

## Vaccination Hesitancy, Fanaticism, and Conspiracies

Why are some people having difficulty deciding to get vaccinated against COVID19? Why are some people deciding not to wear masks or obey the national protocols against COVID19? Then, what makes people inclined to believe conspiracies? There are multiple factors at play here. Research indicates that broadly, the key factors are level of education, personality, personal experience, social media, and extreme religious conservatism or fanaticism. These factors may determine whether or not someone will be inclined to be influenced by conspiracies and decide not to take the vaccination.

We must bear in mind that there are some who are reluctant to be vaccinated for personal medical reasons or their scientific understanding of the COVID19 vaccine development. These people are not really against vaccination in general.

One of the challenges that lead to confusion and hesitancy is that of effective communication. In the article “Changing the Frame” by psychologist, Arthur C. Evans, Jr, PhD, president of the American Psychological Association, states: “During the pandemic, most leaders and public officials have recognized the importance of effective communication with their constituents. However, they often do not recognize the importance of understanding how the emotional state of the listener can impact people’s perceptions, risk propensity, and willingness to act.” Hence, there could be a communication crisis impacting vaccination hesitancy. It is true that nearly no one alive has experienced such worldwide pandemic. Therefore, the learning curve is very challenging. Since conspiracies spread faster than a virus, it becomes, in a sense, a race to see who will win the battle for effective communication. Which information will be more impacting and produce results? Conspiracies are causing deaths and following medical science is saving lives. That’s a scientific fact. Who are you listening to?

Another challenge is that of personality differences, especially when it comes to lockdown and quarantine. In the March 2021 research article entitled, “*Personality predicts self-isolation*” compiled by Chris Palmer in the magazine Monitor on Psychology states: “People’s personality influences their likelihood of staying home during the pandemic, regardless of whether they live in a region under a lockdown . . .” The research was done among 101,005 participants in 55 countries. The research looked at the “Big Five personality traits: agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism, and openness. They found that extraverts were least likely to follow official stay-at-home guidance, agreeable people tended to self-isolate when advised to do so, and people who were highly neurotic or open to experience decided to stay home more than usual even in the absence of stringent lock-downs.” Would the results be similar in our own country?

For some, religion plays a big part in not deciding to vaccinate or to wear masks. Some religious people who are hesitating to take the vaccine are often prone to follow other conspiracies. It is not unreal to say that conspiracies or false teachings by spiritual leaders concerning the vaccine, COVID19 reality, and wearing of masks, travels faster and proves more dangerous than the virus itself. They claim it is a matter of faith. But is this faith or fanaticism? What is the difference?

In the April 2021 article, “*The difference between faith and fanaticism*,” written by Arvind Sharma, he addressed the point so clearly. What he writes may cause you to think. “A person of faith recognizes the truth that God is, whoever it may be, for him and others, while a fanatic is certain that only he or she knows who or what God is and is blinded by her/his passion. That is where differences between the two arise.” Does that sound more like arrogance? Arvind Sharma continues: “The difference between faith and fanaticism runs along similar lines. Fanaticism results from being blinded by the intensity of the luminosity of one’s own religious tradition by standing too close to it, instead of seeing the whole world transfigured in its light. The person of faith also stands close to his or her tradition but lives in the light, not in darkness.” With this in mind would it be fair to say then that a person of faith would be less likely to follow or believe conspiracies and more likely to obey protocols regarding COVID19.

It seems as though in certain circles, religious fanaticism is causing more damage to our society than the virus itself. Here is what Stephen Rwembeho, a writer in *New Times—Rwanda's Leading Daily*, stated far back in 2009 in his article "*When fanaticism eats up the society*": "In fact, this (*religious fanaticism*) is the most dangerous form of fanaticism for it affects people's lives entirely. Religious fanaticism of any kind is perilous and shouldn't be given chance in society because it leads to the loss of lives. When a group of people starts carrying too much pride in their religion, then conflicts blossom." Isn't it amazing that such an article, written for another purpose and over a decade ago, could be so relevant today?

Dear readers, let's not let religious fanaticism destroy our country. The sisters of fanaticism—traditionalism and extremism, and many other isms, are reaping havoc on our society. They are eating away common sense and destroying the beauty of true faith. Christianity is being made a mockery by some religious leaders who believe that their so-called knowledge of God is far superior to the scientific truth that COVID19 is real. They are also making a mockery of God who uses science. They did not read their own Bibles. There were a number of "pledges" or pandemics during Biblical times and the people also had to quarantine. For example, Isaiah 26:20-21- "Go, my people, enter your rooms and shut the doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until his wrath has passed by." Leviticus 13:1-40 talks about how to deal with a terrible skin disease (leprosy) that was killing many people. Isolation was one of the requirements.

Why did not the great God of the universe just tell his people to pray, have faith, and the disease would disappear? Why didn't God ask his prophets to "declare" the people well. "I declare, in the name of Jehovah God, that this pandemic will not harm me." While faith can surprise common sense, it does not nullify or stupefy it. The pandemic is real. If you choose not to get vaccinated for medical reasons, your Christianity should tell you to cooperate with the medical advice and wear your mask, sanitize, and practice physical distancing. Do not make a mockery of faith and Christianity. Faith is not fanaticism.

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