



# Vaccination Hesitancy Among Greek Orthodox Christians: Is There a Conflict Between Religion and Science?

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## Abstract

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic vaccines were highly anticipated in order to help contain the spread of the virus and mitigate its impact. However, when the vaccination program began, some minorities were reluctant to get vaccinated for numerous reasons. Specifically, at that time in Greece many priests were opposed to getting vaccinated and proceeded to discourage their flock, in stark contrast to the decisions of Greek Orthodox religious leaders who endorsed the vaccination program. It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic doesn't solely affect the health system but also other parts of society such as politics, the economy and, last but not least, religion and worship. In the current article, we aim to present the notions and attitudes that led many Greek Orthodox Christians to be hesitant about getting vaccinated or even to become a part of the movement actively against vaccination that has been growing during this pandemic.

**Keywords** COVID-19 vaccination · Greek orthodox Christians · Vaccination hesitancy

## Introduction

Vaccination against the new coronavirus has assisted in the ongoing pandemic in various ways, primarily by reducing lethality and morbidity (Xu et al., 2021). Nonetheless, there are many who, on a global scale, appeared hesitant, whether conscientiously were refusing their vaccination, invoking their personal freedom or their legal

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**Country of study:** Greece.

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right to exercise control over their own bodies (*homo sui juris*), and their gnomonic will (Dror et al., 2020).

According to a recent review of 15 studies, reasons for vaccine hesitancy varied (Troiano & Nardi, 2021). We indicate some characteristics that have been demonstrated to influence their decision, namely a low level of education, political ideology, such as voting for parties on the fringes of the political spectrum or abstaining from elections in their entirety, young age, and disease-free status. Employment and previous infection did not appear to influence vaccine hesitancy, whereas a higher level of education and employment in the healthcare sector correlated positively to vaccine uptake. Finally, a very interesting determinant of the decision to undergo vaccination, particularly in the Greek setting, was religious belief.

## Purpose

Our purpose was to research and present the reasons why many Greek Orthodox Christians in Greece appeared either hesitant or outright rejected vaccination against the SARS-CoV2 virus (Rutjens et al., 2021).

## COVID-19 and Greece

According to WHO as of 2023 nearly 5,683,000 COVID-19 cases were reported and 35,000 deaths (Table 1). As of December of 2021 in Greece, there existed vaccine coverage in 67.4% of the population with appointments increasing by the week (Sypsa et al., 2022), arguably due to several measures introduced by the Greek government, most notably the introduction of mandatory vaccination of Greek citizens over age 60, with non-compliance resulting in monetary fines (Vinceti, 2021). Meanwhile, a rise in vaccine coverage was observed up until January of 2023, according to WHO. It is noteworthy that around 55% of Greek population has received a booster dose (WHO, 2023).

Indisputably, the COVID-19 pandemic has, besides the healthcare setting, impacted various other aspects of our society, such as the economy, trade politics (Hazakis, 2021) and of course religion. Man, according to the Christian doctrine, is made up of body and soul and the Christian seeks the spiritually beneficial without neglecting his bodily health.

There are many examples of contemporary Saints of the Greek Orthodox Church who did not reject medical treatment or the benefits of science. Saint Luke, the Archbishop of Crimea, (1877–1977) was not only a religious leader but also a professor

**Table 1** COVID-19 cases and deaths in Greece by year

Year	Cases	Deaths
2020	138,850	4840
2021	1,257,934	20,790
2022	5,622,282	35,057

of surgery at the University of Tashkent (Kourkouta et al., 2020). Moreover, it is known that Saints Cosmas and Damian, Saint Panteleimon and Apostle Luke are patron saints of medicine in the Orthodox tradition. (Peltier, 1997).

Both the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Standing Holy Synod of the Church of Greece have advocated for the SARS-CoV 2 vaccination program (Papazoglou et al., 2021) emphasizing the benefits and urging both the clergy and the population to get vaccinated. The Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, in his capacity as a representative of the Standing Holy Synod, got vaccinated the same day the Greek Prime Minister did, to show the Church's endorsement of the vaccination effort ("Metropolitan Of Nafpaktos Receives Coronavirus Vaccine — Greek City Times" n.d.).

His Holiness, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew urged everyone to get vaccinated with no reservations, emphasizing the respect the church has for science. Notably, His Holiness has mentioned that "the man who refuses to get vaccinated is not thinking rationally"(Papazoglou et al., 2021). Archbishop Hieronymos in a recent speech said that any priest that does not comply will be expelled from the church, while insubordination may be punished by the Ecclesiastical court.

In spite of the unambiguous statements of church leaders, attitudes amongst the faithful were not so clear cut. In fact, many Greek Orthodox Christians appeared to have lost trust in the authority of the bishops and the Ecumenical Patriarchate. After the Great Synod held at Colympari in 2018, the stance of the Ecumenical Patriarchate was judged harshly by ordinary worshipers, as it appeared to endorse Ecumenism and to reject more established Orthodox traditions (Morariu, 2018).

