

Reasons for Religious Exemptions

Is it just about the connection of vaccines to aborted fetuses?

Phil Steiger – Sep 16, 2021

[Reasons for Religious Exemptions \(substack.com\)](https://substack.com)

With COVID-19 vaccine mandates looming, or in some cases, already here, the matter of exemptions to the mandates have come to the forefront. There are exemptions based on medical conditions or “matters of conscience”, and there is the possibility in some cases of being able to claim a religious exemption to the mandates.

The COVID-19 vaccines currently on the market are of debatable value. They seem to have their intended effect in some populations, but then seem to have a net negative effect in many others. Studies continue to show that natural immunity is stronger than vaccinated immunity, the current vaccines are not effective against any variants (they are already outdated), and the scientific case against mass vaccinations continues to grow.

But the mandates keep coming, nonetheless. As a result, as a pastor, I am interested in what it means to have a religious exemption, a religious *reason*, for not taking these specific vaccines. The debate is raging. Some individuals, convinced of the general effectiveness of the vaccines, simply say that there is no such thing as a religious exemption. Others claim the exemption is very narrow, applying only to a medication’s connection to aborted fetuses. And even then, the link is so distant that the religious exemption may not be applicable. In many of these cases, “reasons of conscience” are separated from “reasons of religion” and a person is advised to carefully separate the two in order to make a valid religious exemption case. While the legal issue may be narrowly defined, I want to push against the way religious reasons, or “reasons of faith,” are treated in these cases.

I believe the way religious exemption is being handled in Christian circles is evidence of Christians having already ceded most of their ground to the “naked public square.” It is true that pro-life issues are very much a part of how Christians make decisions and honor God with their lives. But can that be the whole story? Is that the only way in which our religious beliefs bear upon our public lives?

I know of no way in which my “reasons of faith” are different from my “reasons of conscience.” My faith teaches me to grow in Christlikeness, taking on his character and virtues. Scripture goes so far as to pray that even the thoughts and intents of my heart will be pleasing to God. The well-worn Psalm about God granting me the desires of my heart (Psalm 37:4) is not about God giving me things I *want*, but about God forming and shaping *His* desires in *my* heart. He puts new desires and thoughts in me, like you would replace a transmission or engine in an old car.

If your *reasons of conscience* are different from your *reasons of faith*, from where do you get your reasons of conscience? Who or what is shaping your personal values if it is not your faith? And if it is not your faith, what exactly do you believe, anyway?

My reasons of faith are not separated from what I believe about “good science” or scientific ethics. Science as we know it is the grandchild of faithful Christians 500 years ago, who decided to take a closer look at the “book of nature” in order to better understand and

appreciate its Creator. It is completely rational for a Christian to believe the same thing today, allowing us to be in thankful awe of genuine advancement and discovery. Science is the inheritance of the *Christian*, not the *atheist*. This kind of belief, though, necessarily leads to conclusions about the importance of good science *well done*, and technology bounded by robust *ethical reflection*. Wholesale mandates violate both principles in the case of the current COVID-19 vaccines; thus they violate my reasons of faith.

Another truth that necessarily follows from the Christian theology of *creation* and *anthropology*, is freedom of conscience. This God-given gift is so foundational, it is often the key point in dealing with the so-called “problem of evil”. God created us with freedom of will, and we chose to walk away from Him; thus evil ensued. If freedom of conscience is *this* critical to the Christian faith, then it follows that I believe my neighbor has been given this gift from God, and it is in my interest to protect it. My neighbor’s freedom of conscience is part of my “reasons of faith”.

This is how a Christian can morally oppose things like the Tuskegee experiments on “religious grounds.” Those experiments were not just a violation of the sanctity of their lives, they were a violation of good science, ethics, and the value of their God-given freedom of will.

If those who define “reasons of faith” narrowly opposed those experiments based on their own definition, would they have to stop after the first reason (sanctity of life)^a, and explain that the other reasons are not connected to their faith at all? Of course not. But if not, then I have the same rational right to make the full set of claims now as well.

Back to the legal question for a second. It will be said that a letter of religious exemption will need to be narrowly defined in terms of sanctity of life. And for practical reasons, I understand. But I have another response — *I don’t care*.

I am interested in Christians reclaiming, at least in their *own* hearts and minds, the full-life application of their faith. No more compartmentalization. No more allowing anti-Christ ideologies to define what we can and cannot assert in public. No more of politicians claiming lordship over ever-increasing territory in our lives and families. No more hemming and hawing about the differences between church life and everywhere else.

To paraphrase Kuyper, there is not a single square inch in all of creation over which Christ does not look and say, “Mine!”