Opinion

News



A health care worker in Denver tests people for the coronavirus at a drive-thru testing station March 11, 2020. (CNS/Reuters/Jim Urquhart)



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The relationship between religion and science has long been fraught but, at least for us Catholics, we thought most of that friction had been resolved in the course of the 20th century. There are neuralgic sexual issues where fundamental questions of epistemology still sometimes arise, but more or less, Catholics had made their peace with science.

Not so some of our Protestant brothers and sisters. When Sen John McCain was asked during a 2008 GOP primary debate whether or not he believed in evolution, and he paused before answering, and later amended his reply to say he saw the hand of God in nature when he walked the Grand Canyon. In that pause, I am willing to bet he was not weighing the scientific data, but considering the political cost of the alternative replies. And, in that addendum, he was not, at that moment, worried about the Catholic vote, but about the evangelical vote. Any Republican candidate who too blithely embraces science might inherit the wind, as it were.

Now it appears some Catholics want to put us back among the ranks of the obscurantists too. And not just some yahoos drinking beer and wondering where they can buy a Gadsden flag. In recent weeks, a prominent center for Catholic thought and the bishops of an entire state chose the culture wars over Catholic theology, and did so in a way that will likely cause serious illness or death to anyone foolish enough to follow their bad advice.

Related: Colorado bishops oppose vaccine mandates, welcome Denver's religious exemption



Joseph Meaney is seen in this undated photo. (CNS/Courtesy of the National Catholic Bioethics Center)

The president of the National Catholic Bioethics Center (NCBC), Joseph Meaney, published an article about "vaccine hesitancy," a phrase he does not like. He frets: "Vaccine hesitancy can have a more neutral meaning such as 'wait and see,' but generally it is used quite negatively to portray individuals as trapped by irrational fears into inaction or tending towards a 'science denying anti-vaxxer' position."

You know? Maybe Meaney is correct. Let's start replacing "vaccine hesitancy" with "vaccine stupidity" or "vaccine selfishness."

It is by now obvious that our society is in a dash to get enough people vaccinated before a new, stronger post-delta variant of the COVID-19 virus emerges, and before the onset of autumn brings increased likelihood of transmission. People who willfully choose not to get vaccinated are not only imperiling their own lives, which is stupid, but the lives of others. If another shutdown becomes necessary, threatening our social fabric and economy, it is the unvaccinated who will be to blame.

Meaney is undeterred and rushes to the defense of those who decline to get vaccinated, writing that apart from other issues, there is the abortion issue:

> *Also, since all the currently available COVID vaccines in the USA have a connection to abortion through abortion-derived cell lines in manufacturing and/or testing, many individuals are determined to wait. At The National Catholic Bioethics Center (NCBC) we have frequent contact with persons who will get a COVID vaccine only when there is one with no ties to abortion. These people are clearly not "hesitant" but rather unwilling to compromise their ethics or consciences.*

For Catholics, the Holy See has made clear that there is no ethical compromise entailed in getting the vaccine. There is nothing in our Catholic moral tradition, only in the demands of the culture wars, that requires abstention from the vaccine on account of its remote involvement with an abortion long ago.

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The Holy Father was unambiguous on this point, saying in a January interview, "I believe that morally everyone must take the vaccine. It is the moral choice because it is about your life but also the lives of others."

Meaney makes his true religious convictions — which are libertarian, not Catholic — clear when he writes:

> *There is freedom on this matter and no strict moral obligation one way or the other. At the NCBC, we agree that the best ethical decisions are made "in the moment" based on a good understanding of the facts, when people are not subjected to pressure, or in the grip of powerful emotions. That is*

> *why we do not approve of coercive pressure tactics or vaccine mandates, particularly ones without generous medical, conscience, and religious exemptions.*

As the Archdiocese of New York recently made clear, Catholics cannot claim a "religious exemption" because our religion does not justify an exemption. Mennonites? Yes. Catholics? No.

Meaney is not alone. The bishops of Colorado, sadly if unsurprisingly, followed the lead of the National Catholic Bioethics Center, not the lead of the pope. They announced their opposition to vaccine mandates and trafficked in some of the same foolishness that the center spewed. They even linked to a sample letter from the NCBC that someone could give to their employer when claiming an exemption. That smells like cooperation with evil to me!

This is not the first time that the requirements of culture war politics, not a fair reading of Catholic theology, dictated a stance taken by the NCBC and those bishops who follow it. Back in 2013, they released a statement saying that Catholics should not become "navigators" for the Affordable Care Act because that might entail helping someone to pick an insurance plan that covered abortion.

The problem is in part the nature of the beast. With their singular focus on bioethics, like the Becket Fund's focus on religious liberty, the expertise is often obscured by the myopia that comes with such a singular focus. Combine that with a toxic political environment and you get organizations that respond to the needs of battle in the culture wars not the pastoral needs of the Catholic Church.

In this case, however, even the expertise is lacking because the NCBC gets the issue of vaccines wrong. The bishops should reconsider their relationship with the organization and, henceforth be wary of whatever advice they dispense.