Another reason for the discontent was the decision to hold the Holy Mass behind closed doors and without the presence of worshipers throughout the spring of 2020, including the Easter Sunday Holy Mass. Additionally, in many parishes during May of 2021 the Easter Sunday Holy Mass was, by the decision of the Standing Holy Synod and in accordance to the public health protocols, conducted on the evening of Good Saturday instead of, as per usual, at 12am of Easter Sunday. This resulted to the Mass coinciding with the holiday of the Judaic Passover, something some believers found inappropriate (Papazoglou et al., 2021). Thus, lots of lay people and clergy had certain reservations regarding the attitude of the church hierarchy towards the pandemic.

Of course, it is impossible to disregard the impact of conspiracy theories on vaccine uptake. In the religious context, already from the 70ies, much like in the USA, certain conspiracy theories have been circulating in Greece about "the mark of the Beast/Antichrist", mentioned in the Book of Revelation. Naturally, these theories quickly incorporated the vaccination program (Letšosa, 2021).

The QR code presented in vaccination certificates has often been interpreted in this context by many conspiracy minded worshipers (Sturm & Albrecht, 2020).

Another reported reason for negative attitudes towards vaccination has been the ethical objection towards the research, development and manufacturing process of the COVID-19 vaccines (and perhaps vaccines in general). More specifically, during the research and development of the mRNA vaccines the cellular series HEK293 was utilized, from renal embryonic cells originating from an aborted fetus in 1973 in the Netherlands (Zimmerman, 2021). This particular series has been widely used

in biotechnological industries for gene therapies and safety trials. Furthermore, the PER. C6 cellular series, originating from fetal retinal cells of another aborted fetus in 1985 at the Netherlands has been utilised for the multiplication of the adenovirus vector in the manufacturing of other, non mRNA COVID-19 vaccines. As such, many believers did not support interventions involving these particular cellular series, while some others believed that vaccines contained “aborted dead fetuses” (Galang, 2021). All of the above have been interpreted as confirming various prophecies made by both canonical Saints of the past centuries and ordinary monks (Dein, 2020).

However, much like in the realm of science a medical datum is to be evaluated and interpreted by a doctor of medicine, so too in the case of theology, the quality, content, origin, and the interpretation of a prophecy is to be done by actual theologians and Saints. Despite this, there were many priests who arbitrarily, supposedly in their role as spiritual guides, encouraged their flock to not get vaccinated.

Furthermore, many Orthodox Christians ignored the recommendations of their clinicians and were solely based on the recommendations of the clergy, supporting the existing notion that “only God is responsible for our health”. Another reason for refusing vaccination was the belief that those who die unvaccinated and without proper hospital care will become neo-martyrs (Rutjens et al., 2021).

### **Vaccination in Other Denominations and Religions**

Finally, vaccine hesitancy was not only seen in Greek Orthodox Christians, but also in other Christian denominations. More specifically, a minority of Catholics rejected vaccination due to conspiracy theories regarding the origin of vaccine development from cell lines of aborted fetuses. On the contrary, the official stance of Pope Francis is that vaccination is a “moral obligation” (Garcia & Yap, 2021). Some Evangelical Christians in the US share the same notions with Greek Orthodox Christians, associating the vaccine and its certification with “the mark of the devil” (Galang, 2021). In Judaism and Buddhism higher vaccination rates were observed (Peretti-Watel et al., 2015).

Moreover, many Islamic clerics advocated conspiracy theories about COVID-19, in order to strengthen their own political and religious views (Piwko, 2021). In addition, some Islamic religious leaders stated that Western civilization was trying to corrupt Islamic faith through the COVID-19 prevention (Yoosefi Lebni et al., 2021). Muslims were reluctant to be injected with vaccines containing pork-derived ingredients in addition to hesitation to be vaccinated during Ramadan’s fasting hours (Ali et al., 2021).

### **Study Limitations**

Regrettably, the main limitation of our review is that we cannot quantify the degree of correlation between vaccination hesitancy and Greek Orthodox Christian status, as accurate and comprehensive statistics are sorely lacking. Also, our literature

search was not performed using a systematic or scoping review method, but rather was predominantly focussed upon specific articles noting vaccination and the Greek Orthodox response.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, there are many reasons why some Greek Orthodox Christians did not heed the advice and recommendation of bishops and the majority of priests to get vaccinated, but relied on their local religious authorities, which has also been observed in other Christian denominations. It is clear that disobedience in religious leaders can be likened to a flock of sheep ignoring its shepherd. The reasons we have mentioned could help guide targeted information and communication strategies in this particular share of the population. In addition, the Ecclesiastical court could examine and possibly prosecute cases where individual priests diverge from the collective decisions of the hierarchy regarding the COVID-19 vaccines. Last but not least, further studies are needed in order to clarify the relationship between vaccination hesitancy and Greek Orthodox Christian status.

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