



To Whom it May Concern:

I would like to address the issue of a religious exemption to the Covid-19 vaccination. How can a trained medical professional have a religious objection to the vaccination, and how can a medical institution respond to such an objection? The context of this discussion is not one of mere stubbornness or defiance on the part of an employee, but of an anguished spirit of having to choose between compliance and conscience. Likewise, I hope this letter will be received by medical institutions in an attempt to understand rather than coerce.

I write as an authority about religious convictions. I have a PhD from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas where I have occasionally served as an adjunct professor. I have also been in ministry for 40 years, and I currently am employed as the Executive Community Pastor at OpenDoor Church in Burleson, Texas.

Religious conviction and moral conscience can have at least two different foundations: institutional religious dogma or personal relationship with God. With the former, a religion determines what its adherents (should) believe. With the latter, the individual discerns what they must do and be to please (be in relationship with) their God. When anyone devises a box or predetermined pattern that defines religious truth, the result can be devastating to those who are forced to comply.

I want to elaborate briefly on religious conviction that grows out of a personal walk with God. Conscience (conviction) is not limited to or defined by ideology or methodology. While Christians, for example, hold many beliefs in common, religious convictions will vary from person to person in different circumstances. This was the pattern throughout ancient scripture where people obeyed God in specific ways depending on their understanding of what God required of them. Even Jesus spoke different things and acted in different ways as God led him. Part of walking with God means a believer listens to God's voice in a given moment. Some might criticize this practice as being too subjective, but it is the crucial element and definition of faith. Faith does not operate by the same rules of mere reason, politics, scientific methodology or the like. It's personal.

Let me give a couple of personal examples. During a legal transaction a few years ago, I distinctly sensed God telling me to walk away without a significant amount of money that was mine. The decision was not logical, nor was it a tenant of belief in my denomination. I certainly cannot advise others to follow in my steps. But I knew what my God was telling me to do. Only recently have I understood what the results of my obedience were, and the ending to the story is quite miraculous. I had to hold true to my conscience and spiritual understanding in order to experience the outcome.

Another example happened recently as I attended "Wicked" in Dallas. My wife and I saw this musical in New York City several years ago, and we wanted to see it again.



However, this time in the middle of the performance we sensed a deep uneasiness that we were not where we were supposed to be. After spending a great deal of money on our tickets, we left at intermission. The show was well done, the talent was wonderful, but we knew in our hearts we were supposed to be elsewhere. Our conviction doesn't mean other people were wrong in being there. It means that we would have been in the wrong to stay. We would not force our beliefs on someone else, nor would we want them to force their beliefs on us. That kind of direction from God is not written in a religious creed or a manual of logic. It comes only from sensitivity in relationship where one discerns what is right and wrong in any moment. Some things may be right at one time, but wrong in another. There are numerous biblical examples of this truth.

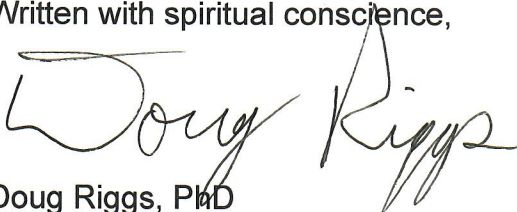
Religious conviction is not controlled or defined by institutional thought. Reform has often come by someone standing on conviction in spite of prevailing tradition. Likewise, religious conviction cannot be defined by any other person. Conscience is personal and requires respect even when another doesn't fully understand it.

Believers may come to religious conviction having been informed by science, news, literature, logic, mathematics, counsel, or a host of other influencers. But ultimately, all those factors form moral conscience that is solidified solely by one's relationship with God. In asking for a "religious exemption," an individual should not be required to explain the multiple factors that influenced the decision. They need only inform an organization of the end result. For an institution to require a person to act contrary to their understanding of God's will is immoral and unconscionable.

Practitioners of medical science often see things they cannot explain logically or scientifically. Some deny what they don't understand, but I suggest we should celebrate medicine and miracles alike. The scientific method cannot explain religious conviction. Instead of denying what one doesn't understand, I urge you to respect the genuine faith of a person who wrestles between their conscience and their livelihood (not to mention their calling).

Thank you for considering my explanation of religious conscience. I respect greatly what you do, and I hope you appreciate the religious convictions held by some of your dedicated staff.

Written with spiritual conscience,


Doug Riggs, PhD