives for this practice come from love, just as the motives of good doctors do, and from the actual experiences of healing through God’s love that have continued in our lives. We’ve been grateful over the years for religious exemptions from vaccination when legislatures and public health authorities have granted them, but we don’t promote fear of vaccines or object to their use in society. Where vaccination is required, we obey the law’s requirement.

In the early twentieth century—another period when vaccination was controversial—our church’s founder, Mary Baker Eddy, asked Christian Scientists not to “quarrel” with society over this issue, but to work out differences with others on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. This is still our aim as a church. As an official of the denomination put it back then, Christian Scientists recognize the need “to be careful in respect to the spreading of disease,” and the true spirit of healing always requires conscientious wisdom, consideration for people’s needs, and the tender inspiration of love for all God’s children of every faith and background.

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