

COVID – 19 Vaccination- Christian Perspectives

Discussion Paper from CEC Thematic Group on Science, New Technologies and Christian Ethics

Main Theses

1. From a Christian perspective, science and technology are not per se either good or evil. Vaccination and new vaccination techniques can be an effective tool in successfully combating a pandemic.
2. Critically examining the evidence is an essential part of scientific work. From a Christian perspective, this also includes critical questioning in ethical terms.
3. Vaccination is grounded in our trust in the scientists and researchers, who interpret and explain the various models and results. In a complex world, we depend on them. This basic trust is necessary to make living together in a complex society possible. For us Christians, this basic trust stems from the creative Spirit of God, on whom all life depends.
4. As Christians, we feel responsibility for our neighbour. Even if vaccination does not affect virus transmission, it is crucial to protect many people from disease and thereby takes some pressure off the health system.
5. We are convinced that it is in the interests of justice and Christian solidarity to guarantee equity in vaccination access for everyone. It is a moral obligation to vaccinate the most vulnerable persons first since they benefit the most from vaccination.
6. It is also a moral obligation for the rich countries of the world to give all people the opportunity to be vaccinated.
7. The faithful trust their spiritual leaders, whom therefore have a special responsibility. Misinformation and unfounded fear-mongering are out of place and cannot be justified theologically. Christians are called to be part of an open, loving and trustworthy dialogue in this critical situation: *Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions.* (Romans 14:1).

Argumentation

While vaccination centres are being set up with great alacrity across Europe, the number of those who are sceptical about - or even hostile towards - vaccination against the coronavirus is significant. The arguments are manifold and range from understandable hesitancy about a new vaccine to conspiracy theories with fears of the implantation of a microchip.

Critical questions on the development and use of new vaccines are necessary and fundamentally important. Such questions however should not arise from prejudice, should be reasonable and be presented on both scientifically and ethically justifiable grounds.

That is why we, as the CEC Thematic Group, consider it our task to contribute to the public discussion on vaccination and present our theological and ethical reflections.

Three basic theological insights underlie our position. From the Christian perspective, human beings live out their lives in relation to and with others. Living means being dependent on others. This requires basic trust without which human life cannot flourish. As a part of the whole community, each individual bears a responsibility for his neighbour's welfare, as well as for the common good.

We would like to summarise our reflections under three key words: Trust, Responsibility and Solidarity.

TRUST: Christians live by trusting in God's benevolence as a life-giving and life-sustaining spirit. If we do not trust others to be benevolent, living together is not possible. Given the complexity of the world, trust in scientific knowledge means trusting those who create and interpret this knowledge. From a Christian perspective, trust in God is not possible without trusting in people.

Test everything: hold fast to what is good, wrote the apostle Paul (1. Thessalonians. 5:21). Trust does not mean blind and uncritical confidence but goes hand in hand with critical enquiry.

Vaccination, like scientific knowledge and research, could become a blessing or a curse to mankind, without being either good nor evil itself. The purpose and the practice must always be critically evaluated for its ethical purpose.

In exceptional situations, such as a pandemic, the risks must be weighed. Exceptional situations pose new questions for theology and ethics that cannot always be answered with conventional thought patterns.

The current vaccines, which have been tested as per the international standards, and therefore licensed in Europe, are safe according to the findings of the majority of scientists. There are hardly any serious side effects that have been reported, and potential long-term effects will be monitored.

We do not want to exaggerate the importance of vaccination against Covid-19 as a miracle remedy but consider it an essential and efficient way of reducing the impact of the pandemic, considering the current state of our knowledge.

RESPONSIBILITY: With respect to collective responsibility, we believe that vaccination represents a potential compromise with respect to the inviolability of the body. Without trivialising this intervention, we see it as theologically justifiable because, from a Christian perspective, the rational and responsible human being and the sensible body belong inseparably together. Jesus himself says: *There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile.* Marc 7:14. Acting responsibly towards my neighbour may also make it necessary for me to limit my right to bodily integrity.

Being vaccinated means acting responsibly towards my neighbour. Even if the current knowledge does not rule out the risk that those who have been vaccinated may still infect others, large-scale vaccination reduces the burden of the disease on the healthcare systems.

Therefore, from a Christian perspective, we believe it is imperative to do everything that we can to protect our neighbour and serve the common good. In this sense, we also lay emphasis on offering the opportunity to be vaccinated to everyone, without limiting people's freedom of choice not to be vaccinated.

SOLIDARITY: At present, vaccines are only available in limited quantities. It is mainly rich countries, with their highly developed healthcare systems, that are benefitting and have the funds available to purchase vaccines. And even within these rich countries, the number of vaccines is currently limited, so not everyone can be vaccinated at once.

Just as you did it to one of the least of these ... you did it to me. (compare Matthew 25:40.) Jesus invites us to act in solidarity with those in need. For us, it is an expression of Christian solidarity and justice if all people can be guaranteed equitable access to vaccination. It is a moral obligation for countries that vaccinate to protect the most vulnerable people first. It is also a moral obligation for rich countries worldwide to make it possible for all people to have the opportunity to be vaccinated.

Therefore, we call for a fair distribution of vaccines, including distribution of vaccines to countries that cannot afford mass vaccination. The world should fight this pandemic together.

Spiritual leaders enjoy a relationship of special trust with the faithful. Therefore, they also have a special responsibility. Misinformation and unfounded fear-mongering are out of place here and cannot be justified theologically. Open discourse in brotherly trust and love is called for in this crisis situation: *Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions.* (Romans 14:1)

We therefore appeal to all those who bear spiritual responsibility in churches and religious communities to engage in an open discussion, free from fear about vaccination against COVID-19.

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