The Washington Post *Democracy Dies in Darkness*

Does respect for human life mean vaccine mandates? Among religious groups, there is wide disagreement.

By Michelle Boorstein

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Last week, the D.C. Jewish Community Center became the region's biggest Jewish organization to announce a vaccine mandate for the hundreds of people who come indoors for preschool and various adult programming each week. The mandate, which kicks in Sept. 1, seemed like the obvious Jewish thing to do as the delta variant became more threatening, said chief executive Dava Schub.

"If the benefits outweigh the risks, it's the Jewish mandate to follow what will lead to the best outcomes," she said. "There's so little we can do to protect people's health, and this is something we can do."

Schub said her announcement went out in the morning to 40,000 people on the JCC mailing list and by Friday afternoon she had heard only positive feedback. "Leading with the Jewish value of *Pikuach Nefesh,* the deeply held belief that each singular human life is valued above all else," she wrote, everyone 12 and older entering the building must be fully vaccinated, unless they have a medical or religious exemption.

At the core of most religious systems is the duty to respect human life, so where do vaccine mandates fit into that?

Since the start of the pandemic, there has been a standoff between personal freedoms and bodily integrity on one side and the obligation to protect the health and lives of others on the other. Added to that, there has been a heap of misinformation about the coronavirus and vaccines.

In recent days, with a handful of organizations from Facebook and Google to the University of Virginia announcing vaccine mandates, religious leaders and organizations have considered their own teachings and values on the question of how to show respect for life. And their conclusions vary widely.

Bishop Kevin Rhoades, as leader of the Catholic diocese of Indiana and chairman of the doctrine committee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, guides a diverse flock of Catholics when it comes to opinions on vaccines and mandates. However, the Vatican's Pontifical Academy for Life — its body dedicated to promoting church teaching protecting life and to researching bioethics — has said there is a "moral responsibility" to get vaccinated, and Pope Francis has decried what he calls vaccine misinformation and "suicidal denialism" among people who don't get the shot.

Rhoades said his committee issued a statement not demanding or attempting to mandate that Catholics get vaccinated, but urging them to get the vaccine "as an act of charity towards other members of our community. It's an act of love of neighbor." In Catholicism, each regional bishop makes policy — such as rules for employees of Catholic schools and hospitals — for their area.

The Vatican's doctrine arm wrote in December that it does not recommend mandates. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith said in its last public comment on the matter that if people opt out for some reason of conscience, they have a duty to "do their utmost" to avoid transmitting the virus.

"I'm not considering mandating it for employees. I do want to strongly encourage it, and I also want to respect people's conscience. There are different reasons why people don't want to get a vaccine, but I'd hope Catholics would say: 'The church has spoken on this,' " he said.

Asked whether he considered it fair to compare the call to mandate vaccines to the call of antiabortion groups — including the Catholic Church — Rhoades paused.

"It's an act of charity that one gets a vaccine to protect others' lives. When I got it, it was a consideration for me. The last thing I'd want to do is be a carrier," he said.

The link between debates around abortion and those around vaccine and mask mandates has been argued since the start of pandemic shutdowns. The calls of "my body, my choice" made by abortion rights advocates for decades are voiced these days from the other side — Americans typically more religiously and politically conservative say their right to bodily autonomy is violated when they are told to wear a mask or get a shot.

"By the way, vaccination is not a 'deeply personal decision.' It is a routine public health requirement in a civilized society," prominent antiabortion commentator Bill Kristol tweeted Friday, garnering tens of thousands of likes. Washington Post columnist Jennifer Rubin tweeted back: "but somehow pregnancy is not a deeply personal decision? The hypocrisy is galling."

Ryan Bomberger is co-founder of the Radiance Foundation, an evangelical group based in Purcellville, Va., that advocates for adoption and other alternatives to abortion. Bomberger said he thinks there are far "too many unknowns" for vaccine mandates.

"I feel like when people of my complexion had to show papers," said Bomberger, who is biracial. "To me, there are too many questions and we're moving into pseudo-medical apartheid."

However, he said he feels the pandemic has shown how much people want to protect human life — but not, he believes, fetuses. "Can we have more of a push to prevent" elective abortions? "Protecting every human life from needless death should be humanity's goal as a whole."

Some say there is no connection between the abortion issue and vaccine mandates.

Among them is Kristi Hamrick, spokeswoman and chief policy strategist for Students for Life of America, a large antiabortion group that isn't explicitly faith-based but whose leaders often cite their faith as a motivator of their advocacy.

"Addressing abortion is *the* pro-life issue alone. Issues that do not address abortion represent other social concerns, and while pro-life people sometimes engage in other issues, that does not make every issue a pro-life issue," she wrote to The Post.

The group has chapters in every state, and she said they have been careful to follow all local rules related to the pandemic.

Abortion rights advocates who favor mask and vaccine mandates are the ones who should be addressing the obvious disconnect in their thinking, she wrote. "Why is it your body when it's abortion, but Uncle Sam's body when it comes to covid?"

Gregory Gibbs, a pastor at Pasadena Buddhist Temple in California, said the building has four times hosted vaccine clinics for local residents, and that the roughly 60 temples in his denomination — Buddhist Churches of America is a U.S. branch of the worldwide Jodo Shinshu Buddhism — are pro-vaccine. His temple is closed for another month, but he said when it reopens, people who want to come into the building must be vaccinated or have a recent negative coronavirus test.

The founder centuries ago of Jodo Shinshu, Gibbs said, was a physician, and there is an emphasis on science and healing. Buddhism in general, he said, "doesn't see itself as invading on every area of everyone's personal life" and leaves room for cultural and individual differences.

The faith, he said, is based more on general premises.

Buddhists are generally supportive of abortion rights, against the death penalty and in favor of the right to euthanasia, he said.

"If your intentions are good and you're trying to preserve life," that's the point. There is a story told about the Buddha, millennia ago, hearing of a student who gets a disease and kills himself, Gibbs said. Someone said to him: Isn't that horrible? "And he said: 'There is nothing wrong.' For Buddhist ethics, life is the highest value. But there is a recognition that quality of life matters."